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# NET-ACTIVISM

How digital technologies have been changing  
individual and collective actions

a cura di

FRANCESCO ANTONELLI



*Roma TrE-Press*

2017

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Francesco Antonelli



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This book is the result of some research activities and discussions developing and encouraging through Net activism International Research Network, based on *Atopos Lab* in Universidade de São Paulo. In addition to it, the network includes: Università degli Studi Roma Tre, Universidade Lusófona do Porto, Université de Lille 2, Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris. The network is going to arrange international conferences and publications on net-activism at least every two years.

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Francesco Antonelli

*Introductory notes*

In recent times, the digital architectures of interaction have become more than just new information architecture and a new ecology of dialogue and participation. In addition to these new forms of debate and interaction which are expressed far beyond the dynamics of modern public opinion, digital networks have opened spaces of experimentation for new decision-making collaborative practices. In several areas, the creation of platforms and architectures of debate and deliberation is putting new questions about the technological possibility of overcoming representative democracy. Along with these possibilities, the practices which express the dwelling dynamics of interaction between individuals, information, and territories, so far experienced in different contexts, demonstrate the need to rethink the concepts of participation and democracy. Much more than the expression of human parliamentary meetings and ideas, the digital architectures of participation express the ecological forms of a new type of social contractility capable of establishing relational ecosystems, connecting us to biodiversity, territoriality, gender devices and databases, extending thus the architecture of the anthropomorphic social beyond the polis and its political dimensions.

With this background in mind, the book is the result of the activities promoted by the Net-Activism International Research Network based on *Atopos Lab* in Universidade de São Paulo. At the Network join: Università degli Studi Roma Tre, Universidade Lusófona do Porto, Université de Lille 2, Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, Paris. The first part is focused on the relationship between Net-Activism and social theory.

The first Chapter, by Massimo Di Felice, is focused on the analysis of social action theory. Di Felice argues that the rise of digital technologies

has been changing social theory perspective about the relationship between action, actor and social environment. On the basis of this point of view, he discusses twenty idea for re-thinking social theory in contemporary world.

The Paper by Antonio Tursi analyses the relationship between Net-Activism and contemporary democracy. Contemporary activism is notably marked by the use of digital communication networks. It therefore reflects the characteristics of these works, such as emotion and accelerated temporality. The redefinition of activism requires a new interpretive map developed between two axes: global/local and political reform/media reform. Net-Activism has an impact on the definition and practices of democracy, definitely marking an enlargement of the action repertoire available to individuals and to groups but also risks alienating the participation of citizens from the circles where decisions are made.

The purpose of the third chapter, by Francesco Antonelli, is to retrace the transformation of intellectuals in the passage from an industrial to a post-industrial society, up until the global network society, through a brief critical review of the main sociological themes that have dealt with this issue. The basic theory is that intellectuals are no longer a social and cultural elite defined by their relationship with political movements, but a mass and a variety of highly differentiated actors who find an environment full of risks and opportunities on the Internet, while taking part in the dynamics of power and counter-power, of criticism and economic production in a global society.

The following chapter, by Marco Binotto and Federica Ferrari, intends to analyse this identity practice, the link between the image of the networks as illustration and prefiguration of horizontal, de-centered, fragmented movements and the ideological contour of a society built around this metaphor. It also aims to define the connection that exists between communication technologies used to build organisational forms of contemporary social movements, and the configuration that shapes these collective actions.

The final paper in part one, by Elisabetta Ruspini and Sveva Magaraggia, is focused on the relationship between digital technologies and gender problems. They argue the rise of web 2.0 has been changing a gender perspective based on the classic dichotomy between masculine and feminine, opening the way to new gender interpretations and practices.

Part two presents a number of case studies on Net-Activism in the



contemporary global world.

A paper by Serena Fossati explores the communicative infrastructure of a youth organisation in China, that is actively engaged in environmental protection, and analyses what communication technologies are adopted and how they are used in combination. The findings are based on in-depth interviews with staff members and the content analysis of 1810 posts retrieved from the social media accounts of the association: Sina Weibo, RenRen and WeChat. Findings show that there are striking differences between the platforms, in terms of function, audience, content, and interaction. The study then considers the role of social media affordance in affecting and shaping the communicative infrastructure of the green group, in particular connectivity (the possibility of the organisation to establish a connection, strengthen the relationship with its audience and subsequent mobilisation) and visibility (the possibility to amplify its cause, reaching a broader audience).

Use of the Internet in collective action is one of the most salient features of mobilisation happening across the world in the first two decades of the new millennium. Worldwide, the web played a key role in the construction and deployment of huge demonstrations and provided unprecedented participatory tools. These opportunities are also exploited by radical movements and extreme right-wing organisations, whose use of the Internet is still not well understood. The seventh chapter, by Emanuele Toscano, proposed here aims to analyse the specific case of an extreme right-wing organisation in Italy, CasaPound, and is based on an empirical research carried out in recent years within this movement. Starting from a review of the literature about this issue, it will analyse in particular the use of the web by CasaPound, and its particular characteristics.

The eighth chapter also focuses on Italian right movements. This article, by Federico Tarquini, presents a mediological analysis of the relationship between media and social and political forms; examining the Italian far-right movement – ‘destra non conforme’ – in order to show how its aesthetic, social and cultural forms are informed by the imagery produced by the cultural industry and digital cultures. The aim of this paper is therefore to demonstrate the relationship of mutual influence between social and cultural forms typical of digital media, jointly with the change of political forms. This obviously raises the question about the category of extremism, or at least as it was understood in the twentieth century.

Chapters nine and ten both focus on the case of Expo 2015 in Milano. In recent years political participation and political consumerism have highlighted the ethical and responsible side of consumption practices. The Internet at large and social media have increased the likelihood of engaging in political consumerism. According to previous research, among social networking sites, Twitter is more focused on the sharing of opinions and information, thus it is more likely to be used as a means of debate about political consumerism. The paper by Ariella Mortara and Stefania Fragapane presents the results of a qualitative analysis conducted on Twitter posts, the aim of which was to analyse Italian consumer reaction to the news concerning McDonald's and Coca-Cola's official sponsorship of Expo 2015.

The paper by Stefania Parisi and Luca Massidda originates from a strong hypothesis: in the late nineties, social movements ascribed powerful political relevance to the media system: it was identified as a strategic field for the construction of a common space not expropriated, in its work and life, by Capital's logic. Today, it is precisely the relational and communicative dimension that appears subsumed from proprietary platforms of digital and social media, widely used by social movements. Therefore the construction of an antagonistic subjectivity seems no longer to pass through the imagination and design of an alternative media environment. This hypothesis is tested through the discussion of the findings collected in an ongoing field research on the practices of the 'Attitudine NoExpo' network.

The eleventh chapter, by Fabio Introini and Cristina Pasqualini, is focused on Social Streets. From 2013 onwards, in the main cities of Italy, the emerging phenomenon of Social Streets (from now on SoSts) has been gathering momentum. This process is trying to reconfigure urban forms of sociality with many implications at the level of collective action, participation and metropolitan transition. A SoSt can be defined as the attempt to use Facebook to reconnect and give new life to those social relations of proximity resting on a defined and delimited portion of urban space (the streets) which the SoSts, in turn, contribute to modifying and producing, with their online and offline action. Firstly aimed at rebuilding social ties, confidence and social capital, SoSts play a pivotal role at the pre-political level, reshaping in a participatory way the forms of dwelling. Being dwelling a meta-practice, this means that SoSts are also becoming collectors, catalysts and enhancers of innovative social practices inspired by a new philosophy of sustainability and a culture

of sharing, which have political meanings and consequences. Even if, in contemporary society, pre-political action is in and of itself political, the rise of SoSts is pushing its trajectory toward the intersection with institutional politics and the processes of city governance, with relevant consequences concerning SoSts identity and activism. In this paper, drawing on the evidence of quali-quantitative research on the city of Milan (which, with its 62 SoSts, is the Italian city in which this phenomenon has currently reached its largest expansion) attention is focused put on the way in which SoSts, acting in the wider and heterogeneous network of urban players (institutions, civil society, media) can affect the collective life of the polis.

Finally, the twelfth chapter, by Tatiana Mazali, presents the results of an ethnographic observation conducted within the project of active citizenship called *IRENCollabora*. Iren is an Italian multi-utility (electricity, energy, water and waste services), it operates for different territories and public administrations. Iren has recently taken measures to involve citizens in ‘improving the quality of their services’ through the provision of local committees. The committees are composed of stakeholders representative of the territory. In order to expand participation Iren has launched the online platform *IRENCollabora* for the widespread involvement of ‘common’ citizens. *IRENCollabora* is therefore a mixed format of territorial involvement. It consists of an online consultation, open to all citizens (based on the model of ‘disintermediated’ participatory online citizenship), flanked by a model of deliberation ‘mediated’ by a group of civil society representatives. The combination of these two ‘formats’ of civic participation is specific – and therefore precious in analytical terms – of the case study that the paper intends to present analytically. *IRENCollabora* is an example of ‘cross-genre’ activism, an example of ‘phygital’ participation architecture. The paper will discuss the issue of ‘hybrid’ community: In recent years the concept of ‘community of proximity’ has emerged, which now includes people belonging to the same territorial or social conditions, but all those who work for the global resolution of a problem thanks to the network and the 2.0 ecosystems. ‘Hybrid’ means the union/tension between online and offline identities and online and offline decision-making practices (mediated and ‘disintermediated’ at the same time).



PART I

NET-ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL THEORY



Massimo Di Felice

*Net-Activism and Ecological Dimensions of Action on  
Digital Networks: 20 Theses in Search of a Language*

*Beyond the social action*

As part of the sociological theory of action tradition, it is customary to divide the various theoretical orientations traditionally in two imaginary lines. The first one, based on the work of E. Durkheim (2007) comes to the American structural functionalism of T. Parsons (2010) interprets the social action as restricted under rules and binding institutional relations able to limit and guide their impacts and their geometries. The second line of interpretation, in contrast, describes the social action as teleological, the result of rational subject-actor option that selects and chooses obeying its own values and ideals.

The latter is related to the work of M. Weber (1961) and would influence much of the social theory of action, reaching condition the economic thought (consumer theory) and political thought, and its effect on the thinking of the theory of acting of J. Habermas (2012) and many other authors. In lines contrary to these two large matrices, we find the minority tradition proposal by V. Pareto (1984), which describes the social action as the result of an irrational act, neither ideological-political or rational and economic.

In more recent times, M. Callon Law (1992) and B. Latour (2012) develop an original and more complex representation of social action, resulting from emerging associations between actants of various kinds, able to aggregate and disaggregate around controversy. Following the theory of actor-network, it would be the responsibility of the cartographer observe, track and map the associations, revealing the complexity of the dynamics of the various aggregations and disaggregations that articulate this particular type of social.

The whole wide and diverse tradition, whose complexity can not be clearly summarized in a few lines of social action theory in the social sciences, including this one's theory of actor-network (TAR) is based on a common assumption that describes the act as the activity that takes place in a time and in a material, architectural spatialities and although opinionative, as in the case of TAR, in a material and aggregative geography. In other words, the social tradition of the studies, whether sociological or that of the actor-network theory, is presented as material and inserted into the ecology of actors that interact or aggregate as materials and various entities that interact with each other in a concrete spatiotemporal context and supposedly as such, real and composed of related entities.

The digitalization process, especially in its most recent dimensions, the social network, Internet of things and big data, seems to express a computerized dimension of action, not just only more material neither only relational or associative. The computerization of the things, of the people, of the environment and territory turns into bits and information the various entities, creating a change in the nature of the various substances and making them connectives, i.e., carriers of a relationship no aggregative or articulated by an act, but 'transubstantiative'.

The contemporary ecological cultures, the sustainability practices, the digital activism movements that marked the Arab Spring and the ongoing protests at all latitudes, through forms of conflict carried out by interactions with social networks, are the expressions of a new type of social action, no longer directed at external or only resulting practices caused by an informative or technical conditioning. We call such diverse and complex interactions with the term 'Net-Activism' which expresses not only the set of collaborative interactions that result from synergy between actors of various natures, but the common digital condition that precedes and fashion people, information circuits, devices, digital social networks and informative territoriality, presenting, according to this view, as the establishment of a new type of ecology (*eko-logos*) no more oppositional and separatist, but expanded and carrying a common substance that makes reticular and connective.

The characteristic element of this type of interaction is that this happens in a computerized ecological context, i.e. digitalized and connective, a complex and unprecedented ecological process, not just social and architectural, but expanded in bits and networks, configured as not only associative but also as a connective reticular interaction. Faced with this major change, it is necessary to rethink the idea of action beyond



its anthropomorphic and subjective dimensions and its sociological and aggregative explanations that would limit the action to the scope of the political and associative acting.

### *In search of a language*

It is fundamental, therefore, seek a reputable language to describe the complexity of such interactions, which express a reticular connective dimension and an unprecedented dwelling condition, difficult to be expressed. I chose the synthetic form of small theses to begin to formulate a language that can approach the Atopic entanglement of net-activists interactions:

1. The forms of conflict spread in recent years in every region of the world are not only the expression of a new type of social conflict, but the result of a profound change in the dwelling condition characterized by the aggregation, by means of the various types of connectivity of individuals, connection devices, information flows, databases and territoriality.
2. This unique interaction is the result of widespread diffusion on the one hand, the mobile connection devices (tablets, smartphones, laptops, etc.) and forms of wi-fi connection (broadband, satellite, RFID2, etc.); the other, the proliferation of networks social and the Internet of things, which gave rise to a particular ecological connective way, not only social, able to connect in real time, people, devices, information, territories, data and all kinds of surface. Finally, the materialities produced by 3D printers that develop experimental forms of ecologies neither only digital or only material.
3. Such interactivity is the advent of connective and ecosystemic forms of dwelling that express a particular type of interaction, which links people, devices, information flows, databases and territoriality in a new type of reticular interaction, neither more expressible from the theoretical language of social developed by European positivists disciplines, nor distinguishable by the traditional anthropomorphic dimension of social and political relations.
4. The characteristics of such interactivities are determined by a new type of network action, no more expression of the activity

- of a single subject-actor, not the result of a kind of movement of an actor toward the outside and the territory.
5. The various members that intervene and contribute to the achievement of an action on digital networks are therefore not only human subjects, but also all sets of devices, technologies, circuits, databases and all kinds of entity-actor that 'leaves trail' (Latour, 2012).
  6. It is necessary to rethink, because the quality of the action expressed by the forms of activism in the network, given that it does not express only the act of a subject (is that an individual, group or movement), but the unpredictable outcome of the connection the various actants and human and non-human actors-network (Latour, 2012).
  7. The network medium requires us to reconsider the characteristics of quality of interactions spread inside and to develop non-linear geometries, i.e., frontal or – directed towards the outside (A to B) – or reversed, i.e. from the outside to the inside (from B to A). The eco-systemic condition of dwelling in a network leads us to also dismiss the dialogical perspective (from A to B and B to A) while simplifying of the group and of the complex simultaneity of the 'a-directional' interactions in a network.
  8. At the same time, we can not describe digital interactions just as the simple result of the aggregative dynamics and associations around controversy, that is, as an act of connection to other 'actants' (Latour, 2012). The complexity of interactions in connected networks is presented, therefore, as a greater complexity, marked by an informative dimension prior the interactions and establishing a particular connective dimension changing the same substance of the members.
  9. The distinction between action and act (in the sense of the Greek *αἰών*, which emphasizes its spontaneous, impermanent size and its non-reproducibility) specifies the quality of network actions such as the emergence of a connective act (Di Felice, 2013) which represents the acting no more of the subject actor point of view, not the subject teleological – a result of a human rational strategy – but from the ecosystemic and connective characteristics of the reticular connective contexts.
  10. The connective act sets up, then, as the expression of a communicative form of dwelling (Di Felice, 2009) unstable

and emerging, that reintroduces continuously through the intermittency of connective practices of interactions between various substances, the characteristics and dimensions of the dwelling condition.

11. More than part from the public sphere and from the opinionated and political dimension, the Net-Activism practices are the most evident expression of the emergence of a new ecological culture, no more subject-centric or technocentric but carrying a relational ontology (Heidegger, 1967) and a specific connective dimension that changes continuously form and meanings of the diverse realities connected informatively.
12. This connective act spreads, thus, out of social, i.e., out of the urban anthropomorphic dimension and out the Western politics itself as the bearer of a diverse interactive ecology which cannot be explained only through its communicative dimension, if for communication only understand the media-informative dimension of information exchange.
13. Surfaces thus an interactive ecology composed of a set of interactive and open ecosystems which can no longer be thought of as a holistic system or a coherent whole, but as intermittent succession of various connection levels.
14. The reticular ecosystems (Di Felice, 2011-2012), through the generation of unstable and non-durable regroupings, produce the constant resetting of each 'actant' (human and non-human) and of each substance of their ecological-interactive condition through the detachment from its originating equilibrium level caused by the assemblage of all the connective interactions.
15. The complexity of such interaction is visible in the ecology of the interactions of net-activist movements. In fact, the vast majority of those were born in the networks and from social networks, and even gaining visible forms in the streets, preserves its connective dimension, continually changing their strategies and structures, reconfiguring the goals themselves, finding new purposes and aggregative forms during dissemination of their actions. Earning, still, form from the dynamics of the information flows and from the heteronomical power of the connections, and not from a previous and strategic identity-ideological position.
16. Unlike the communicative action (Habermas, 2012), or the conceptual tradition of political action (which runs from Aristotle

- to Hannah Arendt), the connective act expresses an ecological act, neither subject-centric or rational, but experimental, produced by the ecosystem interactions of a group of actors-network, which, when entering in a connectivity relationship, give life to a dwelling and a communicative-connective ecology.
17. As a result of connective interactions between individuals, devices, information flows, databases and territoriality, Net-Activism expresses a form of post-politics conflict (Di Felice and Lemos, 2014), which dwells not more the urban or identity spaces of the national public spheres of anthropomorphic identity, but the connective atopy, next to dimensions of an interactive cosmopolitics (Stengers, 2007).
  18. Today we are witnessing the passage of anthropocentric political dimensions – organized through the saturated electoral forms of representation and based on the power management in its public-human mono-dimension – toward atopic interaction practices (Di Felice, 2009) expressing the formation of reticular and emerging dwelling conditions. Which, through connectivity dimensions, are moving, our dwelling conditions, from national and political States, towards the direction of the biosphere and meta-territorialities (Abruzzese, 2006) neither internal nor external to Gaia (Lovelock, 1979).
  19. The impermanent and temporary character (Bey, 2001) of the connective act leads us to define the Net-Activism as the size of an act ‘a- institutional’ that takes shape developing aggregations and networks and that tends, after desegregation, to its own disappearance, thus replacing the political dimension of power by the ecosystem and interactive dimension proper of the living organisms and of the emerging forms of adaptation to the open contexts (Morin, 2011) and interactive contexts.
  20. Networks and connective interactions mark the passage of an anthropomorphic, urban, public and political eco-dwelled dimension for a bio-interactive sphere, which expresses the change in the contemporary habitat of national states to Gaia, from the parliaments to the biosphere, from the subject to the networks.

*Beyond the Observation*

The perspective of those who study and research the digital dimensions and connective relations in networks is delimited not only by the assumption of a technical and methodological issues concerning how to observe and how to track the emerging interactive dynamics that characterize the action of the various actants in networks. To research the digital networks is only possible from a dwelling change, which makes us from external observers to connected members. The digital networks are not external surfaces or public architectures, contenders of an act between various entities, but interactive ecologies and, therefore, coordinating a trans-specific dwelling condition, that, altering the substances in a common informative dimension that not only obliges us to an interaction, but to the alteration of our condition and of our original substance.

This dwelling precondition develops a particular type of interaction not only aggregative and associative, but carrying a profound change that makes possible the occurrence intransitive of the connective interactions. Digital networks, more than expressions of social or associative dynamics, become, in this perspective, the expressions of a substantial dynamism that interest the very ecology of interactions, the substances of the various interacting members and the quality of the dynamics of their interactions. It is therefore appropriate to question, in the range of the ecologies in connective networks, not only the principle of uniformity of interaction dynamics (TAR), but the very not uniform nature of each connected substance.

The connective dimension of interactions in networks questions the opportunity to base the knowledge of its dynamics only through the practice of observing its changes and its visible becoming, as this option prevents the recognition of ecological and dwelling specifics that are established in the digital contexts. The Net-Activism of research should therefore not be limited to the study of the dynamics of interactions between entities or actants, but should aim for the narration of connective ecologies, whose conformation precedes its internal dynamics, but is not limited to these. The study of Net-Activism cannot be limited to the study of mapping networks or to practices the tracking of actants-actors.

As in front of a forest or an ocean, whose totality is unattainable and its diversities extend beyond the reach of the observation, the various

Net-Activism declinations cannot be understood, in their qualities, just by describing their specific and emerging practices of interaction, since they fail to achieve the complexity and qualitative features such intransitive action.

In the same way the study of maps, trajectories and mapping of the fleets that cross the waters of the oceans tell us nothing about the scale of to sail and to sink, reducing the ocean and seas to flat surface of navigation, which prevents us to achieve what acting is not: fear of waves up from storms, the tears of goodbye watering each port and the mysterious emergence of a whale that turns every sailor on a captain Ahab.

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Antonio Tursi

*Net-Activism and Redefining Democracy*

*Some aspects of our mediascape*

Activism, namely the grassroots socio-political engagement and that which goes beyond institutionalized forms of participation, has always been focused on media platforms considered as a means of promoting numerous campaigns, but also useful targets for activists to define themselves. Just to give an example, the mimeograph machine and big-character posters were not only used by student movements in 1968 to spread their ideas, but also to distinguish themselves from the ‘mainstream’ media.

In the case of Net-Activism, the mediological figure has become essential so much that it represents the same word used to describe a varied galaxy of initiatives and operations. This importance of media in the grassroots engagement dynamics has also launched other words such as media-activism or click-activism that have generalized/specified (or preceded/followed) the word Net-Activism (see Di Corinto, 2012).

The significance of digital and reticular media must now be understood and acknowledged in every political grassroots expression and beyond the institutional channels of participation. Every form of activism, in the present, can't help but use or enter the ‘space of flows’. So street protests against the distortion of the electoral system adopted by the Chinese government for the city of Hong Kong have emphasized the utility of the app ‘FireChat’ to send messages among smartphones without using an Internet connection and therefore without relying on an intermediary like phone companies. Even the numerous ethnic groups of the Brazilian population have used new platforms to gain acknowledgment and action to reclaim, rebuild and promote their cultural diversities and fight deforestation and expropriation of their *terras indígenas* (Pereira da Silva, 2013).

For that reason, at an identity, organizational and promotional level, in the present far more than in the past, every form of activism must take charge of the medial structure and available platforms, as well as the features that distinguish them. In other words, the 'net' prefix also conditions the noun that follows. In particular, among the numerous consequences of this influence, we should consider how every political campaign, in the era of social networking sites, cannot exclude an emotional trigger. The never-ending arguments on the goals to be achieved or the goodness of the ideals advocated do not currently guarantee the success of a political action, but rather the ability to involve potential supporters through the dramatization of events and through their understatement, as in many campaigns based on irony. Conveying an appealing and 'spreadable' narrative (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013), a temporary community can be created, even within the 'timeless time' of the web (Castells, 1996), which is able to 'perceive' the importance of events submitted to its attention or the cause to fight for. This means that often the most effective emotional trigger is related to circumstantial events or even enclosed in a life moment (an event, a word, an image) rather than linked to the mobilization of major issues that end up being general and abstract and therefore less 'perceived' by everyone. So mobilization is more likely to be successful in Martin Trayvon's murder case (#justicefortrayvon) than in general for the defence of minority rights. The awareness for the need of an appropriate political action progresses thanks to a picture of little Aylan Kurdi lying on a Turkish beach and shared on social networking sites than in reference to thousands of unknown migrants who arrive in Lampedusa every day.

### *Towards a Net-Activism map*

In order to observe the Net-Activism experiences of our time, in order to comprehend their importance and substance, it may be useful to question the *telos* (the purpose) of each campaign or action. Given the fact that every contemporary form of activism presents a mediological figure and therefore to some degree is linked to Net-Activism, it's not 'how' but 'why' that can make a difference and take into account different experiences. In this regard, it could be useful to create a typology by working on two characteristics related to the stated

or non-stated objectives declared by movements, thus whoever begins certain grassroots processes.

A first characteristic can be drawn between the opposites 'global'/'local'. It isn't always easy to outline (in what some have called 'post-national constellation' (Habermas, 1998) or 'global domestic politics' (Beck, 2002) clear boundaries between issues that are only local and issues that are solely global. In fact with the opposites 'global' and 'local', we indicate the extremes of a 'glocal continuum' in which it is not improbable that some local issues receive recognition and solutions only at a global level and vice versa. This doesn't mean not being able to see the different extent of the objectives that lead to a certain grassroots political action. With reference to the example given above, we can say that natives who defend a threatened area in Brazil is something different from Greenpeace fighting global warming. Defending free wi-fi in Italy is a different argument to Edward Snowden's complaints on NSA global surveillance.

A second characteristic can be drawn between the opposites 'political reform'/'media reform'. Although it is undeniable that distinguishing between reforms of the offline and online world is increasingly difficult if not simply foolish, and although it is undeniable that political issues related to democracy and information are inseparable, Net-Activism can aim for 'extra' or *intra muros* objectives, focusing on issues that only secondarily relate to the web or on issues that primarily relate to 'life on the screen'. In the first case, we can speak of 'democratization through the media', while in the second case of 'democratization of the media', and media in this second case «are not simply a political instrument, but a collective good in themselves» (Carroll and Hackett, 2006: 88). The commitment in Hong Kong, street protests, creating social relations, all through mobile phones, aimed to preserve clean elections in the former British colony. A different purpose from the aim of many mobilizations is to defend Internet neutrality compared to the numerous attempts by parliaments and big corporations to create inequalities solely for enhanced profit.

By combining these two characteristics, a potential typology of the forms of Net-Activism is achieved. Firstly, there are movements that have global objectives of political reform: such as Occupy Wall Street that hasn't only called into question the US Stock Exchange headquarters, but an economic model which effectively governs the entire world; financial capitalism.

Secondly, there are movements whose aim is political reform in a given context such as the movements in Tunisia and Egypt, known as the 'Arab Spring'. Although they were focused on political reform, both of these cases presented a significant mediological figure as shown by Manuel Castells in his *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (Castells, 2012).

Thirdly, there are actions or movements that fight for a free Net (and this is naturally a global aim). Much action taken by Anonymous persons and hackers fall into this category, in which freedom of information is claimed, as well as when Snowden revealed global NSA spying (as previously mentioned).

Fourthly, there are actions that contest and propose a media reform in a given context, for example claiming freedom of expression or reporting censorship and control of communication. The so-called 'Hadopi law', introduced under Nicholas Sarkozy to penalize copyright infringement, caused many protests in France. Internet users overflowed the Culture Minister with e-mails and joined the *reseau des pirates*. In Italy, attempts to equalize service providers to newspaper publishers or bloggers to journalists have been tackled. In the latter case, they were even indictable for comments written by readers to their posts.

### *Many models of democracy and some trends*

The impact of digital media on the forms of participation in democratic regimes or in those in the process of democratization, has led to the development of a series of hypotheses on the evolution of these regimes. Where will democracy stand in a world of digital communication? In order to observe the many models on the evolution of democracy regarding the role of media, two lines can be drawn. The first can be described by borrowing Umberto Eco's renowned theory to describe intellectual attitudes about mass media and their pop culture (Eco, 1964). This is useful to describe the attitude about the present/future of democracy. Within this debate, in fact, there are opinions that could be defined apocalyptic regarding democracy's destiny in the age of mediated communication. In this case, the end of this political regime is predicted or even rediscovered, without an acceptable consideration of its historical possibilities of transformation. To counterbalance such apocalyptic ideas, there are integrated supporters of the magnificent and progressive fate of democracy. Just

a few decades ago with the end of communism, there were those who proclaimed the end of history and considered the radiant present of a democracy on which the sun never sets.

Although the duo apocalyptic/integrated, given the coinage, might in itself be referred to the opinion on media, however, one must more precisely arrange democracy models on another line that gives proper account to the importance of media. In fact, while some writers adopt a media-centric perspective and embrace the irreparable damage caused by media or the opportunities they offer to contemporary politics, others place democratic development in a socio-centric perspective in which media play a role but aren't the main protagonists. They actually end up being considered instruments in the hands of the real protagonists, namely economic rulers (McQuail, 1983).

Colin Crouch's post-democracy (apocalyptic and socio-centric – Crouch, 2004) and Pierre Lévy's cyber-democracy (integrated and techno-centric – Lévy, 2002) can be placed at the extremes of these coordinates. Through these categories, one can place all the yearnings towards direct democracy (integrated and techno-centric) and the concerns towards a post-representative democracy (apocalyptic and socio-centric). At the centre of this framework, new media can be mixed with or integrated into the old institutional structure as in the case of Stefano Rodotà's continuous democracy (Rodotà, 1997) or Ilvo Diamanti's hybrid democracy (Diamanti, 2014). Whereas, although balanced in considering technological and social aspects, a live broadcasting representative democracy (recently discussed by Nadia Urbinati, 2013) leans to some degree towards the apocalyptic pole. On the other hand, an audience democracy (long ago discussed by Bernard Manin, 1995) inclines towards the integrated pole.

In all these cases, one of the aspects considered in proposing the respective democracy model refers to the participation in political dynamics. In the case of post-democracy, 'a manipulated, passive and rare participation' is to be considered, with greater reference to a television show rather than to communication processes made possible by new media even though it is difficult to clearly see their innovative capacity. While in the case of cyber-democracy, information opportunities and power of speech on political events offered by digital media are to be considered.

What are the evaluation criteria of the impact of new forms of activism on political participation and eventually on democracy? Two

criteria seem particularly significant. Firstly, Net-Activism definitely continues an already observed trend that refers to the tactics of a number of social movements (from the students of 1968 to environmentalists), this means a broader repertoire of action for individuals and groups to use, in order to intervene in the public sphere. Today more than ever, there are numerous accessible ways to have your voice heard (see Ceccarini, 2015). Click-activism or hashtag-activism are just the latest examples of forms of action that express one's positions beyond the organized forms of political participation. A broader repertoire also represents a renewal compared to forms no longer viable (party membership) or perceived as too crystallized (there are those who even declared that 'voting is no longer democratic' – Van Reybrouck, 2015).

Secondly however, we must point out how often new forms of action can be properly categorized as participation by opinion. In other words, they have little or no effect on the decision. Highlighting this trend could be integrated with Evgeny Morozov's criticism regarding 'armchair activism' that costs practically nothing, but produces almost nothing in terms of actual results (Morozov, 2011). Here however, we would like to highlight the detachment, if not the contrast between participating through public opinion and participating through the institutional procedures of democratic fluidification of power, between the participation centered on speech exaltation and the classic participation based on will, between the participation by opinion and the direct participation of citizens in creating laws, between the participation related to the 'word' and the one related to a vote. When citizens are offered greater possibilities of participating in public debate, there is a paradoxical risk of distancing them from getting involved in the decision-making process (see Krastev, 2014). Bearing in mind these two trends – the opportunity of a broader repertoire of participation and the risk of moving away from decision-making centres – may allow the evaluation of the political impact of Net-Activism and the quality of democracy in the era of digital networks.

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Francesco Antonelli

*New Sociology of Intellectuals and Net-Activism*

*Introduction*

The purpose of this essay is to retrace the transformations of intellectuals in the passage from an industrial to a post-industrial society, up until the global network society, through a brief critical review of the main sociological themes that have dealt with this issue. The basic theory is that intellectuals are no longer a social and cultural elite defined by their relationship with political movements, but a mass and a variety of highly differentiated actors who find an environment full of risks and opportunities in the Internet, while taking part in the dynamics of power and counter-power, of criticism and economic production in a global society.

After explaining the critical approach followed and the main definitions used, in the second and third paragraphs we will discuss the classical sociology of intellectuals. The third, fourth and fifth paragraphs will instead be a debate on the most recent approaches. Finally, we will conclude by retracing the main transformation lines that have emerged and the challenges regarding the new relationship between web 2.0 and contemporary intellectuality.

*The critical approach and main definitions*

The critical approach followed in this essay aims to link the transformations of theory and social research to those in a more general context, assuming that, as Anthony Giddens claims (1994), real phenomena and their conceptualisation, measurement and analysis follow a spiral process. In other words, the subjects of knowledge, the results

of their work and the observed phenomena are built upon a reciprocal relationship. From this point of view, the work developed in these pages relies on a principle of contextualisation (Jasanoff, 2005) which applies the logic of the new sociology of knowledge to reflect on the political and public use of knowledge itself.

The essay's key term is obviously the 'intellectual' category. Although as we will see, different approaches tend to give different definitions of this phenomenon (Eyal and Buchhloz, 2010). In order to clarify and define the topic of this analysis, we define as intellectual a social actor whose actions have a desired and/or undesirable impact on political and public dynamics based on a cultural and symbolic capital defined relevant in a specific social context. The result is that an intellectual isn't just someone who has an intellectual job or is educated: this must be the basis to claim and exert some kind of influence on politics, communication and/or the public sphere. Moreover, in line with Habermas' typical approach (1962), in this essay we will distinguish between 'political sphere' and 'public sphere'; the former defined as an institutionalised realm of power dynamics that involve the political system and the latter as the dimension of debate and civil society action, in regard to collective and political issues.

### *The classical sociology of intellectuals*

The historical and social context in which the classic sociology of intellectuals develops, lives by the complicated and dual relationship between intellectuals and the masses, marked by the rise of new mass parties (Pombeni, 1994): on one hand, the former tend to stand out socially and culturally from the latter; on the other, public intellectuals justify themselves in relation to the masses (working class, middle class) always seeking the right distance with conflict and socio-political movements that characterise industrial society. In a corporate modernity phase, this means simultaneously imagining the problem of the relationship with political parties and with the form of participation and representation that characterises political dynamics.

In his well-known book *The Age Of Ideologies: A History of Political Thought in the Twentieth Century* (1982), the historian Karl D. Bracher suggests that the general interpretative key to the history of the past century is the short circuit between cultural production and political

processes, between intellectuals and the masses, between intellectuals and parties: reconnecting to a well-established liberal interpretation that dates back to Eric Voegelin (1952) and Jacob Talmon (1952), the German historian identifies the main explanation for the formation and rise of totalitarian and dictatorial regimes of the twentieth century with the political mobilization of intellectuals, their explicit militant choices and the redefinition in eschatological and dogmatic terms of modern humanistic culture: through the support of mass parties, intellectuals reportedly led non-intellectuals, the masses, towards their ruin and slavery, based on a widespread sense of alienation and estrangement from the liberal and capitalist project of modernity. This vision is clearly opposed to the diverse idea that could be defined radical, (mainly referred to German idealism, especially to Fichte's Science of Knowledge - 1794) which instead interprets the last century as a long trend of intellectual decadence. This vision upholds the idea that intellectuals betrayed their original mission of public engagement or were relegated to a marginal role, so they ended up favoring or unable to prevent barbarity in history (Asor Rosa, 2009; Furedi, 2004; Flores d'Arcais, 2013; Saïd, 2014): intellectuals were allegedly a vanguard defeated by history and in the end, basically alienated from party dynamics, unable to lead themselves and the masses towards a higher degree of emancipation.

With reference to different visions of the Enlightenment, both the liberal and radical interpretations bring out the two central issues that dominated the same consideration of social sciences on intellectuals between the first post-war period and the 1970s - a research program we could describe as classical sociology of intellectuals, by tightly binding analytical and normative dimensions:

1. The relationship between cultural and political spheres within the new industrial mass society. An issue based on the opposing duo involvement/detachment between cultural production and political approach and therefore, between intellectuals and mass movements.
2. The individuation of social identity and therefore, of the roles and tasks that intellectuals had and/or should have had in modern society. In this case, the opposing duo is political autonomy/political dependence, between the idea of intellectuals as social actors and autonomous politicians, instruments of a particular vision of the world and those who deny this

possibility, considering intellectuals as a constant instrumental actor in the political game of the main social groups (typical of the twentieth-century social thought of the middle and working class).

The combination of these two dimensions enables the identifying of four main areas of research:

- a) Theories of the new class (involvement/political autonomy): intellectuals are a class in itself that bears specific interests and world views, capable of structuring a training process and giving rise to a new ruling class that is replacing, (through the expansion of bureaucracy and the planning of production processes) the economic entrepreneurial bourgeoisie (Burnham, 1941; Dilas M., 1957; Gouldner, 1979). In this interpretation, both the quantitative growth and the increasing socio-economic role of intellectuals mark a trend in their relationship with mass political movements: initially characterized by vast forms of cooperation, this relationship marks a growing independence of intellectuals who increasingly become actors of an independent movement (and therefore political).
- b) Theories of the organic relationship (involvement/political dependence): intellectuals justify themselves in their social being and they always play a role of criticism or support towards history's two main social classes and related power dynamics; thus they are always at the service of others, not being directly productive and despite carrying out essential tasks to maintain or change the social order, by organising/leading secondary groups, producing ideas and approval (Gramsci, 1992). According to this interpretation, intellectual roles make sense and are considered specifically modern only in their close relationship with political mass movements that end up being led and organised by intellectuals.
- c) Theories of intellectual supremacy (detachment/political autonomy): in this vision, intellectuals are a group characterized by a moral and spiritual supremacy connected to their close relationship with the Truth: this basic orientation helps withdraw their social origin and influences (to which other socio-political individuals are subjected to) making them an independent social group; this shows that intellectuals should

not carry out their tasks at the service of this or that individual interest but, in line with their socio-cultural characteristics, they should put themselves at the service of a general interest or recover an ascetic vision of their role (Benda, 1927) or of a government inspired by Plato's 'philosopher kings' (Mannheim, 1929; 1935; 1950). For this vision, intellectuals must distance themselves from mass political movements to form a vanguard above conflict and individual interests.

- d) Theories of the professional role (detachment/political dependence): intellectuals don't have a privileged relationship with an alleged universal truth since they are fully immersed in an insuppressible 'polytheism of values'. This shows that they may primarily base their credibility on technical and professional training, providing useful support to understanding the phenomena and developing practical solutions without being able to attribute them to some objective reason (Weber, 1919). Therefore, even according to this interpretation, intellectuals must distance themselves from mass movements without claiming a greater ability to govern, but 'being satisfied' with carrying out their professional role, collaterally to the different socio-political groups fighting one another.

Tab. 1. – *Main branches of classical sociology of intellectuals*

IDENTITY AND ROLE OF INTELLECTUALS		RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURAL SPHERE AND POLITICAL SPHERE	
		<i>Involvement</i>	<i>Detachment</i>
	<i>Autonomy</i>	Theories of the new class (Alvin Gouldner) <sup>a</sup>	Theories of intellectual supremacy (Karl Mannheim) <sup>a</sup>
<i>Dependence</i>	Theories of the organic relationship (Antonio Gramsci) <sup>a</sup>	Theories of the professional role (Max Weber) <sup>a</sup>	

a= Emblematic author of reference

### *Discussion I: the supremacy of politics*

The classical sociology of intellectuals, between analysis and self-analysis, has mainly been a political sociology even when moved by an approach related to the sociology of knowledge – as in the typical case of Karl Mannheim (1929). Classical sociology, by focusing on a ‘high’ concept of politics and culture typical of the industrial society (that its development seemed to have weakened since the beginning) led the analysis problem of intellectuals back to Sartre’s central question: ‘what is an intellectual’. This sociology was therefore also an essentialist sociology based on an actual sacralisation and idolisation of culture and criticism’s ability to help build, through the intellectualisation of politics, a more rational world. The classical sociology of intellectuals was a sociology of minorities: intellectuals of the industrial society are a social minority from a quantitative point of view, in a situation in which the population’s average level of schooling is low; but they are also a minority from a qualitative point of view, since they present themselves and are socially perceived as an elite and/or a vanguard able to observe things in a deeper, more thoughtful and more forward-looking way and therefore, worthy of listening and leadership, according to a didactic model of the relationship between intellectuals and non-intellectuals (Bauman, 1987). In conclusion, this sociology has represented that supremacy of the political sphere compared to the public sphere, of organised political movements compared to civil society, which characterised the trend of the industrial society and the democracy of parties (Manin, 2010).

### *The new sociology of intellectuals*

The transition from an industrial to a post-industrial society has produced a crisis of the classical research program on intellectuals from an epistemological-methodological point of view, as well as from a self-sufficient perspective. In the 1970s and 1980s, five developments marked the rise and ultimate decline of the role of public intellectual that appeared on the public scene with the Dreyfus Affair: 1) the increasing centrality of knowledge in economy (Touraine, 1969; Bell, 1973); 2) the population’s remarkable growth of literacy and schooling in western countries; 3) the rise of new social movements after 1968 which led to a public saturation of the engaged intellectual figure and

the spread of an argumentative style based on the culture of critical discourse (Antonelli, 2012; Gouldner, 1979); 4) the success and development of a new media system based on commercial broadcasting and the leading role of entertainment (Abruzzese, 1978: 5) The disrepute which strong concepts of the Truth fall into and the general weakening of humanistic and social sciences' knowledge in their ability to materialise to a certain and universal knowledge: the *pars construens* that had given meaning to intellectual activity gives way to the supremacy of 'deconstruction' as the main mission of a knowledge different from natural science (Lyotard, 1979).

These five developments on one hand helped the deconstruction of the mass party and the rise of the new democracy of the public (Manin, 2010; Mazzoleni, 2012); on the other hand, the 'disillusionment' and the 'desacralisation' of the bond between the cultural sphere and the political sphere: the sociology of intellectuals stops being mainly political sociology, essentialist, of minorities and of political supremacy compared to civil society. It became: a) a 'sociology of knowledge and communication' because the central issue was the production and use of knowledge in the dynamics of power and counter-power on a mainly public scene and of public individuals; b) 'relational' because many individuals exceeding the classical cultural institutions (academy, school) and political institutions (State, parties) of social modernity use knowledge to structure their actions; c) 'focused on highly differentiated intellectual categories', since the division of intellectual labour and the individuals that animate it grows enormously in a constant tension between professionalism and a selfless approach to knowledge; d) the increasing 'supremacy of the public sphere and civil society compared' to institutionalised politics since the places and extents of the conflict move on a more informal, common ground, linked to communication and the formation of movement actors are not related to institutionalised parties.

The new major questions are: «in what conditions intellectual actors are formed?» And «in what conditions do intellectuals take part in the dynamics of power and counter-power on the public scene?». The new sociology of intellectuals moves along the opposing duo 'objective conditions/subjective conditions', 'structures and institutions' or 'identity and culture' as elements that can answer these questions.

- a) 'Objectivist' approach: this analytical current tends to 'depersonalise' its investigative object and, by adopting an approach related

to Pierre Bourdieu's genetic structuralism, it investigates the different intellectual areas, their socio-cultural features and the different positions of the actors within (Camic and Gross, 2001; Rahkonen and Roos, 1993; Sapiro, 2003; Ringer, 1990; Jacobs and Townsley, 2010). The reference model for this approach is *Homo Academicus* (1984) by Pierre Bourdieu. By starting from the university professor's definition 'dominant part of the ruling class', the French sociologist bases his entire analysis on the implementation of the 'social space' model, that means, viewing the University as a conflictual context to control its distinctive resources (prestige, political-cultural influence), in which one fights from different positions, alternating long phases of 'war of position' to brief but significant moments of 'war of movement'. The first type of conflict dominates the everyday academic life and is based on the use of science and the scientific merit as a resource to legitimize itself, but it doesn't work as the only criterion for recruitment, assignment and exercise of academic power. Arising from Kant's analysis, Bourdieu shows that relations between the different Faculties and between the different academic individuals, there is always a distinction and conflict between those who claim power on the basis of scientific capital (results obtained through research) and those who do so on the basis of social capital – influence developed from being members of the upper class or a dynasty of intellectuals or of a cultural-political faction. This isn't a conflict between good and evil, between 'merit' and 'barony', but between two principles always simultaneously present: the outsiders and the disciplines closest to pure research will gather and use the first type of capital, insiders and the disciplines closest to the field of power (such as Medicine and Law) the second. Pierre Bourdieu traces the brief, but intense phase of the 'war of movement' to 1968: in his interpretation, this event is the result of University's transformation into mass universities, with the consequential downgrading of qualifications and the increase in the number of professors which however, hasn't led to an equal increase in career opportunities. In France, the general crisis of May 1968 arose from the contingent formation of a 'position of homology' (in exploitation and frustration) between those newly wealthy of the Academy and the



working classes. Some of the most complete and characteristic research which moves alongside Bourdieu's model is Sapiro's analysis (2009) on the different models of public intervention in the French context. According to this research, the many ways of being intellectual depend on three factors: the total amount of the symbolic capital held by various experts, the level of independence from political power and lastly, the level of professional specialisation of 'aspiring' intellectual actors. Based on these structural factors – they are seen as changing features in the evolution of a social field – Sapiro identifies six types of public commitment of intellectuals and their identity: the critic, linked to the figure of a universalistic intellectual; the guardian of moral order; the intellectual-leader and organiser; the intellectual-vanguard; the pure expert; the collective intellectual.

- b) 'Subjectivist' approach: the second type of macro-approach is linked to a deconstructivist epistemological and theoretical option and is more thematically differentiated than the 'objectivist' approach: a first line of inquiry pertains to studies on science and technology as social products incorporated into public communication processes and in the formation of debates – such as ethical ones, on the social use of scientific knowledge and especially, those related to the life sciences. These *Social Studies of Science and Technology* (SSST) mark a crucial break with Merton's sociology of science (1968), mainly focused on reconstructing the internal identity of science (Calhoun, 2010): the focus is now on the symbolic redefinition, in a political context, of knowledge and technology (Collins and Evans, 2002; Latour and Weibel, 2005; Wynne, 2005). Four key principles follow in order to interpret the complex relationship among all these processes (Adler-Nissen and Kropp, 2015): 'the principle of symmetry' states that in rebuilding the social role of a certain knowledge, one must know the events and processes that determined the victory of a theory instead of others; 'the principle of interchange', according to which the scientific field is highly permeable to external influences; 'the situational principle', according to which knowledge must be read in its production and in its impact in close relation to institutional dynamics and with the circumstances that lead to its development; 'the contextual principle', for which knowledge

must always be read in relation to a wider political, economic and cultural environment in which it matures. A second sub-line of inquiry is clearly inspired by Foucault’s work and especially to that particular variation of the power-knowledge relationship included in the concept of ‘governmentality’. For the French philosopher, this concept is referred to that specific ‘art of government’ [...] which through institutions, procedures, analyses, reflections, calculations and tactics assures populations are taken over and guarantees the government of the ‘living’ (Foucault, 1978: 167-168). It’s on this ground, since the publication of the book edited by Burchell, Gordon and Miller, *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (1991), that *Governmentality Studies* start spreading on an international level: they start from the assumption that *governance* nowadays is built on the basis of ‘expert’ knowledge that defines the nature of government and the most appropriate means to putting it into practice (Barry *et al.*, 1996; Valverde, 1998; Rose *et al.*, 2006). Finally, the third sub-line refers to the so-called ‘epistemic communities’, groups of experts who, for different reasons, enter the increasingly influential and structured debates on international issues such as peace and global pollution; trying to investigate how their activism has repercussions on international relations (Adler and Haas, 1992; Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

Tab. 2. – *Main areas of the new sociology of intellectuals*

OBJECTIVIST APPROACH	SUBJECTIVIST APPROACH
Genetic structuralism	Social Studies of Science and Technology Governmentality Studies Analysis of the epistemic communities

*Discussion II: power and counter-power*

When the new sociology of intellectuals tends to minimise the typical prescriptive dimension of classical sociology, it represents the increasing differentiation of the relationship between intellectuals

and non-intellectuals and therefore, compared to those socio-political movements that had been a big part of twentieth-century thought. The focus shifts from the actors to the actions and to their desired and undesired effects, completely aware that legitimate knowledge is now an essential element to any socio-political dynamic. These may or may not be incorporated within the dynamics of power and counter-power that are no longer only structured on the political scene, but on the public, media and economic scene as well, in relation to civil society. Together with intellectual-militants who operate within social movements not linked to institutionalised political parties, there are the actions of experts and consultants, who become more important within the framework of the risk society (Beck, 1986) and post-democracy (Crouch, 2005). So intellectuals represented and analysed within the new sociology are defined by mainly interpretative or technical-professional identities and roles: on one hand, there are weakened intellectuals compared to the modernity, who continue to influence the public debate, whose job is to help connect different worlds of meaning and reveal a higher level of awareness among social actors who oppose power, on the basis of their scientific authority (Touraine, 2007; Beck and Grande, 2004; Bauman, 1987). On the other hand, there is a variety of intellectual figures who act as 'new legislators' in legitimising and supporting power in different social environments (Habermas, 2014).

### *Intellectuals and the Network*

If one of the new sociology's main achievements is bringing to light the diversity of intellectuals, of their actions and use of knowledge in the public sphere and civil society, in the dynamics of power and counter-power, then it's clear that one of the most important current topics is intellectual presence on the Network.

In this regard, we can briefly identify three leading positions:

- a) Techno-enthusiasts: those who consider the Network and especially the web 2.0 as the instrument that is able to release intellectual and potential energies of social criticism previously entangled in the institutional forms of the industrial society and of the first post-industrial society, based on analogue and unidirectional media. The hypertextuality, interactivity and

multimediality typical of the web 2.0 could start new ecologies and new processes of connected intelligence (De Kerckhove, 1997) or even collective intelligence (Lévy, 1994): on one hand, the intellectual's critical role is fully recovered, on the other, its tasks and actions are distributed among a multitude of dispersed entities who cooperate and compete with each other in building an interpretations of events, in the theoretical elaboration and in activism. This orientation has its roots in the libertarian culture that inspired architecture and the use of the first Internet, reproducing an image of the Network and its actors as primarily linked to the hacker culture (Himanen, 2001). The result is a positive verdict of the new intellectuals' ability to renew the forms and procedures of contemporary democracy.

- b) **Techno-critical:** according to researchers belonging to this second interpretation, the Network is far from strengthening critical or even cognitive skills of social actors, as well as their possibilities for action, so it represents the instrument of a growing domain of this new digital capitalism, able to weaken critical ability (Formenti, 2008; Morozov, 2011; Carr, 2011). This position – linked to Habermas' scepticism on the Network's discursive and democratic potential – develops mainly in a more mature phase of the Internet's rise and, by emphasising manipulating aspects and acquisition processes of individual intelligences from the economic mechanisms of the Big Companies on the Network, it forecasts the disappearance of the intellectual figure in the contemporary world.
- c) **Techno-realistic:** those who belong to this third category stress the ambivalence that characterises the Network and the elimination of any distinction between the 'on-line' and 'off-line' of social life (Vecchi, 2015). This shows that although undeniable manipulative aspects are present in the web 2.0, at the same time the Network is a place where a critical debate may occur and it often leads to the collective activism of actors who take part: these new intellectuals, who have prominently appeared in Arab revolutions and protest movements that followed the 2008 economic crisis, are no longer a vanguard, but a subject among others within contemporary movement networks (Castells, 2012).

One of the main problems that cuts across these three approaches is the social basis of new intellectuals present on the Network as well as the processes through which they are (or allegedly are, according to different points of view) manipulated or neutralised. The debate on intellectuals cuts across the debate on knowledge workers, individuals defined by their high level of education, the use for communicative, innovative or creative purposes of expert knowledge within the economic process and the use of new media (personal computer, Internet, mobile phone, etc.) as working and relational tools (Antonelli and Vecchi, 2012; Butera, 2008; Formenti, 2008; Bologna and Banfi, 2010; Beradi 'Bifo', 2004). Knowledge workers are a new chaotic middle class, much more individualised and distinguished than the old middle class of intellectuals: several aspects fade such as the intermediate bureaucratic structures that had been the main employment for 'white collars', their similar tastes that had expanded the mass market and the ability to obtain corporate protections compared to pure market competition. Thus forming:

«an actual social magma. A constantly moving context in which someone goes up and someone goes down in the hierarchy of realisation and life potentialities, but always within a bordered and communal space of action [...]. Each group tends to stand out for more or less subtle distinctions, but without the ability to become a reference class» (Gaggi and Narduzzi, 2006: 9).

According to the techno-enthusiasts' outlook – similarly to the theories of the new class (see above) – knowledge workers are destined to become a new ruling class that uses digital technology to express and release, without political mediation, their critical and vindictive requests and to self-organise and mobilise themselves when their own interests are at stake (Florida, 2002). According to techno-pessimists, knowledge workers are an integral and integrated part of the political-economic system and thus unable to mobilise or critically oppose themselves to the dynamics of power (Morozov, 2011; 2014). Finally, for techno-realists, knowledge workers have a high potential for mobilization and criticism that however, tends to be irregular, fragile and inconsistent (Antonelli, 2013).

*Conclusion: new challenges?*

To sum up the analytical path examined so far, we can say that the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial society and then on to a global society on the Network is characterised by the final decay of the intellectual figure as a cultural and political vanguard of society; of its figure of recognisable enlightened minority and the gradual appearance of a multitude of social actors with a high cultural capital, variously involved in the dynamics of power and counter-power. These dynamics exceed the bind between politics and culture that had represented the breeding ground of intellectuals during the modernity to transversely cross the public sphere, the civil society and the dynamics of communication. The sociology of intellectuals goes from mainly being focused on the 'intellectual' social actor to a wider object of analysis that examines the intellectual action and its effects; produces, spreads and uses knowledge as a critical feature as well as to support power.

The Network's increasing significance in the organisation of every contemporary social dynamic, offers a field for new investigations for this complex sociology of intellectual commitment and the instrument of unusual transformations of contemporary intellectuality. In particular, through a new, emerging bind between economic, communicative, cultural and political processes, through which intellectuals, as a political-cultural elite, gradually seem to become a swarm of actors whose actions mix and blend, producing an increasing overlap between the moment of criticism and debate and the moment of self-organised collective action. In this context, the relationship between new intellectuals on the Net and critical-emancipatory processes could face three limits that are, at the same time, areas of study and depth for sociological research:

- a) Impotence. In a world characterised by increasing communicative complexity and excess, the most important form of impotence that new intellectuals on the Network could experience is represented by the great deconstructive potential and by the great weakness in effectively supporting reconstruction processes of social and political structures that suffered criticism and protest. Two examples: in the so-called 'Arab Spring', intellectuality on the Network has played an essential role in determining the fall of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. However, not only was it unable to lead a completely

different model to success, but it mainly failed to deliver, if not in a small part, a new ruling class, especially in the second case. Even more disturbing is the result of ‘Occupy Wall Street’: in almost every case, neither the considerations nor the actions had any effect; the readjustment policies continued to follow the neo-liberal line and technocrats their interpreters, regained power. The impotence we’re talking about is therefore a political impotence, an inability to go from a ‘critical’ moment and of the movement to political forms.

- b) Favouritism. Intellectuals on the Network only speak to a small part of the population. Despite increasing cutting-edge multimedia and the interaction between old and new media, a large part of the population (the less educated and older individuals) is still largely unfamiliar with the Network. Another kind of favouritism comes from the fact that, very often, among knowledge workers (who are the basis of contemporary intellectuality) and manual workers (at all levels) there is very little communication and an even rarer exchange. The languages spoken are different and often incompatible. A third kind of favouritism comes from the excess of specialised knowledge and from an arrogant tone that many debates take on: so old habits are repeated and they end up distancing intellects and contributions useful to theoretical development and its distribution. Favouritism, in other words, weakens the hegemonic ability of new intellectuals.
- c) Populism. Just as the cultural knowledge and sophistication of intellectuals in the industrial society didn’t protect them from the totalitarian seductions of the twentieth century, neither did the widespread reflectiveness nor the sociability of the web 2.0, protect the new intellectuals from simplification, sensitivity, misinformation and charismatic seduction. Thus, intellectuals’ action on the Network may lead to a decline of the democratic idea, based on an image of an innocent and uncorrupted civil society – of which the intellectuals on the Network feel part of – and a political society home of every suffering.

Faced with these situations, sociology cannot and must not take on a simple analytical-descriptive mission – in accordance with the principles of new positivism – but, being an active part of the examined process and in line with the principles of public sociology (Burawoy, 2005) that

emphasize the social responsibility of the sociologist in promoting the rise of the actors' consciousness, it also offers on a regulatory level its contribution to the debate and action.



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Marco Binotto, Federica Ferraris

*Imagined Networks.*

*Media and the Organisation Metaphors of Collective Actions*

The medium, the movement itself  
as a new medium, is the message.

(Melucci 1985, 801)

- Look I'm trying to find the virtue of a leaderless movement where everyone's voices are heard.
- That isn't the point. We want everyone to look at Occupy Wall Street and ask themselves the question, 'Why is this happening?' I think that's been taken care of.
- But what happens after people ask themselves that?

*The Newsroom*, Season 2, episode 4.

*Introduction*

National Precarious Researchers Network, Solidarity Purchasing Groups Networks, Rainbow Parents Network, High School Students Network, Suspended Coffee Network, Network of Knowledge, Lilliput Network, Lenford Network, Solidarity Economy Network.

Networks: many civil society organizations and social movements define themselves using this term. Most of them have a website and, today, use social network pages or profiles. Often the network metaphor looks like a perfect analogy for the thick net of relationships the movement is made of, rather than the indication of a 'reticular community' based on the use of the web and of digital media. We aim here to investigate a): the reason why these collective mobilizations choose to define themselves through this metaphor and b): their relationship with the use of media tools.

Studies on 'Social Movements' have long focused on the role played

by communication technologies in identity construction and on the role of collective action coordination to increase creativity and collective proactive capacity (Tilly, 1978; Bimber, Flanagan, and Stohl, 2005; della Porta, 2009; McCaughey and Ayers, 2013; Tilly and Wood, 2013; Gerbaudo and Treré, 2015). The purposes and self-definition of the organization of a social movement are crucial in defining its structure and its identity building process (Hunt and Benford, 2008; Flesher Fominaya, 2010; Diani, 2013). Organisational studies have also focused their attention on the metaphors used to image and describe a structure or community and its identity (Koch and Deetz, 1981; Grant and Osrick, 1996; Morgan, 1998).

### *Network as an organisational image*

The word network, as a noun and as a definition, is both ‘a metaphor’ to define the organization and ‘a proposal’; the vision of what it aspires to represent. The network metaphor looks like the perfect analogy for the structure of the movement, its organization, and more significantly the way in which different people unravel their subjective experience of being part of a social movement. All movements work as a web. To put it better, they can be defined as social networks, and studied as «complex and highly heterogeneous network structures» (Diani, 2003: 1). The pioneering work by Mario Diani attests to the effectiveness of analysing the form and density of networks and connections a social movement is shaped by (Diani, 1995; Diani and McAdam, 2003). The network metaphor and the use of social network analysis tools have long since been used in the study of social movements and contentions protests.

However, the hypothesis we suggest here is different. Something changes radically when the movement itself defines the network as «the image of their communion» (Anderson, 2006: 6). It tries to function as network. To take the shape of ‘that’ web. These organisational forms seem to emerge similarly both from «new social movements» born in the Seventies and Eighties of the twentieth century: they had a segmentary, polycentric and networked structured described by Gerlach and Hine (1970) at that time. This frame seems to impose itself also recently, even more compellingly, when information and communication technologies have allowed to reproduce faithfully such technological

connectivity, while also offering an apt metaphor to describe them. However, this organizational model was not exempt from criticism, since it is inappropriate for ensuring efficacy and efficiency in collective action (Melucci, 1989). Today the definition of network appears to magically sort out all risks and idiosyncrasies towards top-down and institutionalised organisational forms. This vocation emerged strongly in the media-policy framework, and subsequently in scientific debates since the ‘rise’ of the Seattle Global Justice Movement in November 1999 (della Porta, 2009). Its «Lilliputian strategy» – as imagined by Brecher and Costello – will inspire one of the founding organizations of the Genoa Social Forum born in Italy in 2001, the Rete di Lilliput (Saroldi, 2003; Castagnola, 2004):

«Just as the corporate strategy creates worldwide production networks linking separate companies, the Lilliput Strategy envisions strong local grassroots organizations that embed themselves in a network of mutual aid and strategic alliances with similar movements around the globe». (Brecher and Costello, 1995: 106)

Around this specular opposition is an emphasis on the ‘networking’ structure: on the one hand, the network appears to be the best tool for dealing with a contender functioning as a web, on the other the reticular configuration corresponds to the use of the web and digital technologies as organisational infrastructure. It is thus on one side coherent with the *Zeitgeist*, the best way to oppose, an isomorphic form of the institutions of the network society. We can also see the categories ‘chosen’ by these movements as ‘endured’ properties. The network image is the modern myth to institutionalize organisations, hence the movements organisations. Organising a movement as a network today still appears to be the most rational and effective way to achieve a collective action (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Selznick, 1996; Powell and DiMaggio, 2012). Since the paramount definition by Bennett and Segerberg (2013) where the ‘Seattle movement’ was defined, scholars have used it to define this new form of collective action particular to Net-Activism:

«Connective action networks are typically far more individualised and technologically organised sets of processes that result in action without the requirement for collective identity framing or the levels of organisational resources required to respond effectively to opportunities». (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 751)

Reference here is combined indissolubly with the image of a network portrayed by information technologies. In one of its founding documents *Una vita da rete* (document 5) the Rete di Lilliput is described as follows:

«We conceive the network both as a common frame beyond which various forces and knots can find an interest in acting together towards single topics and as the use of the *Internet as the privileged tool* to build up alliances». (Bologna & Rete di Lilliput, 2001: 61 our emphasis)

The shape-network<sup>1</sup> is something that allows to simultaneously weld and differentiate, to «*recombine* social fragmentation showing the various actors involved a common escape route», combined with the awareness that «today, we have no more opportunities of rigid and monochromatic gatherings». The representation is that of a construction made by leave gaps and weak ties (della Porta *et al.*, 2006). Such a trend has also designed contemporary forms of mobilisation which are more and more rooted in digital networks. In these terms the metaphor of the web appears fully consistent with «the new social morphology of our societies» (Castells, 2011: 500). If on the one hand social movements tend to use narratives and organisation forms such as the «networking logic» of new processes of production, experience, power, and culture, on the other hand highlight the strength particular to such logic, building up isomorphic opposition towards the powers of the network society.

It is not fortuitous that Manuel Castells himself, probably the most acute analyst of the passage to the Network Society, also became the storyteller of contemporary «networked social movements» (Castells, 2013). Leaderless and decentralized, diverse and digital, movements, without precise strategies and objectives, where preserving debate and rallies appear to be an aim *per se*. Where «the process is the message». Just as in the media of the network society.

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<sup>1</sup> Seemingly, in the following years (2002-2007) the Networks and Districts of Solidarity Economy and the 'RES board' coordinating the existing local networks were created. The «Charter for the Italian Solidarity Economy Network (RES)» so defines the «Network strategy»: «to strengthen and expand the realm of the solidarity economy we are experimenting in different places the network strategy consisting of the construction of circuits where goods, services and information made in solidarity circulate and thus create space for a different economy» (p. 2).



*Media as organisational technologies*

It should thus by now be clear that every movement has its own defining technology (McLuha, 1964; Bolter, 1984), while each medium shapes the organisational forms of movements and social actors. The organisational model of social movements referred to a precise organisational metaphor and to a specific medium. When the movement, before 1977, worked as a political party, its own communication structure was the newspaper; its voice. The party had 'one' positioning and 'one' policy. It was easily recognisable and shared so that it could be «technically reproduced» uniformly and repeatedly for its militants and leaders. Party newspapers were that voice. The structure appeared similar, the secretary of the party, his leading team, paired with the newspaper editor in chief, whose task was to collect the rumors and news from the peripheries and masses to choose and to sum up, to synthesize. Similarly to press capitalism, press information constructed the identification with the party newspaper as effect of similar views, as identification and belonging (Downing, 2001; Pasquali and Sorice, 2005). As in the case of the rise of nationalism according to Benedict Anderson's analysis, the newspaper created «an imagined community among a specific assemblage of fellow-readers» (2006: 64). Seemingly, in recent times to subscribe to a mailing list or a Facebook group, despite not representing the affiliation to a party or to an association, allows one to enter a fellow-reader's community, that (at least apparently) will share the same information, and will know the same things. The transitory and 'light' feature of these networks and movements should not surprise us, since they are built on tools which can be easily dispersed through space and grow temporarily and almost instantly borders and news, creating an also temporary and instant belonging. Rooted in the same tool of latest news, of journalism, or 'live' news, its working mechanisms remains similar to that introduced by Harold Innis in his analysis of the history of the media (1950): it is a medium emphasising the 'space' – «the immediacy of the transmission from remote and the control of the territory» – against media emphasising time, continuity and cultural steadiness (Miconi, 2001: 41). The newspaper-party, like the web-network allows the construction of organizations throughout the national (and international) territory in a cheap and instant manner (Earl and Kimport, 2011), but this same focus on the space dimension hardly allows to be consolidated through

time via this medium exclusively so as to generate steady and ‘heavy’ identities.

The network is an organisation more explicitly based as an ‘oral space’ of co-existence and community, built on praxes and narratives and not on rules, positions or belongings which, as Czarniawska (1997) recalls, are rooted in their repetition. To some extent, motivation and boundaries are reconstructed every day, and their being together is built on conversation and connectedness. To operate, the network must constantly talk, account and share information. The newspaper constructs a univocal message, which once defined and constructed spreads itself as it is. The network is conversely rooted in the hope that «more people join and help reshape the message» (Jenkins, 2011; Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013). The former publishes a headline; the latter a hashtag. It is so true that hashtag features the way in which new social movements define and act.

Each #movement thus becomes a network. Social network sites can then become its organizational form and its means of expression. The purpose is no longer to achieve a specific goal, rather instead «Refusing to anchor a singular meaning» but willing to «keep[s] the conversations alive», to «provoke discussion» (Jenkins, 2011). To keep the net on line.

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Sveva Magaraggia, Elisabetta Ruspini<sup>1</sup>

*Contemporary Net-Activism: beyond Gender Dichotomies?*

*Changes, fluidity, movements*

This essay aims to briefly illustrate some aspects of the complex relationship between new technologies and gender-oriented activism. In particular, we will try to offer some ideas for reflection to analyse the connection between globalisation, contemporary modernity and movements aimed at reaching gender equality. The era we now live in has set forth the overcoming of dichotomies and standardisations that have connoted the modern historical moment increasing individual freedom, diversifying personal life courses and allowing new interchanges among cultures, generations and gender. Today interdependence affects individual and collective identities. Such trends have expanded by the development of ICT (Information and Communication Technologies). On the one hand, the technological outbreak has favoured the growth of new ways to communicate that are more rapid, participatory, pluri-directional and freed from the 'limits of the physical world'. While on the other hand, it has promoted cultural exchange, and has supported the emergence of new identities, thus influencing the perception of equality (which has now acquired several broader meanings), the modalities of civil and political engagement aimed at constructing an inclusive society, as well as the practice of demanding civil rights. This has brought about significant consequences – not to be underestimated – also on the women's movement. Briefly put, claims centred on the recognition of the particular identities of 'both' male and female are now strengthening, after a historical phase (second wave)

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<sup>1</sup> The essay is the outcome of a joint research. In the final writing, section 1 is by Elisabetta Ruspini and section 2 by Sveva Magaraggia.

characterised by egalitarian claims centred on the female subject and on the difference of the female with respect to the male. The fourth wave (also defined 'post-feminism', starting at the beginning of the twentieth century) is growing out of the web and social networks, and it includes the newest generation of women (see for example Cacace, 2004; Turri, 2013; Magaraggia, 2015). Such a wave represents a synthesis of the new needs, the expressive and narrative modes employed by the last generations of women, the growing cultural interdependence and the crucial role played by communication technologies. Today the main objective of such claims is to give space to the infinite number of female individualities and make the movement more and more accessible, inclusive and open; also towards men. In point of fact, the alliance with men has become crucial, since men are as much a victim of patriarchy as women (Ciccone, 2009). As argued by Magaraggia (2015: 31), such alliances have become possible also because some 'certainties' regarding the stability of relationships and of gender roles are strongly challenged by social change which is triggering a significant process of the reformulation of male identity. The late or postmodern women's movement is therefore quite different from that which characterized the second (and also the third) generation of feminism (Perra and Ruspini, 2015): the models of activism have changed, the collective actions have changed and are now entering the social system through different communication channels: social media, blogs, forums (Cacace, 2004; Del Greco, 2013). Concurrently, people are becoming more and more aware that fighting against gender discrimination cannot be solely concern with the exclusion of women from the public domain. Other subjects, spaces, realms are to be taken more and more into account (cfr. Antonelli and Ruspini, 2016). Starting from such reflections, the essay will try to shed light on the relationship between contemporary feminisms and new technologies, focusing both on the positive aspects and on the potential risks that such an encounter may generate.

### *Feminism of the fourth wave: prospects and some contradictions*

The great social transformation that marks a phase of historical discontinuity in our lives is mainly performed through social media. Thanks to the diffusion of smartphones and of social media the



so-called #activism has developed. The global echo of feminist action such as ‘One Billion Rising’<sup>2</sup> shows the potential of digital practices of participation and organisation. The web is the perfect translator of individual practices into global action. Thanks to such a translation, daily life seems to have fully become a source of ideas capable of activating political participation (Del Greco, 2013; Rossi, 2013).

Such a ‘development from within’ easily achieves a global dimension thanks to the web and it implies the co-presence of several objectives; an extreme cacophony of voices that have only one element in common: trust in the web. The employment of virtual space has changed a lot with respect to the way it was employed by third wave feminisms; the boundaries between on-line and off-line have become hybrid and, being no more distinct, they melt into one and create a continuous stream of comparisons and action (Hinsey, 2013). The transformative effectiveness of these forms of activism is highly debated, while there is an agreement on the web’s refreshing effect on feminisms.

The fourth wave seems to be a kind of feminism that wants the refoundation of gender identity: no more satisfied with definitions by negation – masculine is everything that is not feminine – but searching for libertarian, positive definitions. Such an operation means the transformation of male and female from their very roots, so from the way they are defined, i.e. from only focusing on the opposition such defining process aims at becoming inclusive.

In such a libertarian redefinition of our gender identity, men are also called on to play a significant role (surely a stronger one than in the past). The fourth wave is making into a political practice what has been scholarly affirmed by Men’s Studies from the end of the 90s, namely that also masculinity is suffering from the patriarchal order (Ciccone, 2009; Magaraggia and Cherubini, 2013).

Male supremacy is finally considered, also by these feminist movements, as a mere exercise of power, mere narcissistic display and repetition of strict identity-making devices. The construction of a new symbolic order, capable of focussing on the relationship with alterity can happen only through an aware alliance of genders.

These alliances can only strengthen in such a historical moment when certainties are being dismissed at an increasingly fast rate. The

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<sup>2</sup> One Billion Rising is the biggest mass action to end violence against women in human history <[www.onebillionrising.org](http://www.onebillionrising.org)> (last access 31.03.2017).

attempt to make differences coexist and co-work is revealed, for instance, by the slogan ‘check your privilege’, which is extremely popular online<sup>3</sup>. The fourth wave has translated into a political practice the awareness (often, so far, only theoretical) that any form of social privilege is not visible to those who hold it. To defeat this invisibility, we have to question our privileges, which exactly because of such invisibility are an exercise of power.

A parallel that can be seen between the contents produced by this new feminism and those of the third wave (the feminism that was born with the protests at the G8 in Genoa, 2001) resides in the reflections on the transformations of the working modalities (Magaraggia *et al.*, 2005). The third wave thought over on the precariousness, its transformation from the mere contractual level to an existential condition. Today the same logic is applied to pornography. Women and men of the fourth wave seem to have come out of the sterile dichotomy ‘yes/no’ in accepting pornography. They have greatly enlightened the moralist nature of such debates and have transformed their paradigms, reasoning on the meanings that a ‘pornification’ of daily relationships involves. These relationships are being experimented on a slippery surface, painful and at times funny, one that thinks of «pornography as a particular kind of job or rather as a paradigmatic way to work» (Power, 2009: 43). In a society such as the current one, where no one can become a subject without being first transformed into a good product, where «no one can hold their subjectivity in a safe place without constantly bringing back to life, resuscitating and re-integrating the capacities that are attributed to and requested by a saleable product» (Bauman, 2007: 17), to speak about pornification seems necessary. It is necessary because such a commercialisation combines with a transformation of the boundary between public and private: every element of our identities is exposed to the commercialisation process, which then becomes pornification. How to become an active subject in this process and not just to give in passively is high on the agenda of the fourth wave.

To conclude this brief reflection, we would like to think over the potential risks, on the foreseeable tricks that contemporary feminism may have to face.

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Check Your Privilege’ is an online expression used to remind others that the body and life we are born into comes with specific privileges. That we have to be situated <[www.checkmyprivilege.com](http://www.checkmyprivilege.com)> (last access 31.03.2017).

A characteristic of consumer society is the capacity it has developed to «absorb every kind of dissent that (like in other types of society) it inevitably generates, transforming itself into a fundamental resource to reproduce, strengthen and expand» (Bauman, 2007: 61).

Also the feminisms of the fourth wave risk being integrated into the prevailing order so as to continue to serve dominant interests (Mathiesen, 2004). A pop version of feminism, unable (or not interested) to offer some criticism of the oppressive structures of neoliberal patriarchy is more and more present, both online and offline. Feminism is thus translated into a very fashionable accessory for emancipated women. It is a kind of feminism<sup>4</sup> that is not able (or it does not want) to shed light on the contradictions of media messages, of imposed models, while, in an incoherent and critical way, it chooses some of those models and makes them its own.

As underlined by Nina Power (2007), such a lively passivity is functional to feminised capitalism, since it does not produce resistance, ruptures, counter thought, but rather a turnover increase for the market and a sense of frustration for female consumers. Today, this is one of the main dangers that fourth wave feminism faces.

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<sup>4</sup> The argument can be found, for instance, in what Jessica Valenti (journalist for *The Guardian*) writes.

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PART II

NET-ACTIVISM IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD:  
CASE STUDIES





Serena Fossati

*Mapping the Communicative Infrastructure of  
a Youth Environmental Organisation in China*

*Introduction*

Rapid economic growth has resulted in dramatic environmental degradation in China. In response to growing environmental concerns, the government has made efforts to develop policies, promulgate laws, and set up an institutional apparatus (Schwartz, 2004). However, governmental regulations have proven to be inadequate in addressing environmental challenges and are selectively enforced (Zhao, 2014): as a consequence, central government has started opening limited political space for public participation in environmental protection. This has led to the development of several Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (ENGOS) in the mid-1990s (Wang, 2001), responsible for promoting environmental awareness, monitoring local government efforts, organising local sustainable development projects; as well as the proliferation of student environmental associations in Chinese Universities (Lu, 2003). Thanks to international and domestic pressure that have placed environmental protection at the top of the reform agenda and the influence of active ENGOS, environmental activism has been enjoying a dramatic increase (Ho and Edmonds, 2007). However, ENGOS have to deal with several legal and financial restraints, that limit the exploitation of strategies and resources. As a result, environmental activists have embraced the Internet, since it provides a relatively open forum with lower financial and social costs (Sullivan and Xie, 2009).

*Literature Review*

The proliferation of communication technologies has benefited environmental activism in China (Matsuzawa, 2012). The Internet has inspired and facilitated the creation of a new associational form, that is to say web-based environmental organisations, overcoming political constraints and the lack of financial resources. NGOs face a restrictive institutional and political environment in China, making it difficult for organisations to be officially recognised (Ho and Vermeer, 2006). The Internet has brought about extensive changes, as it provides ENGOs the opportunity to establish their presence and organise online; and therefore effectively increase their public visibility.

Moreover, the Internet has facilitated the activities of existing ENGOs: it becomes a powerful tool for spreading information and promoting discussions concerning environmental issues, consequently raising public awareness about China's environmental problems, and mobilising potential volunteers (Yang, 2005b). The Internet not only represents a platform for self-presentation and publicity, information sharing and debates, the coordination of online and offline campaigns, but it also plays a crucial role in strengthening the links with both the local and international public (Sima, 2011). Sullivan and Xie's (2009) results suggest that the level of connectivity within the environmental network is increasing, as they have identified a large and dense online network of groups involved in environmental activism.

Finally, the Internet has fostered new resources for citizens to engage in activism (Yang, 2009), introducing new dynamics into popular protest. The 2007 Xiamen protest is an illustrative example of how mobile phones can facilitate the coordination of protest events and citizen mobilization (Liu, 2014), allowing the spread of information, expressing discontent, triggering discussions, capturing and posting events online. Social media provide alternative sources of information and discussion threads, and contribute to mobilising social forces (JH Xua, 2014). Although social media platforms have been defined as apolitical spaces, as the most popular daily trends usually consist of entertainment, news and commercial information (Sullivan, 2012), and are subject to content regulation policies (King *et al.*, 2013), activists in China tend to attribute greater importance to social media to promote and foster public debate (Harp *et al.*, 2012).

## *Methods*

The paper presents findings obtained from qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews (conducted in August 2015) with five staff members, focusing on the role of social media in environmental activism. In addition, data are drawn from the content analysis of 1810 posts retrieved from the group's social media accounts, up to August 2015: 1220 from the social networking service RenRen, 525 from the microblogging service Sina Weibo, 65 from the instant messaging service WeChat. The paper focuses on a student environmental organisation established in 1999 at Tianjin University, made up of 200 students. Its founders describe its establishment as a response to today's tough environmental situation. Its mission is to advocate a green lifestyle, raise awareness, encourage public participation in addressing environmental problems, and condemn acts of pollution. Its activities include energy, water-saving and recycling campaigns within the campus, field training programs, water pollution investigations and classes for school children. The green group has also developed exchanges with ENGOs that are committed to spreading green culture.

### *Analysis of the organisation's communicative infrastructure*

Drawing from a communication ecological approach, the paper explores the communicative infrastructure of the youth organisation, analysing what communication technologies are adopted and how they are used in combination. According to my observation and interviews, the communication of the green group is articulated across different online platforms. Striking differences between these platforms, in terms of function, audience, content, and interaction have been observed.

#### *Sina Weibo: an education and networking channel*

Sina Weibo is a microblogging platform that also features social networking services: it allows users to post textual messages, upload videos and photos, and comment on each other's posts. Our youth organisation created its Weibo account in May 2011; as of August 2015, the number of followers is over 1470. The green group has embraced Weibo to reach a broader audience. First, Weibo enables the

spread of information and education of citizens concerning international and local environmental issues. For example, posts are focused on the effects of global warming on the polar regions; or report international news, such as the decision of the Ethiopian Government to burn illegal ivory products. Posts also report national news, like the recent release of a revised Air Pollution Prevention Law, and concerns about local issues. For instance, the group has shared the air pollution data released by Tianjin authorities about the explosions that have hit Tianjin in August 2015; and report cases of water pollution, along with information on how to denounce violations: it is recommended to call relevant authorities, and post recorded violations online. Second, Weibo enables the strengthening of existing connections with youth green organisations, by promoting mutual support and fostering solidarity. For instance, groups with common areas of interest mutually share noteworthy initiatives, such as green Summer Camps or research projects, and show enthusiasm for the establishment of new groups in partner universities. This clearly shows that our green group is part of a network of environmental youth organisations. Content mainly consists of original posts, and reposts of articles and messages. 42,3% of the examined posts contain URLs, linking to outside sources: news sites (as Xinhua News), Chinese environmental institutions websites (such as the Tianjin Environmental Protection Bureau) and international NGOs (like Greenpeace). Moreover, there are few outlinks to video-sharing platforms (YouKu and Sina Video), that point users to video materials, including TED talks and CCTV interviews.

#### *Renren: a recruitment tool*

RenRen is a social network that enables users to connect with each other, by posting status updates, uploading photos and videos, and blogging. Our youth organisation joined RenRen in May 2009. The page has been regularly updated, and has developed a following of 1726 likes, up to August 2015. Since its inception, the platform appears to be part of the group's volunteer recruitment approach, as posts invite young people to join the group, and take effective action to address environmental challenges. Messages are directly addressed to potential volunteers; like-minded people, who share common environmental concerns, and appeal to their desire to make their own contribution to the environment. Posts explicitly solicit a conversational response and

are aimed at establishing a connection with them. Recruitment messages often mention successful past activities, to show results the group has recently achieved, and some of the possible benefits that students could gain from volunteering. Renren appears to be the appropriate platform for seeking new recruits, since it is extremely popular with university students. As reported by the company, although RenRen has nationwide penetration with users across all demographics, the core audience consists of college students.

A RenRen account is also used to encourage the engagement of young people in the group's initiatives, including competitions, energy, water-saving and recycling activities to create a healthier campus. Information about how to get involved are detailed, and URLs in order to find further information are also included. Content mainly consist of textual statuses focusing on the group's activities: 28% of posts include pictures and less than 3% contain videos.

*WeChat: a publicising platform*

WeChat is a mobile instant messaging service, enabling users to generate multimedia messages, that also supports a social network (Moments) and location-based services to chat with WeChat users. Moreover, companies, celebrities, and media can create a public account, to promote their brands. The WeChat public account was created in August 2014 and the green group is investing resources in order to increase its number of subscribers. So far, it has mainly been used to reach Tianjin University students and volunteers, to publicise information about the organisation. Posts focus on the communication of its vision and aims, for example by inspiring students to practice green lifestyles; and provide information about relevant organisational updates, including meeting reports, the election of new members, or future aspirations, like the hope of establishing further connections with university green groups. Informational posts also feature successful initiatives, such as volunteers' investigative journeys, aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of environmental problems in specific areas, and evaluating new approaches to managing them. Posts are formulated in the form of a diary, and combine textual and imagery narration to showcase volunteers' missions and enthusiasm. The accurate descriptions of activities highlight the educational aspects of the experiences.

However, the intention of the group is to introduce some changes in the management of WeChat account: content will include more environmental scientific articles. Indeed, the latest posts analyzed concern environmental issues, including Beijing air pollution, and US-China climate and energy cooperation.

### *Discussion*

The study considers the role that social media affordances play in affecting and shaping the communicative infrastructure of the green group, in the context of the emerging new media ecology. An affordance perspective allows one to analyse communicative practices enabled by the relationship between an organisational context and the capability of a technology (Leonardi, 2011). Based on recent research concerning social media affordances (Halpern and Gibbs, 2012; Treem and Leonardi, 2012) and on previous analysis, the discussion focuses on two affordances associated with online platforms observed: connectivity, referring to the possibility of the group to establish and strengthen connections with its audiences, and mobilise them; and visibility, which offers the possibility of amplifying its cause and reaching a broader audience.

Firstly, social media provide different features facilitating interaction among users. On Weibo, mentions are used to address messages to specific green groups within its network of youth organisations, and to directly engage them in discussion. This form of 'addressivity', that is crucial for conversation to occur (Honeycutt and Herring, 2009), is often combined with the practice of reposting, which allows the forwarding of other users' content. Our green group creates its own posts version, by adding additional content when reposting a message, such as reactions to specific news, and solicitations to users to share their opinions; sustaining a high level of interactivity. However, public discussion does not take place frequently, although Weibo encourages debate through the threaded comment feature. Discussion mainly involves youth organisations, that are more active in leaving comments, in particular when they are mentioned in a post. Hyperlinking represents a central practice of the green group, and appears to increase collective solidarity and strengthen ties, as the outlinks may refer to sources of information about other associations' causes and activities.

On RenRen, commenting and social tagging features can be seen as mobilising structures (McCarthy, 1996), as they may encourage potential and actual volunteers to actively engage in the group. These interactional features are closely related: they may not only contribute to strengthening existing connections within the group, but may also involve more people in the organisation's RenRen community. Indeed, tags within comments enable volunteers to connect with one another, and include their friends, by encouraging them to join the community. These practices may also potentially increase support towards the green group and create opportunities for offline civic engagement, by motivating potential volunteers to become involved. These features are reinforced by statuses that stimulate more interactive exchanges among volunteers, and explicitly call potential volunteers to action. WeChat's public subscription account operates differently: it enables users to broadcast one message per day, and does not offer opportunities to customize profiles, providing a more basic communication approach and low interactivity. Subscribers do not receive push notifications, but have to access the group's account within the Subscription Accounts subfolder, to check new content updates. In addition, interaction with content is limited to liking and reposting functions. However, WeChat enables the green group to engage in direct communication with its audience, as content is delivered to subscribers on their mobile phones. The group manages to create engagement with its followers through quality and in-depth content, mainly self-published articles about organisational identity, history, activities and perspectives. The platform is perceived as a tool for receiving and sharing significant and timely information.

Secondly, social media platforms provide functionalities able to enhance the visibility of online content. On Weibo, our green group is interested in influencing public opinion in terms of environmental behaviour and positively impact on environmental causes, by increasing their awareness. The reposting practice represents a key mechanism, as it facilitates information dissemination on the platform. Communication through Weibo begins from an individual sharing with his follower groups and, after several layers of group sharing, the message propagates and may rapidly reach the masses (Zhang and Negro, 2013). On RenRen, the possibility to share content within multiple formats enables our group to gain more attention from its target audience. From the observation, it is clear that posts combining

textual, imagery and video resources generate more engagement, as they receive more likes, comments and reposts than textual status updates. Original content may appear in News Feeds more frequently, thus amplifying the message. The platform facilitates the practice of picture sharing, through a number of functionalities, including multiple photo uploads and album uploads. The preference of the group to frequently use features that support high-context communication, such as emoticons as a substitute for non-verbal communication, has been observed. Compared to Weibo and RenRen, the WeChat account has limited visibility in terms of information diffusion, as content is delivered to subscribers who are interested in the group. However, the design of the public account makes content easy to repost within subscribers' personal networks, on Moments and other social media platforms. The green group itself reposts WeChat articles on its Weibo account, to achieve better dissemination. The reposting among one's own networks allows greater views of such posts, triggering attention and attracting traffic via personal influence. WeChat is perceived to be a platform which can disseminate social messages and exert a positive influence on users.

### *Conclusion*

Social media play a significant role in the work of the Tianjin University green group. Online platforms enable our youth organisation to educate its audiences, by disseminating environmental information. This may contribute to raising awareness and influencing public opinion in terms of environmental behaviour, and positively impacts on environmental causes. Social media are also crucial in spreading information about the group's identity, history, activities and perspectives. Moreover, social media interactional features play a crucial role in strengthening existing connections among volunteers and with the network of youth organisations, thus promoting mutual support and fostering solidarity. Finally, online platforms facilitate the mobilisation of actual and potential volunteers, encouraging young people to join the group, and take effective action in addressing environmental challenges.



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Emanuele Toscano

*The Dark Side of Web-Activism:  
the Case of CasaPound Italia*

*Introduction*

Since it became a central issue in social movement studies, digital activism has been the focus of research largely referred to movements inspired by positive and emancipating values, such as freedom, solidarity, the environment, the affirmation of civil and social rights (Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Farro and Demirhisar, 2014). Apart from a few notable exceptions (Padovani, 2008; Bartlett, 2012; Caiani and Parenti, 2013), digital activism and the use of social media in far right radical movements in Italy and Europe has not yet been the subject of extensive in-depth analysis.

Social media, also provide a communicational and organisational space for far right activists, who use them for their own characteristic of multimodality, speediness, and for the given possibility to create connective actions and channels of propaganda as much as to reinforce some threats by their own identity and community.

The focus of this article is the presence and use of social media and (more generally) the web by the radical Italian right-wing movement, CasaPound Italia.

*CasaPound Italia*

In Italy, over the last twenty years, many big changes have occurred in the articulated world of extreme right-wing movements and groups. CasaPound can be considered the best example as a result of these changes, mainly linked with the redefinition of far right symbolic languages,

codes, cultural references and political discourse<sup>1</sup>.

The name CasaPound comes from the Italian word for 'house' (*casa*) linked with the name of the American poet Ezra Pound (1895-1972), famous for having openly supported Mussolini and the fascist regime in Italy and for his positions against usury. The name, together with the symbol of the movement, a stylized turtle, symbolically expresses the main concern of CasaPound's political discourse: the rights of housing over bank mortgages. In fact, for a long time CasaPound has claimed as its main political proposal the institution of a 'social mortgage' (*Mutuo sociale*): a loan without interest to buy public houses, modulated to be no more than 20% of household income, directly paid back to the State, without any bank brokerage.

CasaPound was officially born in December, 2003, squatting in an entire building of a multicultural neighbourhood in Rome city centre. In the last few years it has managed to transform itself from a local experience to a national presence. In the most recent administrative elections it presented its own lists and candidates in many cities around the country<sup>2</sup>. Even if its electoral presence is still very moderate, CasaPound has managed to recruit a significant number of people, mainly young, largely thanks to its network of rock bands, labels, pubs, squat-buildings, and for being strongly characterised as a grassroots and streets movement.

CasaPound's political discourses combine the far-right social tradition of Italian fascism together with Alain de Benoist ideas and his theorisation about the *Nouvelle Droite* during the seventies and eighties. The latter, according to Ignazi (2009), can be summarised in three main points: a) critique of liberalism and the marketisation of all aspects of social life; b) the refusal of cultural homologation and US cultural hegemony, seen as the destruction of 'natural' communitarian characteristics; c) the rejection of egalitarianism, considered a consequence of affirmation of liberal individualism and mass society. In this sense, the 'metapolitical' approach, which means attention to more cultural and intellectual aspects, rejection of the left-right dichotomy,

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<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth analysis of Casapound and its main relevant sociological characteristics, cfr. Toscano, Di Nunzio (2011). *Dentro e fuori Casapound. Capire il fascismo del terzo millennio*. Armando Editore.

<sup>2</sup> In the most recent administrative elections (June 2016) the CasaPound list secured 6,21% of votes in Bolzano, Northern Italy, while in Rome it doubled its votes in comparison with the previous administrative election of 2013 (from 0,6 to 1,2%). Finally, in Latina, a southern part of the Lazio region, CasaPound achieved 3%.

is combined in CasaPound with nationalistic and revisionist discourse inspired by fascist ideology.

### *CasaPound's presence on the web*

As already underlined, digital activism in radical right organisations has yet to be broadly analysed and research on this specific issue is very limited.

As shown by Caiani and Parenti (2013), who completed a Social Network Analysis of extreme right-wing network online connections, Italy is characterised by a strong fragmentation without any central and pivotal organisation capable of monopolising all communication exchange. Differently from other countries also considered in their analysis, Italian extreme right-wing online networks have some characteristics such as many connections within groups, but with weak ties. In particular, their SNA shows how CasaPound is clearly part of these networks, but as a central node of a sub-network mainly populated by rock bands (ZetaZeroAlfa) and music label websites (Perimetro), as well as information and communication platforms (NoReporter)<sup>3</sup>.

CasaPound's presence on the web is mainly organised around the website (<[www.casapounditalia.org](http://www.casapounditalia.org)> (last access 31.03.2017)) and social media profiles, with many regional and local pages. In particular, the Facebook page of CasaPound Italia in June 2016 reached more than 178,000 fans, as well as its Twitter profile with over 15,000 followers. In order to have a wider and more precise picture, is also important to consider some social media profiles strongly linked with CasaPound Italia, such as ZetaZeroAlfa, the rock band whose singer is also the leader of the CasaPound movement (more than 46,000 FB fans in June 2016) or Simone di Stefano, president of CasaPound Italia and candidate in the last mayoral election in Rome (more than 67,000 FB fans and 7,500 Twitter followers in June 2016). Before the affirmation of social media as communication platforms, CasaPound's online activities were organised around the online forum *Viva Mafarka*, which, since its creation in 2006 up until April 2011, accounted for more than 3,500 registered users, 1,575,000 posts and more than 65,000 threads, (Di Nunzio and Toscano 2011: 108). The

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<sup>3</sup> For more detail, see Caiani Parenti, 2013: 96; fig. 3.1.

substantial importance given to their presence on the web is demonstrated by the promotion of a particular figure in CasaPound, the ‘web supporter’, starting in 2013.

«Web supporters are the emergency task force of CPI in the internet world. This implies great responsibility, the same that we already ask of CasaPound members and adherents. It is an important role, in which we strongly believe in, as it represents the greatest spirit of our movement, which is based on participation of everyone according to his/her abilities and aptitudes. As we do in the streets, in schools, in universities - also on the Web our area of freedom must be preserved»<sup>4</sup>.

The communication above shows how commitment to the movement’s ideas, values and lifestyle strongly involves CasaPound members at a political, social and cultural level (Di Nunzio and Toscano, 2014), both in face-to-face and online activities and interaction. The awareness of this commitment acts as a strong force of cohesion, which consequently strengthens personal involvement and collective action: activists feel an affinity not only with the contents of the actions, but also with the modalities through which they are involved by expressing their individuality and personality.

### *How CasaPound uses the web*

As well as in the case of many other extreme and radical right-wing movements and organisations (Caiani and Parenti, 2013), in the case of CasaPound, the web is mainly used as a showcase, to promote their values, discourses and initiatives, organised on three levels: ‘what we are’, ‘what we are doing’, ‘what we have done’. We can briefly summarise four aspects that mainly characterise CasaPound’s use of the web.

Identity strengthening as shown by Bartlett (2012) in his research<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cfr. <<http://www.casapounditalia.org/2013/03/new-aperto-il-tesseramento-2013-sia-per.html>> (last access 15.07.2016).

<sup>5</sup> The British think-tank DEMOS realised several surveys on populist Web presence in Europe. In Italy CasaPound was chosen as a case study, along with other extreme radical right-wing organisations in many different European countries. Cfr. <<http://www.demos.co.uk/research-area/radicalisation-extremism/>> (last access 31.03.2017).

on CasaPound members' online behaviour and the use of Facebook, most supporters consider the 'group values' as the main reason to be part of the movement. The answers collected by Bartlett's online survey suggest that CasaPound supporters «are not just 'protesting' against other parties, but rather have a sense of identifying with the movement itself» (2012: 47).

**Politainment:** social media are also used in CasaPound to promote initiatives and collective actions. The communication strategies chosen are often referred to as a popularisation of politics, with the use of cultural codes and pop imagery to spread political messages, in accordance with the idea of 'politainment' (VanZoonen, 2005), and which identifies the combination of political themes in pop culture products.

**Repository:** CasaPound's official page is more a web portal than a simple website. It is the starting point to explore the galaxy of many different websites directly linked or controlled by CasaPound. Many of them have the peculiar role of conserving the memory of CasaPound actions and initiatives. Many others, such as [archiviononconforme.org](http://archiviononconforme.org), close but not explicitly linked to CasaPound, offer archives of thousands of song lyrics of extreme and radical right-wing singers and rock bands.

**E-commerce (merchandising):** the web is also a powerful distribution channel for merchandising (mainly T-shirts with sentences and slogans taken from ZetaZeroAlfa's song lyrics), which is one of the ways CasaPound manages to self-finance its activities at a political, social and cultural level.

### *Conclusions*

Digital space, such as social media, offers the same field of interactions, autonomy, collaboration and individual affirmation for all kinds of activists. The framework in which digital activism takes place is always the same, irrespective of an organisation's ideas and values: the principle of autonomy and the affirmation of networked individualism (Castells, 1996), the use of the web as a collaborative tool, the development of a new kind of communication, based on interactivity and web 2.0 characteristics of 'mass-self-communication' (Castells, 2010).

These new tools provide social and cultural movements of the third millennium extremely effective communicational and organisational forms and models, marking a definitive departure from that of traditional organisations. Nevertheless, even if web and social media characteristics are the same for all organisations, CasaPound's use of the web and ICTs (and extreme right-wing movements more generally) is very different from other movements where digital activism has also been a crucial part of collective action, such as the 'movements of the squares'<sup>6</sup> developed in the last few years around the world, from Europe to North Africa to the USA. However, if for the latter a large and accurate literature has been developed, digital activism in extreme right-wing movements is a key issue that needs to be better explored, with more field-research and theoretical reflection.

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<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Geoffrey Pleyers (2014). *From Facebook movements to city square movements*. <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/geoffrey-pleyers/from-facebook-movements-to-city-square-movements>> (last access 15.07.2016).



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Federico Ettore Maria Tarquini

*The Italian Far-Right in the Digital Age: Media,  
Consumption and Imagery*

*Introduction*

It was autumn 2009 and in the streets of Rome numerous propaganda posters with the face of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara and the *CasaPound* logo had appeared (Fig. 1)<sup>1</sup>. On the face of the revolutionary Argentinian were emblazoned the words *'Aprendimos a quererte'*. The event did not go unnoticed, like other similar experiments (Fig. 2), as CasaPound in Europe was known as the first and most important community of the so-called *Destra Non Conforme*<sup>2</sup> (now known as the DNC), a major component of the polymorphous galaxy of 'continental right-wing extremism.' The aim of this paper is to analyse the implicit transformation of the symbolic short circuit that we have briefly mentioned, starting with the identity between the immediate object of our research, extremism, and practices through which it is expressed, the Internet (Benjamin, Agamben 2001). The study presented here, dealing with the aesthetic aspects and the cultural and communication processes of the DNC, moves within the disciplinary field of mediological and cultural studies<sup>3</sup>. What arises, like a horizon of reflection, is the reciprocal relationship of influence between media

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<sup>1</sup> Source of all images: <[www.casapounditalia.org](http://www.casapounditalia.org)> (last access 31.03.2017).

<sup>2</sup> With the designation 'Destra Non Conforme' we refer to the neo-fascist movement commonly known as 'CasaPound Italia'. The type of definition proposed relates to the same protagonists of this movement.

<sup>3</sup> A collection of studies that deals with: the relationship between forms and cultural change (Simmel, Benjamin, Abruzzese); the relationship between the media, cognitive forms, and expressive forms (McLuhan); the distinction between strategies of social power and tactics of everyday life (De Certeau, Hebdige); and finally to a positive and not a negative definition of the imagery products of the cultural industry (Morin).

and societal and political forms. Figuring out how much and in what way this form of right-wing political extremism will conform to the general characteristics of the network society (Castells, 1996) is therefore the main focus of this paper.



Fig. 1 – CasaPound Poster: Ernesto 'Che' Guevara



Fig. 2 – CasaPound Poster: Corto Maltese

*The imagery of the media and consumption in the identity processes of political extremism*

«I hope you realize what you're doing».  
 «Not exactly. We sat at opposite ends of the table, undistracted by Julia's presence. You're going to tell me».  
 «I am» Sangster examined his swollen hands, and picked a splinter from his thumb. «In a way it's quite an achievement. Back in the nineteen-thirties it needed a lot of twisted minds working together, but you've done it by yourself».  
 «Is my mind twisted?».  
 «Definitely not. That's the disturbing thing. You're sane, kindly, with all the genuine sincerity of an advertising man».  
 «So what have I done?».  
 «You've created a fascist state».

«“Fascist?” I let the word hover overhead, then dissipate like an empty cloud. In the ... dinner party sense?».

«No. It’s the real thing. There’s no doubt about it. I’ve been watching it grow for the past year. It’s been stirring in its mother’s belly, but you knelt down in the straw and delivered the beast».

«Fascist? It’s like “new” or “improved”. It can mean anything. Where are the jackboots, the goose-stepping Brownshirts, the ranting Führer? I don’t see them around».

«They don’t need to be» Sangster watched me with a quirky smile that never completely formed, as if I were a destructive pupil he disliked but was unaccountably drawn to. «This is a soft fascism, like the consumer landscape. No goose-stepping, no jackboots, but the same emotions and the same aggression. As you say, there’s a strong sense of community, but it isn’t based on civic rights. Forget reason. Emotion drives everything. You see it every weekend outside the Metro-Centre». (Ballard, 2006: 319-320)

This conversation allows us to introduce the fundamental meaning that consumption practices have taken on for the DNS. Especially if you look at how it currently creates its own collective identity. The scenario above by Ballard in his famous novel ‘Kingdom Come’ highlights a type of fascism fuelled by the significance that the experiences of consumption were having on provincial England at the dawn of the third millennium. In this novel it is easy to find a number of typologies in which the author recognises the fulfilment of this new fascism: the football fan, the Christian nationalist, and fanatical shopper.

The process, well described by Ballard, between consumer practices and the construction of collective identities or typologies, is what characterises the profound nature of the DNC. Somehow, what creates aggregation and social bond within this group is the common adherence to a lifestyle, a way of eating, dressing, or spending one’s free time. The definition of extremism is therefore the result of a way to use every day objects<sup>4</sup>. It is clear that this transition from the concrete dimension of consumption to that of an abstract of collective identity can verify itself only in the presence of a reference of imagery. On the other hand, as we remember Colin Campbell, the symbolic potential of the consumer lies in:

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<sup>4</sup> In this sense, it is interesting to note that the imaginary fantasy of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* was used in the sixties and seventies as a representative element of their identity in Europe by far-right movements, and the United States against the Californian culture.

«the desire to experience in reality the pleasurable dramas which they have already enjoyed in imagination, and each “new” product is seen as offering a possibility to realising this ambition. However, since reality can never provide the perfected pleasures encountered in day-dreams (or, if at all, only in part, and very occasionally), each purchase leads to literal disillusionment, something which explains how wanting is extinguished so quickly, and why people disacquire goods as rapidly as they acquire them». (Campbell, 1987: 90)

In the early nineteen sixties Edgar Morin stated that imagery, especially that which was produced by the culture industry and consumption, could be considered the ‘concrete’ basis on which to place the life of the individual and the community (Morin, 2001). In this thesis, essential to our research, we can approach in terms of political phenomena the studies of Benedict Anderson on imagined communities (Anderson, 1991). The idea, namely, that every political community achieves its own story through both real and imaginary data, where the latter often has a greater unifying power compared to the former. Therefore, the role of the imaginary is determined with absolute evidence for the DNC, especially in its way of approaching the world of consumption and the media. Like in *Kingdom*, as the reader ‘reads’ about the birth of a new fascism on the bodies of the characters described by Ballard which were adorned by polo shirts with the cross of Saint George, as well in the public spaces in the city of Rome and in the medial spaces of social networks, the symbolism and the identity of the DNC can be recognised on a range of clothing, gadgets, cultural products, memes, gifs, and especially images. To analyse the DNC therefore means being able to understand the manner in which this movement makes itself readable to society. The opinion of De Certeau (1984) is exemplary on this transition when he says that historically the normative discourse:

«Only works if it has already become a story, an essay on a reality that speaks in its own name, or a law distorted, historicized, and then told by the bodies. Its result in the story is the precondition to produce other stories making them believe. And the instrument accurately guarantees the transition from speech to story». (De Certeau, 1984: 97)

The twentieth-century sense of extremism can only feed the ‘political’ relationship between writing and reading, as it has been described by De Certeau.

### *The centrality of extremism*

On the basis of the read-write relationship De Certeau offered generations of researchers a perfect theoretical interpretation with which to analyse the symbolic power of productive consumption practices, especially within collective aggregations like fun, subcultures, and extremists (Jenkins, 2003; Boyd, 2015). However, today we witness a technological event that forces us to question the ‘pace’ at which the relationship between the imagery of the media and consumption and the daily lives of people manifests itself. Different types of digital media, particularly social networks, overlap the temporal levels of consumption, utilisation, and reprocessing. Recollection and introspection allowed by the Gutenbergian media and mass media (McLuhan, 1962; 1964) are now almost impassable in social networks, since in the whole of the latter the user constantly observes and yet is perpetually being observed. This is of course, in McLuhanian terms, a consequence of the nature of the medium, and not immediately of the content that it is transiting (McLuhan, 1967).

In this way, examining the many blogs, social pages and profiles close to the DNC one easily notices the ‘structural’ similarity to other web pages dedicated to various topics. The uploaded content is organised according to types and forms – text, images, audio-video, links – established by the technological device used. The extreme consequence of this precondition is observable in any video produced by this political movement and uploaded to the Internet through YouTube. Inside the frame runs the video recording of a CasaPound rally ahead of the local elections in Rome, at the bottom an ad banner suddenly appears that reminds us about the impending registration deadline of a Master’s course at a well-known private communications and design institute. This shows us how in the realm of the Internet a bizarre and very significant cohabitation between extremism and some mundane element of the main stream is now possible (Figg. 3-4).

Even more interesting is to note how the well-established habits of YouTube users to this kind of advertising insertion by no means



Fig. 3 – *CasaPound Poster: Fundraising Campaign*



Fig. 4 – *CasaPound Poster: Acknowledge for Facebook Likes*

prevents the viewing of the video, nor hinders the political message it conveys. The juxtaposition, this term seems fitting, of the banner on the video of CasaPound, however, shows a clear complex entanglement between political phenomena, political categories, and media processes, especially if one takes into account the good fortune and the meaning that the concept of extremism has enjoyed and continues to enjoy in global scenarios. Is it therefore still possible to evoke the concept of extremism when describing political phenomena of this kind? That's hard to say. Certainly, the Internet's modes of communication, and in particular those of social networks which shape the language of extremism, produce major changes between the latter and the rest of society. This does not mean that the subversive potential and anti-democratic policies of these formations has failed. It simply must be observed, especially for the purpose of a theoretical advance in media studies and the phenomena related to them, as the historical evolution of a concept (extremism) is unaffected by the changing medium through which it is expressed.



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Stefania Fragapane, Ariela Mortara

*Net-Activism on Twitter.  
McDonald's and Coca Cola @Expo2015*

*Introduction*

In recent years the practices of boycotting or buycotting (Stolle *et al.*, 2005; Neilson, 2010) companies have become very common among consumers. Moreover, political participation and political consumerism (Stolle *et al.*, 2005; Shah *et al.*, 2007) have highlighted the ethical and responsible side of consumption practices. In Italy, according to recent data (Rapporto Demos and Pi, 2014), consumers are more and more likely to boycott global brands through online activities. Although there is a common debate on the decline of political participation, the widespread use of forums, mailing lists, discussion groups, and social media has reinforced political down-up movements. Thus social media represent a potential space for citizens' action. The numerous cases of collective web mobilisation demonstrate the importance of analysing different forms of activism as preconditions for active citizenship in the digital culture, in which new forms of communication and social interaction influence the democratic relationship (Colucci, Coelho *et al.*, 2015). Thus the Internet at large and social media have increased the likelihood of engagement in political consumerism (de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2013).

Among the social media, Twitter, the most famous of the microblogging sites, is more focused on the sharing of opinions and information (Kwak *et al.*, 2010) than others platforms like Facebook, which is more focused on reciprocal social interaction (Huberman *et al.*, 2009). Twitter is more likely to be used as a means of debate about political consumerism and political participation (Tumasjan *et al.*, 2010; Kim and Park, 2011; Bekafigo and McBride, 2013). Indeed, according to

Zimmer and Proferes (2014), activists have used Twitter as a communication and coordination tool during global political and social protests, e.g. the 2007 Nigerian election protests, the 2008-2009 Iranian protests, the 2011 Arab Spring protests, and the Occupy movement. Moreover, social media have become an important channel for expressing and measuring consumer behaviour and attitudes. Frequently, marketeers and brand managers use Twitter to gauge feeling about their products (Jansen *et al.*, 2009); and also the financial industry has used the sentiment of Twitter messages to predict short-term performance of the stock market (Bollen *et al.*, 2011; Zhang *et al.*, 2011). Finally, over the last few years, many academics have used Twitter to gain knowledge about the thoughts and opinions of Internet users (Zimmer and Proferes, 2014).

This paper presents the results of a qualitative analysis conducted on Twitter posts. The aim was to analyse Italian consumer reactions to the news concerning McDonald's and Coca-Cola's official sponsorship of Expo 2015.

### *Research objectives and methodology*

To understand Italian consumers reaction, authors have content-analysed the posts in order to detect the emerging sentiment, manually extracting the most relevant categories and themes. Authors preferred manual extracting because, in analysing the sentiment, as the context often determines the different meaning of words (Liu and Zhang, 2012). Moreover, authors have studied user practice and cultural processes, which create a collective sense around the participation of McDonald's and Coca-Cola at Expo.

To gather the sample, authors have used the Twitter search function<sup>1</sup> at first with the generic hashtag #expo 2015, then selecting 'all tweets' and 'all people', in the advanced search form, combining it with several relevant hashtags (see [table 1](#)). Authors have collected and subsequently analysed 741 'top tweets'<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> As of 19 May, 2015 Twitter offers a new search function to all logged-in users, allowing the filtering of content results by date range, language, and even feeling (advanced search).

<sup>2</sup> Twitter enables the filtering of results by Top, Live, Accounts, Photos, and Videos. The Top Tweets are the most relevant, which are selected by a special Twitter algorithm able to detect the most popular tweets according to the users (FAQs about top

Tab. 1 – *Search key combination*

HASHTAG	LANGUAGE	PERIOD
#expo2015 AND #mcdonald's	Italian	02/27/15 <sup>3</sup> -09/15/15
#expo2015 AND #cocacola	Italian	02/27/15-09/15/15
#expo2015 AND #mcdonald's AND#cocacola	Italian	02/27/15-09/15/15

## Results

Table 2 summarises the results according to the total number of tweets and the keyword combinations, highlighting also tweets coming from institutional, corporate or public accounts.

Tab. 2 – *Number of tweets according to keyword combinations*

	#COCA COLA	#MCDONALD'S	#COCACOLA AND #MCDONALD'S	TOT
#EXPO 2015	302 (162 coming from non-personal accounts)	415 (119 coming from non-personal accounts)	25 (6 coming from non-personal accounts)	741 (287 coming from non-personal accounts)

Authors have then content analysed the posts as of the expressed sentiment. The negative sentiment mostly highlights the inconsistency of the value system of the two corporations with the Expo core topic. 'Feeding the planet', the Expo value proposition, and the ethical value system fostered by the Expo communication as opposed to the trash food, health concerns, the bad choice of Italian authorities, and the

search results - Twitter Help Center <<https://support.twitter.com/articles/253356>> (last access 09.18.2015)).

<sup>3</sup> The initial date is the release date of the news concerning the official sponsorship of McDonald's and Coca Cola at Expo2015.

inconsistency of Italian citizens.

However, the positive sentiment, quantitatively less evident, highlights more of a marketing oriented approach sustaining brand equity of the two companies. The presence of the two sponsors allows a more meaningful experience to visitors.

### *Negative sentiment*

Most of the negative remarks appear just after news of the sponsorship deal. The tweets often share online articles about the ‘defeat’ and inconsistency of the two corporations’ image and value system with the Expo 2015 main topic<sup>4</sup>:

Expo 2015, again a defeat: McDonald’s and Coca Cola sponsor. Il Fatto #Expo2015#cocacola #mc#zeroconsistency (1 March 2015)<sup>5</sup>

#Expo 2015, # Italy wordlfamous 4 #mediterraneandiat, has #McDonald’sasOfficialSponsor&#CocaColaasOfficalSoftDrinkPartner (1 March 2015)

Really #cocacola & #McDonald’s are sponsors of #expo 2015?! #eatinghealthy?! (4 March 2015)

@NoExpo 2015, #Expo2015 highlights organic food and then chooses, as official sponsors #CocaCola and #McDonald’s (11 March 2015)

### *#Trashfood vs Expo*

Since the documentary film ‘Supersize me’ (2004), McDonald’s has been the icon of bad dietary choice. Public opinion, media, and medical research point the finger at the junk food served in fast food restaurants. The topic of a healthy diet is one of the main inconsistencies

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<sup>4</sup> On 28 February, 2015 Il Fatto Quotidiano reports the news using the term defeat <<http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2015/02/28/expo-2015-lennesima-sconfitta-mc-donalds-e-coca-cola-sponsor/1463991>> (last access 31.03.2017).

<sup>5</sup> In order to comply with ethical standards, authors have anonymised all the tweets and then translated them from Italian, trying to maintain the original colloquial language.

regarding the general knowledge that MacDonald's and Coca-Cola represent a very unwise alimentary choice. Junk food as opposed to the Mediterranean diet and lovely Italian food are the reasons to criticise the poor choice of sponsors.

#Expo2015 represents the world window of Italian healthy food. Say NO to McDonald's as sponsor. It'll be a shame for Italy.

McDonald's hamburgers are good for a balanced diet. Even the exhausted oil is not so bad #Expo2015.

#Expo2015: #Italia worldwide famous 4 the #mediterrandiet has #McDonald's as OfficialSponsor and #CocaCola as OfficialSoftDrinkPartner.

### *Global companies vs local promises*

As multinational companies, McDonald's and Coca-Cola are perceived as global corporations able to impose themselves as sponsors, forcing their marketing strategies and deepening the inequalities among countries. Thus consumers, trying to resist and re-create commercial culture in order to transform society (Sandlin and Milam, 2008), redefine the Coca-Cola iconic can, which does not symbolize sharing among friends but the exploitation of people.

#CocaCola is often mentioned with the hashtags of other big companies and brands, which are held responsible for exploiting people. The eloquent image (below) underlines the inconsistency between the Expo promise 'feeding the planet' and the actual activities of many companies.

In the struggle between global and local, Twitter users highlight the superiority of the Italian pizza compared to the Big Mac, criticizing the recent commercial in which a kid chose a happy meal over a pizza.

### *The defeat*

If choosing two of the biggest global companies as Expo 2015 official sponsors sounds like a defeat, citizens also criticise the work of Italian politicians and institutions in managing the event. The inconsistency of



Fig. 1 – Reappropriation of a Coca-Cola can<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 2 – Inconsistency between Expo value proposition and sponsors<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The tweet says: #water more expensive than#CocaCola at #Expo2015, it's a marketing strategy too.

<sup>7</sup> The tweet says: 'feeding the planet...' have we finished speaking about it?



institutional choices emerges as one of the main topics together with the visitors' feeling of betrayal as the political failure to maintain the Expo value propositions. Moreover, citizens remark the bad image of Italy in an international scenario and the scandals related to Expo procurements.

McDonald's at Expo, as if Herod were a witness for Unicef #food #EXPO2015 #sustainable #development<sup>8</sup>.

I can't decide, it's worse the corruption in the construction sites or McDonald's stand? #Expo2015 #ready4Expo #feedthebigmacenergy4life.

Why did #Expo2015 CEO Sala lie during #Report saying he didn't get money from the sponsors, while according to #CocaCola they have paid 10mil?

#Expo2015 it's all about organic and then chooses #CocaCola e #McDonald's as official sponsors.

McDonald's at #Expo2015 the biggest restaurant with 300 seats. Healthy food? Italian food? No #consistency at all.

### *Positive sentiment*

Besides the negative sentiment, the presence of McDonald's and CocaCola at Expo 2015 fosters some positive thoughts too. Consumers – who actually love the brands – appreciate the possibility to try different flavours (the Coca-Cola pavilion presents products not available in the Italian or even European markets) and new products (McDonald's offers special burgers and interactive totems to place orders). Brand fans use Twitter to propose old and vintage packaging or commercials and to highlight the great experience that they are going to have.

#Expo2015 #CocaCola Pavilion... Could I miss it?! Never!!!! What a pavilion!

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<sup>8</sup> The tweet refers to the following article: <<http://popoffquotidiano.it/2015/03/12/mcdonalds-a-expo-come-erode-allunicef/>> (last access 31.03.2017).

Among the topics of positive sentiment some tweets criticise those who assume a tough position against the brands encouraging extreme ideological positions and fostering a rhetorical discourse of Slow Food<sup>9</sup> against fast food.

### *Conclusions*

Digital media confirm themselves as relevant tools which analyse socio-cultural relationships that 'shape and structure our possibilities for social action, education and cultural expression across all generations and walks of life' (Radovanović *et al.*, 2015).

Social media, particularly Twitter, offer a space which expresses different identities. In the 'connective' action, differently from the 'collective' action, political content is often manifested through personalised ideas that are highly inclusive and easily transferable to different platforms. Thus, identity can be seen as a 'collective identity' within a limited time span (Giglietto and Yenn, 2015).

According to previous research (Kwak *et al.*, 2010; Bennato, 2011), Twitter confirms itself as a useful means of sharing opinions and information. As for political stances, the analysis highlights the habit of proposing and sharing content from more authoritative sources, typically on-line and off-line newspapers. Moreover, many tweets propose topics concerning the most common criticisms against the two brands; producing trash food with a very high content of sugar or fat underlines the inconsistency between the sponsors and the main topic of Expo 2015.

On average, McDonald's elicits more critical remarks compared to Coca-Cola probably because of the reputation for unhealthy, processed, sugary foods that the brand has gained over the years. Despite recent efforts to offer healthier products, McDonald's is losing market share, also in the domestic market (Sutton, 2015), no matter how much it claims to be improving the quality of its products. Twitter users underline the scarce credibility of McDonald's offering a vegan burger – or completing the menu with sliced apple – and interpret such efforts as deceptive. Italian food, as a prototype of the Mediterranean diet, emerges as a benchmark for healthier food.

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<sup>9</sup> By the way, the Slow Food brand at Expo2015 is also criticised.

Conversely, Twitter users are overall less critical towards Coca-Cola; the brand engages them promising a rewarding experience inside its pavilion. The main accusation is towards the high quantity of sugar contained in a can of Coke, which is held responsible for obesity and diabetes.

In order to have a more complete picture regarding the different forms and tools of net-activism and the differences or similarities between net- and traditional activism further research could be useful. Indeed these qualitative results could be integrated through qualitative or quantitative data describing the multiform world of political participation. Such data could be gathered surveying different social platforms.

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Luca Massidda, Stefania Parisi<sup>1</sup>

*(Don't) Reclaim the Media. 'Attitudine No Expo' Network,  
Urban Conflict and Media Practices*

*Megaevents and Urban Conflicts*

After a long and controversial promotional campaign, lots of public debate and some foretold scandals, the Milan Universal Exposition finally opened its gates on 1st May and closed on 31st October 2015. Between May and June, 2015 – after a preliminary survey in which we evaluated the online and offline cultural and communicative production of the 'Attitudine No Expo' Network – we selected four collectives of activists particularly representative of the movement's issues and we conducted nine in-depth interviews. We met activists from SOS Fornace (a *centro sociale* located in Rho, nearby the Expo site); Off Topic (a political lab of urban research), Macao ('New Center for Arts, Culture and Research', a collective of artists, performers and precarious working on the concept of 'culture as a common???'), GenuinoClandestino (a network and a communicative campaign which aims to inform people about sustainable production and consumption of food).

In our study, we focused on the way in which a mega-event like Expo, historically built as a 'social peacemaker', becomes an opportunity, for social movements, to express new forms of political protest. Far from considering the Expo as a 'boost' for the economy of the city, the activists interpret it as an attempt to 'overpower' citizens, an expropriation of their 'urban sovereignty'; an attack by the global economy on the *droit à la ville* (Lefebvre, 1968).

We highlighted four typologies of antagonistic actions performed

<sup>1</sup> The chapter is the result of collaboration between the authors. Luca Massidda wrote paragraph 1 and Stefania Parisi wrote paragraph 2. The third, conclusive paragraph, is written in partnership by the two authors.

by the activists: Knowledge-oriented, Convivial, Ludic and Traditional. Each typology is not exclusive of a single collective, but each collective owns its 'favourite' practice.

The observation of these practices inspired a more general reflection about the relationship between contemporary 'local' movements and the last large 'global' movement born at the end of the twentieth century. In this paper we will briefly show their different approaches to the mediasphere, underlining how the relevance of the 'territorial factor' does not necessarily represent, for contemporary urban movements, a retreat or a closure in a NIMBY logic.

*Movement's media culture: a short comparison between two seasons of grassroots politics*

*Mediasphere as battleground: 1999*

November 30, 1999: in Seattle, an unexpectedly huge demonstration against WTO marks the rise of a large, transnational movement for global justice in a political scene dominated by a neoliberal idea of globalisation.

Two different topics, in particular, animated the debate:

- a. how to avoid monopoly of the mainstream media in the storytelling of the movement's activities, protests and proposals;
- b. a large consideration about communication as a crucial sector of the 'knowledge economy' – an essential hub for the global governance of capital.

The first topic refers to the movement's news-making: activists started to produce news 'from the inside', counterpoising their point of view to that of the mainstream. This experimental pattern can be represented by the enduring experience of Indymedia, the global network of local 'Independent media centers'.

The second refers to the communication as a 'cross industry' related to contemporary capitalist production; here, the goal of the movement was to produce an ironic 'détournement' of the culture industry's more representative languages (e.g. the Italian case of Molleindustria. it, self-defined as '1. Soft Industry. 2. Soft Factory. 3. A project of re-appropriation of video games. 4. A call for the radicalisation of popular culture. 5. An independent games developer').

Media-activism was considered as a social lab, a space for do-it-your-



self experimentation and innovation of technology and languages. Media were not the only means of representation but, first of all, were a means of production (Pasquinelli, 2002). And movements 'reclaimed' them.

That movement considered mediascape a battleground, a conflictual space in which new paths of political struggle are created. For these reasons, activists invested a big effort in the construction of 'their' independent media. Scholars (and the same activists) identify lots of labels for them: 'alternative' (Atton, 2002), 'radical' (Downing, 2001; 2008), 'community' or 'citizens' (Rodriguez, 2001), 'grassroots' etc. These media produce and distribute content in a more participative way; they look for different formats and aesthetics for their products; most importantly, they aspire to 'deep engagement' with their 'audiences'.

*Almost 20 years later: media as tools*

The comparison between the idea of mediasphere expressed by that movement and the 'Attitudine NoExpo' network helps us to identify the transition to a radically new paradigm in the media culture of social movements.

Nowadays 'the social media won', said us D., a Macao activist. Online social networking platforms hold people in a mechanism of production/gratification/surveillance (Dean, 2010), but the activists we interviewed seems not to care too much about this: they consider digital media platforms 'just as tools'.

The relational and sharing potential that digital media seemed to express to the 'alterglobal' activists appears in a large part subsumed by the logic of the so called 'tech giants': companies oriented to gain profit, and not interested in the construction of critical knowledge and collective, relational subjectivities.

The activists' approach to the mediasphere appears radically changed: mediasphere is no more the battleground in which Capital and Cognitive Labor fought; activists occupy massive property platforms and use their language in a pragmatic, almost 'opportunistic', way, trying to intercept potentially interested audiences.

In order to verify this hypothesis, elaborated after a preliminary study on the online presence of collectives and groups of activist belonging to the 'Attitudine NoExpo' network, we prearranged a specific question set to investigate activists' opinions about the application of media tools in the grassroots political conflict.

In particular, we observed the relationship between urban/territorial and narrative/mediatic aspects, both relevant in the NoExpo movement. We found two different classes of problems related to the info-communicative universe: the first one refers to the internal organization between members and collectives of the network; the second relates to the engagement of 'generalist audiences' of social networking platforms and to the 'cultural sabotage' of Expo's official representation and narration.

In regard to the first sphere, activists reported to us an increase of internal communication efforts by each network's hub when it needs to organise relevant events (e.g. 'MayDay', a precarious 1st May parade); after the event, the network 'breaks up' and its different parts go back to their specific topics and activities. There's no 'continuous' internal communication between the hubs: this 'flexible connectivity' marks an important difference from the popular and crowded mailing lists of debate and discussion of the movements of the last decade (e.g. the technical and coordinating mailing list related to Indymedia.org and, in Italy, the political and 'speculative' experiment of Rekombinant.org).

The second area of interest, communication as a strategy of people's engagement, highlights permanent attention to the out-of-movement and not-(yet)-engaged audiences. This reasoning is also employed to justify the use of 'mainstream' social networking sites instead of 'alternative' platforms.

The contradiction between a radical disapproval of the logic and economics of the media (characteristic of the alterglobal movement but still expressed by NoExpo's activists) and the daily 'immersion' into monopolistic social networking platforms is bypassed by admitting that:

«Today Capital has gained ground. At that time Indymedia was the medium that everyone followed. There was no Repubblica. it. There was Indymedia. But we can extend this reasoning to the whole web. The market fenced parts of the web. The big companies have eaten us. Currently, I do not even know if there is space for a movement's communication» (S., SOS Fornace).

At this downsizing of the media space of 'insurgent politics' (Castells, 2009), now disseminated in the interstices of mainstream communication, corresponds, in contrast, to the structural recovery of the territorial dimension of a conflict. Let's explore the paradox of this spatial turn.

*The territory is the message: social antagonism's spatial turn*

This territorial vocation of the 'Attitudine NoExpo' network does not close the movement in a strictly local dimension, confining the breath of its antagonistic action in a NIMBY logic. Indeed, this 'spatial dominant' of the movement, inscribed in its birth and in its evolution, constitutes the main 'connective' resource for the aggregation of the different realities that compose the 'NoExpo' galaxy. It's a territorial bias to generate the first political action against the mega-event: the NoExpo Committee. It was composed of 'some organisations active in the northwest outskirts of Milan' (L., OffTopic) led by SOS Fornace, a 'traditional' *centro sociale* deeply rooted in the Rho Fiera territory.

The territorial dimension confirms its central role in the history of the movement during the reorganisation of the protest, moving from the traditional and closed form of the committee to the open and flexible logic of the network. Without this connective tension, the movement risked being trapped in its local roots. It is the activation of a sort of 'territorial connectivity' to guide the construction of links between the different realities that compose the NoExpo network. Different local struggles and resistance, starting from Milan and then involving all the national territory, become part of the NoExpo Network. All these local realities recognise in fact the Expo as a 'neoliberal model of territorial governance'.

If the territory is, at the same time, the original 'hub' and the 'link' that brings together the various subjectivities of the Network, what kind of relationship exists between this physical connectivity and the logic of communication networks? Which role retains media activism in a movement with such a strong territorial vocation?

The digital communication devices, the social and cultural practices they activate, and the relational environments they disclose, represent a strategic resource available to the NoExpo movement. However, this resource has to be 'situated' in the territorial logic of the network, which must operate supporting antagonist action deeply rooted in everyday life.

*The Practices of Protest: Main Goals*

Observing the various typologies of conflictual practices activated by the network to oppose the megaevent's logic, we realise that there

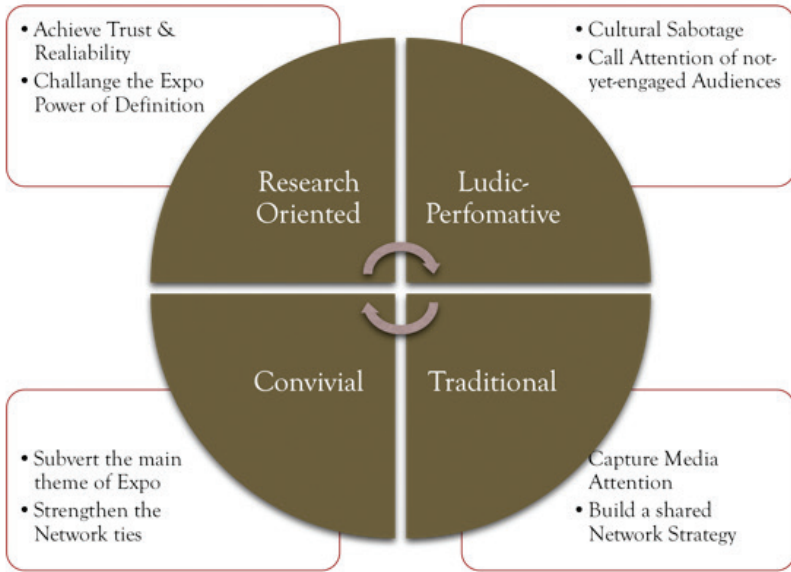


Fig. 1 – Various typologies of conflictual practices

is a strategic synergy between territorial dimension and media technologies – a synergy in which the primary role is always played by the territorial dimension.

The territory is the message: in traditional *practices* it represents the protest's playing field; it constitutes the main content of *research-oriented practices*; it is the real issue at stake in *convivial practices*; finally, it inspires *ludic-performative practices*. Although media remain essential instruments for the achievement of the NoExpo network's main goals: they act as catalyst for the field action and amplifiers of the local performance, they strengthen the network ties and call for the attention of not-yet engaged audiences, they contribute to sabotaging the official narration of the event and building a shared alternative storytelling.

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*Connected Proximity. 'Social Streets' Between Social Life  
and New Forms of Activism*

*Introduction*

From some years now, in several Italian cities the rising phenomenon of the so-called 'social streets' has gathered momentum. Social Streets<sup>2</sup> can be roughly defined as the attempt to revitalise urban sociality and social capital among neighbours, enhancing common culture and collaborative practices, starting from the creation of Facebook Groups (Augé and Pasqualini, 2016). The aim of this contribution is to give an initial descriptive portrait of such emerging phenomenon, drawing on qualitative<sup>3</sup> data gathered by empirical research conducted in the city of Milan over a two-year period of fieldwork and to hint at some theoretical suggestions for its sociological framing.

*ItalianSoSts: a quantitative framing*

The analysis of an emergent phenomenon requires the drawing of its quantitative impact. The birth of the first Italian SoSt dates back to

<sup>1</sup> This essay is the outcome of a common reflection between the authors. In details, paragraphs 1, 3, 4 can be attributed to Fabio Introini and paragraphs 2 and 5 to Cristina Pasqualini.

<sup>2</sup> From now-on, SoSts.

<sup>3</sup> In the city of Milan, the research team has collected, 60 in-depth interviews with the founders of the SoSts. Other research actions conducted are: participative observation during events and activities organised by some SoSts; the monitoring and content analysis of the more active Facebook Groups and an on-line survey administered to all the Facebook Users. These actions were conducted in Milan, Bologna and Mantova. For the aims of this paper we only drew from in-depth interviews with founders conducted in Milan.

September 2013 (see below, [Figure 1](#)) and takes place in Via Fondazza, a street in the center of Bologna, an important city in central Italy. From this date onwards, SoSts have continued spreading in the rest of Bologna but also outside it, reaching many of the main Italian cities such as Milan, Rome, Florence, Turin and Palermo. In some cases, SoSts have also been opened abroad. At the end of the last quarter of 2013, the overall number of Italian SoSts is around 140 and in January 2014 increases to 149. After one year – January 2015 – the total amount more than doubles (365) and in January 2016 it reaches 408 units, 30 of which are abroad. The last monitoring, dated June 2016, shows that SoSts reached the 450 mark. Even though their historical roots are in Bologna, SoSts reach their highest concentration in Milan, with 71 units and a total amount of 26,000 people registered in the respective Facebook groups. The reason for this affinity between Milan and SoSts may reside in the marked metropolitan character of this city. This implies that in this city more than in others, the problem of sociality and social capital building is much more felt as a priority. However, at the same time, it also means that Milan, thanks to the complexity due to its metropolitan features, is an authentic ‘sociological laboratory’, open to every kind of innovation and experimentation, granting a fertile milieu even for the flourishing of SoSts<sup>4</sup>. In this perspective it is worth noting that before the official ‘foundation’ of the SoSts by the group ‘Social Street International’ (see below) in 2013, in Milan there was already some experimentation very similar to what had been called, some years after, ‘SoSt’: we have mapped three of them, the older of which is based in Paolo Sarpi Street<sup>5</sup>, with the largest Facebook Group (around 5000 registered users). Anyway it is by virtue of the catalyst represented by the birth of Via Fondazza in 2013 that this phenomenon takes off in Milan. The bigger SoSts in Milan – by number of Facebook Groups users – first appear in this period. They are ‘Parco SolariSoSt’ (October 2013), ‘MaiocchiSoSt’ (November 2013), ‘MorgagniSoSt’ (December 2013), ‘LambrateSoSt’ (January 2014), ‘San Gottardo-MedaSost’ (February 2014). During 2014 SoSt phenomenon reaches its ‘boom’ with the opening of 48

<sup>4</sup> For this reason the Observatory on SoSts, coordinated by C. Pasqualini selected the city of Milan as the main field for the empirical, quali-quantitative research concerning Italian SoSts.

<sup>5</sup> We have to underline that the name of this single street is also the name of the entire district, also known as the ‘Milanese Chinatown’.



new SoSts whereas, in the following year, we witness a significant slowdown, with only 9 new streets. This trend is confirmed by 2016 data, in which we registered, during the first quarter, the opening of just one

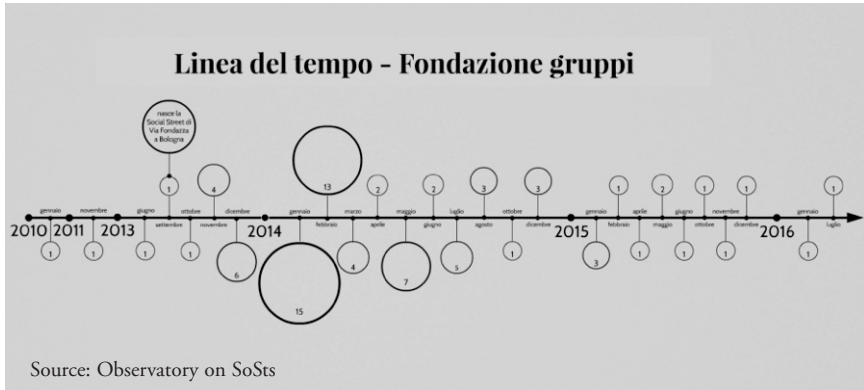


Fig. 1 – Timeline of SoSts openings. Period: 2010-2016

### SoSts: a general overview

Currently, the ensemble of Italian SoSts is quite heterogeneous and every SoSt is, in a certain sense, a sui generis world, as if this form of life were exploring all its different evolutionary possibilities. Every SoSt has its idiosyncratic genesis and development, depending, basically on the founders' motivations and personal culture, his/her confidence with web 2.0 and the net culture, his/her civic or political commitment, the history and the urban, social and demographic features of the district in which the SoSt is based. Anyway the 'official' origins of the whole phenomenon has to be connected with the birth of *Social Street International (SSI)*, a group of people, based in Bologna, which are credited with promoting the same idea of Social Street. As an interviewee told us, the success of SSI lies in its ability to create a balanced mix between top-down suggestions and bottom-up creative impetus giving to well-disposed and enterprising people an open, flexible and customizable idea to develop in different ways. At the same time, the simple existence of SSI has given a field of visibility to the whole phenomenon and acted as an incubator of relationships and knowledge among nascent SoSts. SSI is far from being the pacemaker or the crane cabin of a movement. As SSI groups – and the many 'streeters'

who adhered to this venture – bluntly recognise, the ‘concept’ at the basis of Social Street is not radically new inside both the worlds of net and urban culture. It was something already ‘in the air’ – due to broader social trends such as the need to fight the fragmentation of social fabric by building social relations and confidence, the desire to make urban spaces more livable and safe, a new spirit of collaboration and the advent of a ‘sharing culture’ for the sake of mere togetherness and as an antidote to the damage produced by the Financial Crisis of 2008. But SSI has been given a much clearer identity and concreteness to the phenomenon, creating a (web) platform able to gain visibility of this phenomenon and to trigger a ‘positive feedback’ process. The SSI website has also democratised the practices of networking through SNS, even to people not very used to the sphere of the web 2.0, giving a *vademecum* on how to open and maintain a SoSt. But, most of all, SSI has had success in building a narrative and a ‘brand’ which gives a frame of meaning and recognition to the phenomenon. As many SoSt founders told us, the availability of such a brand became very useful when it came to ask and convince neighbors to join the project. SSI created a kind of ‘manifesto’ defining in a very general and open way the identity and mission of a SoSt: to enhance collaboration among neighbours by means of a closed Facebook group, leaving aside economic purposes and direct political commitment or the explicit endorsement of politicians and their campaigns. SSI is a brand and a network, but it does not impose an ownership of the idea. Everyone interested in opening something similar to a SoSt is free to run alone; joining SSI is just a matter of benefit: the benefit to enter a wider network to exchange experiences and practices.

### *SoSts as a new form of dwelling?*

Even though SoSts are ‘apolitical’ they inevitably may assume a political dimension for several reasons: 1) the founder may be motivated in this enterprise by virtue of his/her strong civic commitment or 2) the SoSt arises as an answer to a peculiar collective problem of a specific district (e.g.: integration of immigrants, lack of services such as shops, leisure structures, as happens very often in city suburbs); 3) the district giving birth to a SoSt has a history and tradition of civic commitment and participation and finds in the idea of an SoSt another

way to channel this spirit. However, we can say that generally speaking every SoSt is somewhat 'political' because of its involvement in social capital (re)generation and in the current key question, that of dwelling. As a meta-practice concerning the whole ensemble of strategies that human beings display in their relationships with the environment (Ingold 1995), dwelling is a complex network of heterogeneous elements (legal, social, economic, political and spatial) strictly connected and co-defined with each other. Urban life can be considered a peculiar configuration of such networks so that, starting from the institutions which organise it to the material aspects of urban space, the city proposes a 'life paradigm' at the expense of others. This is even more true in contemporary cities where, according to La Cecla (2014), the discipline of urban planning has gathered momentum and transformed our cities in places where the only one relationship you can have with the space is consumerism. We suggest that trying to transform urban relationships among neighbours – as SoSts do – has consequences on all the other dimensions of dwelling so that it makes visible all its complexity concealed behind the simplest, reductionist and naturalised version imposed by the 'neoliberal city' – and its implicit anthropology – also by means of its urban planning and architecture. It is not by chance that trying to act on social capital, SoSts attract other practices concerning urban space and its uses, social innovation in mutual service provision, gift-based relationships, sensibility to sustainable lifestyles and green areas, re-discovering of 'ancient' and traditionally non-urban practices such as gardening. In short, all the forms of relational and environmental practices discarded from contemporary city life and its 'usability'. In so doing SoSts have to be put inside the current flourishing – triggered also by the 2008 financial crisis – of dwelling experimentations: from the most radical, to the need to move outside the urban space in search of a new kind of settlement (as in the case of the 'Ecovillages') to the less demanding which try to change things inside the urban space by means of 'manipulation'.

Furthermore, as SoSts are exposed to open evolution, and rooted in complex social and anthropological meaning and processes, it could happen that in some cases the civic commitment increases to the point of leading them to take part more explicitly in political issues and processes. As regards this possible evolution and the role SoSts can assume as political collective activists inside the city, we have to account for a trajectory which has characterised, in 2015, some Milanese SoSts and

which has led to an important convergence between them and the local institutions. Although in order to better understand the meaning and the consequences of this convergence we have to specify two important features of SoSts as a collectivity: 1) SoSts are ‘virtual’ but have to be rooted in a precise urban place. This creates an interesting, innovative form of sociality because it leads to a different way of joining online and offline dimensions. If virtual communities and groups generally find in elective ties based on common interests the ability to join people from everywhere, a SoSt, albeit virtual, is ‘proudly’ defined by ascription as it has to connect people living in the same urban premises. In other words SoSts are virtual communities which can continuously be in conditions of meet-up<sup>6</sup>, with deep consequences for their main purpose; the creation of bonding social capital. This is also the originality and the gamble of the SoSt model: using the Internet (via Facebook) to enhance and maintain communication among people living near each other– and not distant and scattered – but that, for a ‘metropolitan paradox’ needs Computer Mediated Communication to put people in touch, trigger sociality and build social capital; 2) SoSts want to maintain a fluid collective identity, so that they are different from other more traditional forms of collective ties, such as associations, which are clearly and formally defined by an official charter. This endorsement of fluid identity, according to SSI, is an expression of the desire to propose a light and totally voluntary adhesion, more consistent and affordable with the rhythms of current urban life.

### *The road to institutions: the Milanese experience*

In a closer analysis we can say that Milanese SoSts encountered local institutions in a ‘durkheimian’ way: proud of their fluid nature and their innovative form of collectivity, they hadn’t searched the dialogue with them until they realised, in a very concrete process of organising even the ‘simplest’ event (e.g. ‘street parties’), they were forced to request public permission from these local institutions. This led some SoSts to address the local administrative institutions. The Municipality of Milan showed great sensitivity to SoSts requests from

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<sup>6</sup> For the way in which meetups can enhance bridging or bonding social capital inside an on-line based community, see Shen and Cage (2015).

the beginning and gave way, in 2015, to a series of public meetings open to all those SoSts that were interested. As the delegates of the Milan Municipality bluntly recognized their lack of knowledge of such a cutting edge phenomenon, the very first meetings were dedicated to learning from the direct voice of the streeters what a SoSt is and what are its purposes. Following that, the discussion shifted to the ways in which the municipality could legally and formally receive SoSts requests and how to help them in their mission. In this regard, the fluid and non-formalised nature of SoSts revealed a problem. Not being an approved association proved to be an obstacle to obtaining permissions to use, for example, public spaces and to enhance some civically committed activities and practices which SoSts are interested in promoting and which are devoted, mostly, to the safeguarding of urban public property. The municipality recommended that SoSts become associations in order to easier gain permissions. However SoSts, proud of their fluid identity, convinced the municipality to come up with another solution. Hence, due to Streeters' desires and the normative void, SoSts and Milanese Institutions gave birth to several negotiating tables<sup>7</sup> to plan and build a 'special' regulation capable of legally recognising and making room for new forms of social collaboration and active citizenship.

Once ascertained that SoSts have as their main objective the enhancement of sociality without profit, The Milan Municipality, drawing inspiration from the pre-existing experiences of Rimini and Bologna, (which launched a similar regulation respectively in 2011 and 2014) on 25 January 2016, in a meeting with the Streeters, presented the first draft of a 'Guiding Act for the institution, by public advice, of a town register of informal groups for active citizenship'. SoSts members enthusiastically approved this document, as, in their opinion, it fully recognised their informal and fluid collective subjectivity.

SoSts which are interested can now register on a public list which enables them to activate temporary conventions with the municipality on the basis of specific projects. Once submitted to the authority, such projects have to be assessed by the administration and are eventually authorised. In this way every SoSt can organise meetings and events in places such as streets, squares, parks; they can also promote and 'advertise' their initiatives with fliers and posters. Most importantly, all

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<sup>7</sup> Our Observatory on SoSts took part, as observer, in such meetings.

people involved in such initiatives will receive insurance coverage for the whole duration of an event.

Currently it is not possible to assess if this important development will be enough to sustain, and make effective, this new kind of urban activism or if some SoSts will go a step further and convert to being more traditional types of associations. Or, on the other hand, if SoSts opt for a 'lighter' profile, dedicated to simply enhancing sociability for sociability's sake. However, in any case we believe that SoSts will remain an object deserving of our sociological attention.

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Tatiana Mazali

*Hybrid Community.  
An Empirical Case Study of Participatory Citizenship*

*The transformation of the public utilities*

In the last twenty years the Italian sector of local public services has experienced remarkable changes. Besides the major national operators, who long ago launched a multi-business strategy and an aggressive penetration in international markets, new realities have appeared on the market, based on the merging of local companies.

The Iren Group is one of them and is now the main interregional multi-utility operator in the Northwest of Italy. Its field of activity spans Piedmont, Liguria and Emilia, and its services range from electricity supply to district teleheating, hydrology and even environmental issues linked to waste management. In almost every territory the Iren Group has acted as a catalyst for small and medium local service companies, offering itself as a bridging agent between different local systems. It is now deeply rooted, and therefore its relationship with local communities is of primary importance for its own continued development.

These strategies of the Iren Group and its decision to launch a vast project of participatory citizenship, called IREncollabora, fully correspond to the large-scale changes that have taken place in the services sector provided by public utilities. Such changes consist mainly of the blending – both symbolic and normative – of a public dimension (public services) with a private dimension (transition from public-utilities under public control to multi-utilities under private control).

These recent changes in the way of managing and delivering public services have been also influenced by the diffusion and penetration of digital culture.

As the researchers Helen Margetts and Patrick Dunleavy put it (2013), there are two confronted models at the root of these new trends: Public Management has shifted from a prevailing, almost exclusive model, the so-called NPM (New Public Management), to a new model, the DEG (Digital Era Governance), which strongly favours the adoption of digital communication technologies in the management and delivery of services for citizens.

Basically, the challenge is to understand how the new wave of digital technologies is modifying the organization and management of service delivery. The transforming impetus of the DEG framework is mainly represented today by the 2.0 model of digital communication (social media); and also by a series of pervasive technologies that permeate urban and domestic spaces to create an interconnected fabric of information flows (Internet of things and big data) which have an impact on services, on the organizations that provide them and on the final users.

The New Public Management model stands on three pillars:

- Disaggregation: the transition from centralization to decentralization, the so-called 'agencification' of the main institutions' functions, with the establishment of a series of intermediary organizations that lead to the separation of the purchaser and the provider of a service.
- Competition: the progressive withdrawal from the model of monopolistic public supplies towards new mechanisms, such as the 'quasi-market', leading to a gradual deregulation.
- Incentivizing: motivation based exclusively on financial reward rather than professional improvement.

The clearest results of the NPM approach, which has spread widely across the Anglo-Saxon world and in economies with a rather liberal bias, have tended to privatise, the creation of public-private partnerships, and deregulation processes. From 1980 to 2005, many countries saw their institutions shift towards the NPM model, with considerable differences in modality, intensity and relevance from one country to another. The United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand stand out for having adopted and put to practice this model. Other countries have only implemented single measures (such as the privatisation of railways and telecommunications such as in Italy).

Nevertheless the onset of austerity measures in many European countries after the financial crisis of 2008, and the subsequent criticism of the neo-liberal model – that gave birth to the New Public

Management – have lead to a questioning of its principles and processes.

In addition to the NPM model, researchers at the Oxford Internet Institute and the LSE Public Policy Group are describing a new model, partially or even openly opposed to it: a model of management based on the impulses generated by the digital media in every field of social action. The Digital Era Governance model starts in parallel with the first wave of technology, linked to ICT infrastructures, and covers the decade from 2000 to 2010. From 2010 to today, it undergoes a transformation due to the disruptive onset of the ‘2.0’ digital communication.

The DEG model clearly shows the importance of digital transformation, as well as the need to completely reconsider macro-theories on the development and management of the public sector and the public services (Goldfinch and Wallis, 2009). It is based on two pillars:

- The organizational re-integration of service management in national governments (in favour of a disintermediation between Institutions and citizens).
- A ‘holistic’ approach to services based on people’s needs (transition from a segmentation of the services strictly based on business logic to a reunification based on customer needs), that has led to the reunification of public services around the concept of *citizen-customer*.

### *The participatory model of IRENcollabora*

Such is the context of the Iren Group’s decision to carry out a participatory project experiment in its territories. It is obviously a project that brings the Iren strategies close to the DEG model, as it sets up instruments, including digital ones, to involve local communities and thus allow the Group to: inform citizens about projects that have a significant impact on their territory (and that often lead to clashes and conflicts, as in the case of energy plants and incinerators); maintain a permanent interaction with customers and gather ideas and suggestions from citizens themselves. The goal is to stop communicating and to start involving the ‘citizen-customer’ in participation processes.

This approach is consistent with the identity of Iren, a multi-utility company with strong local roots, resulting from the conversion of municipal utility corporations into private entities that provide services of public interest.

This transformation also explains the ‘hybrid’ participatory model adopted by IREncollabora, which considers two types of participation for citizens, on a territorial basis: the offline format, mediated by delegates of civil society who sit at the table of a local committee; and the online format (Bakardjieva, 2015), ‘disintermediated’ by digital media of the digital platform irencollabora.it.

The vision that supports the IREncollabora project – in its dual format of stakeholders’ table and online digital platform – is clearly present in the digital culture of the ‘smart citizen platforms’, which point to three main goals: massive (and transverse) participation, empowering (increasing the level of people’s awareness and providing them with tools for action), up to the ambitious objective of co-design (Laird, 1993; Enserink and Monnikhof, 2003).

This hybrid model puts to the test a particular way of governing the participatory processes, which stands halfway between a ‘from the bottom up’ non-regulated participation and a mediation-experts-guided participation.

IREncollabora has chosen to offer a double approach to citizen-users. On one hand, they can use a free, non-filtered space to submit brief topics/suggestions/ideas/opinions (the ‘proposals’ section of the online platform). While on the other hand, they can use a ‘controlled’ space, restricted to complex projects, to submit projects in accordance with a format suggested by the platform (the ‘projects’ section of the online platform). This second channel is supervised by a territorial committee; its duty is to meet once a month, to review the online proposals and to respond to them with a constructive attitude.

Both channels – ‘proposals’ and ‘projects’ – work independently of each other. The only meeting point between the territorial committee and the digital community of citizens is the platform, by means of the committee members’ compromise to analyse the submitted projects and to take action in making them achievable. The real moment of consultation/deliberation happens ‘in the presence’ of the stakeholders around a table, but it must be communicated via the online platform, following a principle of transparency that is essential to building trust between all agents: the multi-utility company itself, the local mediators and ordinary citizens.

IREncollabora is an example of ‘cross-genre’ activism, an example of ‘phygital’ participation architecture, in which the language and mechanisms of ordinary citizens’ bottom-up participation are guided and

blended with the language and mechanisms of regulated deliberation processes (which include shared and compulsory rules, transparency tools, mediation, etc.).

This ‘hybrid’ model is therefore a courageous attempt to put together, within a single platform, two goals and instruments that usually prosper in separate communication environments: the gathering of ideas (‘proposals’ channel) and the co-designing of projects (‘projects’ channel). The first aspect has a clear low entry level (low involvement), but the second involves a motivated community (high involvement) and is ‘mediated’ by territorial committee members.

The moment of deliberation, which happens around the table of the territorial committee’s working group, does not put an end to the participation process, it triggers instead a new cycle of the project’s life, as the project shares online its releases, comments and evolution. The deliberation launches the life cycle of the online project.

The hinge, the connecting point between the offline and online participation is therefore the project; and it is the territorial committee’s responsibility to support it by setting up activities for its development.

In digital ‘smart citizen platforms’, the goal is to have a maximum (enlarged and inclusive) participation rate with a low entry level (low effort); this does not require special abilities or previously acquired skills (technological and cognitive-cultural), but motivations; it allows to focus on the local aspect of civic engagement, in order to better orientate it towards mutually agreed solutions. The ‘smart citizen platforms’ model clearly relies on the concept of proactive community (Castells, 1997). It provides new channels to collaborate with and to share from the bottom up, but in parallel it questions the role of the institutions and makes them confront the crisis of the deliberative model based on representation.

IRENcollabora seems to respond to this tension by trying a third way: it cautiously experiments to unite the consultative/deliberative model of traditional representation (where the representatives of a well organized civil society act ‘in the name of ...’) with the typical model of the web 2.0 disintermediated digital culture (where the citizens-users, unorganized, submit proposals ‘in the name of themselves’).

This cautious form of mediation between two models and two cultures is indeed a form of ‘hybrid’ participation, that means ‘hospitality’, both in the sense of hosting alterity (letting oneself be contaminated by alterity) and of being hosted by otherness (putting oneself

on a different decentralized perspective). The result is a participatory environment produced by the interaction or crossbreeding of two dissimilar cultures and traditions. A hybrid model is a composition of two or more distinct ‘infrastructures’ (private, community, or public) that remain unique entities, but are bound together by standardised processes that enable information portability and create new shared habits.

*The ethnographic observation. Some results to discuss*

The analysis of the IREncollabora case has been conducted mainly with qualitative tools: observing on-site, from July 2014 to July 2015, the work of the Piacenza territorial committee; conducting in-depth interviews with all committee members (consisting of 16 community stakeholders from the Piacenza area); and quantitatively and qualitatively analysing the users and communication flows of the irencollabora.it platform.

In order to analyze the structure of the digital platform, I have used the model proposed by Pais, Peretti and Spinelli (2014: 133-134) for ‘crowd’ platforms dedicated to the engagement of people and ideas. This model focuses on four dimensions:

- the ‘axis of personalization’: the projects are between between two extreme polarities, that of the ‘person’, when the project is strongly characterized by its submitter, and that of the ‘idea’, when the focus is on the project;
- the ‘axis of relationship’: the projects are supported by social networks that either have ‘bonding’ type links (strong bonds established among people who know each other and share common interests and a high sense of belonging to the community) or ‘bridging’ type links (new links that started with and are due to the project);
- the ‘axis of anchoring’: the projects can be divided, according to their territorial involvement, between ‘local’ ones (bond to the specific requirements of a region) and ‘global’ ones (the community is international and has general interests that aim beyond territorial settlement);
- the ‘axis of digitization’: the project and the communities involved both act ‘offline’ and ‘online’, according to the different engagement tools set up by the project.

According to this scheme, the IRENcollabora experience of involvement and participation is based on the 'idea' concept. It works and takes roots on a 'local' basis, through engagement strategies that can be both 'offline' (the territorial committee) and 'online' (the web platform). When it comes to the type of relationships, it shifts along the 'bonding-bridging' continuum: IRENcollabora has very strong local/regional roots and therefore points to bonding type relationships; it has nevertheless the ambition to expand its community of reference, and tries to render 'general' the local interests of the different territories where new committees appear.

The platform was publicly launched in the fall of 2014, by means of a traditional press campaign in print media. The promotional campaign had a territorial basis, which took advantage of the territorial committee members (first from Piacenza, later from the other cities involved) to trickle down information on the existence and usage of the platform to their own communities (the 'snowball' model).

Throughout the platform's first year, the Piacenza committee had to encourage and manage most of the projects currently in progress, which is an obvious sign of the difficulties in involving ordinary citizens in the online participatory process. One year after its inception, only 9 proposals (the channel freely available to the citizens) had been shared, whereas 7 projects (the channel mediated by the territorial committee) had been proposed, almost always from the stakeholders' table.

For analysis of the online platform's participatory model, we shall again borrow a basic model from Pais, Peretti and Spinelli (2014): the activation model for 'crowdfunding' in social networks. It analyzes the ability to activate three related spheres: the involvement of strong ties (Granovetter, 1973); the involvement of the weaker bonds thanks to the strong ones that act as bridges encouraging the transmission of information to people who are two or more degrees away from the proponent; and the creation of new bonds, through the mobilization of strangers.

IRENcollabora is currently at the first stage of involvement. It has brought together a community of people that are close to the first proponents and that mainly belong to the associations and organizations included in the territorial committee. The committee members sit at the decision table not as single individuals-citizens, but as representatives of separate communities, the civil society groups of the territory. This makes it more difficult to transition directly from the first level (strong ties) to the second level (weak ties) of involvement, a thing that

would instead be much easier in the case of horizontal communication between peers.

In terms of digital participation, the difficulty in creating a critical mass of actively involved users is probably due to the hybrid model itself, which puts together a vertical dynamic (that follows the course of action and the channels of traditional representation, by means of the territorial committee) and a horizontal dynamic subordinated in the ways and habits of digital participatory platforms.

The two trends need time to find a common path. In fact, the ethnographic observation has revealed the difficult transition from passive to proactive attitudes among territorial committee members. During the first year of the project, all slowly changed – some more, some less – their initial attitudes of resistance: resistance against the new mode of governance that they were called to create, and also against the digital environment that they were not able to avoid and which they had to learn (in order to present their proposals).

The solution to overcoming such resistance was the determined use of a ‘learning by doing’ approach. Working subgroups were created, divided by themes and by the single projects launched on the platform. In this way, every member spent time and resources giving shape to the project that they had voluntarily taken over.

The digital realm is, above all, a ‘practice. Change cannot happen by means of ideologies or a-priori choices. Instead it requires that people pragmatically get their hands dirty. It is the ‘by doing’ aspect that produced changes, however small, in the habits of social mediators groups (stakeholders representing civil and political society). IREncollabora is a smart citizen platform and its uniqueness lies in its attempt to bring together two space-time dimensions: the long and slowly flowing tempo of the offline world and its representative system, and the brief and hectic tempo of online participation. The project makes the organised subject (the socially involved stakeholder) act as a trigger of participation, including digital participation.

All this effort certainly seems in contradiction with the culture of ‘networked individualism’ (Welmann, 2001) generated by the spread of the Internet which ‘facilitates personal communities that supply the essentials of community separately to each individual: support, sociability, information, social identities, and a sense of belonging’. A culture in which ‘the person, rather than the household or group, is the primary unit of connectivity’ (Welmann *et al.*, 2003).



IREncollabora is a participatory experiment that struggles to launch bottom-up participation among ordinary citizens, but it may certainly have a serious impact on the practices of the social mediators involved in the project, for whom irencollabora.it really seems like a different ‘technology of self-mediation’, a new ‘mediation opportunity structure’, ‘the tools through which a social movement becomes self-conscious’ (Cammaerts, 2012; 2015).

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Recently, the digital architectures of interaction have also become, more than a new information architecture, a new ecology of dialogue and participation. In addition to the new forms of debate and interaction which are expressed far beyond the dynamics of modern public opinion, the digital networks have opened spaces of experimentation for new decision-making collaborative practices. In several areas, the creation of platforms and architectures of debate and deliberations is putting new questions about the technological possibility of overcoming the representative democracy. Finally, this new digital ecology has been changing social actions in everyday life. The book analyzes these phenomena both through a theoretical reflection (first part) and by some case studies (second part), as the result of the activities promoted by the Net-Activism International Research Network based on Atopos Lab in Universidade de São Paulo. At the Network join: Università degli Studi “Roma Tre”, Universidade Lusófona do Porto, Université de Lille 2, Fondation Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, Paris.

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