From the Streets to the Net?
The Political Use of the Internet by Social Movements

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the political use of the Internet by the Italian Global Justice Movement (GJM) considering both the organisations and the individuals involved in the movement. First, a definition of the concept ‘political use of the Internet’ and its operationalization is provided. Second, light is shed on how the Internet is used politically by participants in social movements taking into account their organizational and participatory experiences. Data were gathered with quantitative and qualitative instruments during different researches: a survey of participants in a demonstration against the ‘Bolkestein’ directive and a series of interviews with representatives of different organisational sectors of the Italian GJM, complemented by a qualitative website analysis of the same organisations. While quantitative data allows for controlling relations among variables concerning the political use of the Internet by individuals, qualitative data provides more detailed information on Internet use in the everyday life of activists and organisations.

Keywords: ICTs, Interviews, Organizational Experiences, Participatory Experiences, Political Use of the Internet, Social Movements, Survey, Websites Analysis

INTRODUCTION: THE DEMOCRATIC POTENTIAL OF THE INTERNET FOR SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

This article draws on the recent debate on the democratic potential of the Internet. This debate has often been dominated by the confrontation between skeptical and optimistic views, especially over the potential contribution of new technologies to improve political participation and democracy. The Internet has been considered by some a medium that favors those already interested and engaged in politics (Norris, 2001). Other scholars claim that it can reduce political inequalities (Meyers, 2001). Indeed, the Internet multiplies the channels for political information and participation at the individual level, provides new opportunities for communication, mobilisation and interaction at the organisational level, and creates new pluralistic arenas where citizens can discuss issues of general interest directed towards to the public good at the macro level (della Porta & Mosca, 2005a).

A discussion of the democratic potential of the Internet should take into account the traditional critique concerning the democratic deficit of this medium: the digital divide. In fact, when reflecting on the Internet’s democratic potential,
it should be noted that even in rich and technologically developed countries a significant part of the population is still excluded from access to this medium. As Norris (2001) noted, digital differences emerge in access between different territorial levels (not only between rich or poor macro-regions, but also between nations with similar levels of wealth located in the same macro-region), between different social classes in the same nation (penalising groups of citizens who lack economic and cultural resources), and between social sectors with different degrees of interest in politics (favoring groups of citizens already active and interested in politics).

A large number of studies demonstrate that people without access to the Internet have peculiar socio-demographic characteristics. In fact Internet access reflects a gender divide, a generation divide, an ethnic divide, a wealth divide and an education divide, as the Internet is more likely to be used by young, male, affluent, white, and educated people.

Recent studies have focused on the use of new technologies by civil society organisations and individuals, with particular attention paid to the Internet. Electronic networks have been considered the backbone of new transnational social movements which gained media visibility from “the battle of Seattle” on (Bennett, 2003). Being bi-directional, interactive and cost-less, they allow for the construction of new public arenas where social movements can organise mobilisations, discuss and negotiate their claims, strengthen their identities, sensitise public opinion and directly express acts of dissent (della Porta & Mosca, 2005a).

Internet research has been characterised by methodological pluralism (Garrett, 2006), especially when focused on the organisational level. In fact, studies on the individual level have been undertaken mostly through online surveys that are generally based on self-selected samples, often raising problems of reliability (Best & Krueger, 2004). At the same time, the attention paid to offline surveys on Internet use has been limited to very basic questions concerning frequency and places of connection but generally ignoring the political dimension of Internet use (Bentivegna, 2009).

As for the organisational level, the online presence of different political organisations has been investigated through the content analysis of websites (for NGOs see Vedres et al., 2005; for parliaments and political parties see Coleman et al., 1999; Gibson et al. 2003; Trechsel et al., 2003; for civil society organisations and social movements see della Porta & Mosca, 2005b; Van de Donk et al., 2004; Vedres et al., 2005); mailing-list analysis (Kavada, 2006; Wall, 2007); search engine analysis (Zimmermann & Koopmans, 2003); link analysis (Koopmans & Zimmermann, 2005) and with the case-study approach (Pickerill, 2003). Such research has provided important insights into how these organisations use the Internet for acting politically by other means.

In what follows, I will address the political use of the Internet by the Italian Global Justice Movement (GJM) paying attention to both the organisations and the individuals involved in the movement. First, I will define the meaning of the concept ‘political use of the Internet’ and its operationalization. Then, I will consider how the Internet is used politically by participants in social movements taking into account those factors that can explain different styles of Internet use. My hypothesis is that offline experiences (organisational and participatory ones) define the political profile of individuals that is then consistently expressed online.

In this article I will present data that was gathered with quantitative and qualitative instruments employed during different researches: a survey of participants in the demonstration on the Bolkestein directive (Rome, October 2005) and a series of interviews with those in leadership positions of different organisational sectors of the Italian GJM, complemented by a qualitative website analysis of the same organisations. While quantitative data allows for the checking of some relations among variables concerning the political use of the Internet, qualitative data will provide more detailed information on Internet use in the everyday life of activists and organisations.
Concerning the survey, as it is almost impossible to build a casual sample of participants in a protest event, I worked with a “non-probabilistic sample” (Corbetta, 1999, pp. 343-352). The sampling strategy was based on previous surveys of participants in Italian social movement events like the Genoa G8 counter-summit in 2001 and the Florence European Social Forum in 2002 (Andretta et al., 2002; della Porta et al., 2006; see also della Porta, 2009). The survey was implemented using a “strategy of small samples”, focusing on the main organisational sectors of the Italian movement. A sampling method of selecting interviewees on the basis of their belonging to different organisational sectors was then employed (for more details see della Porta et al., 2006). Data was collected through a self-administered paper-based questionnaire distributed just before (when different groups assemble to organise their presence within the demonstration) and just after the demonstration (when people rested and listened to spokespersons of the movement) and during a conference on ‘common goods’ discussing the consequences of the Bolkestein directive on public services preceding the demonstration. In order to take into account the different geographical provenances of participants, the questionnaire was also distributed on different trains coming to Rome (the place were the demonstration was held) both from the South (Sicily) and from the North (Lombardy) of Italy.

The non-probabilistic nature of the sample does not allow strong inferences to be made. Thus, I present only descriptive statistics and non-parametric correlations in order to give an idea of the strength of the relations between variables. It is worth underlining that the findings provide information on the participants in a specific protest event but cannot be considered generalisations for the social movement population (for a discussion on the limits and opportunities of this type of survey see Blanchard & Fillieule, 2006; Walgrave & Verhulst, 2008).

As for the qualitative part of this article, I interviewed those in leadership positions of different Italian social movement families engaged in mobilisation on the issues of globalisation, democracy, and social justice: from political parties to unions, from large associations to small informal groupings. During the interviews I asked those in leadership positions of different Social Movement Organisations (SMOs) to indicate both the strengths and weaknesses of Internet communication. In parallel, as illustrated elsewhere (Mosca & della Porta, 2009) I also analysed the websites of the same organisations looking at some relevant dimensions (quality of the information, identity building, transparency, mobilization and intervention on the digital divide).

While the first part of the article focuses on quantitative findings concerning the individual level, the second presents qualitative results regarding the organisational level (interviews and websites’ analysis).

Before presenting the results of the analysis, it is important to discuss the Italian media system in some detail. The Internet cannot be analyzed as detached from such context. In Italy, the media system has been dominated since the fifties by a reduced competition in TV ownership. Also, the Italian media system can be described as a model of “polarized pluralism” in that it is characterized by a limited circulation of printed media (elite politically oriented press); a low degree of autonomy among license-financed radio and TV; weak professionalization; and strong government intervention (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 67). Since television is the first source of information for Italians, and the TV system is based on an oligopoly providing very limited opportunities for outsiders, a new media like the Internet became extremely valued, especially by resource-poor social movement organisations. Hence, the Internet has been perceived as an opportunity to foster pluralism overcoming traditional mass-media. As we will see, however, only a limited portion of the Italian population accesses the Internet.
THE POLITICAL USE OF THE INTERNET BY PARTICIPANTS IN SOCIAL MOVEMENT PROTEST EVENTS

In this section the focus will be on the political use of the Internet by individuals taking part in social movement protest events. In what follows, I will present some results of a survey of the participants in a demonstration against the Bolkestein directive that was held in Rome on October 15, 2005. Almost 500 questionnaires were gathered. The questionnaire, focusing mainly on conceptions and practices of democracy within the GJM, also contained some batteries concerning sources of political information and Internet use.

First, the sample included people engaged in social movements which are characterised by an intense use of the Internet to organise and carry out political actions (della Porta & Mosca, 2005a; for similar findings see also Van Laer, 2006). The issues around which they mobilise are scarcely considered by the traditional mass media, and are under-represented in parliamentary arenas. Consequently, the Internet was heavily used: 42% of respondents declared that they used it daily, 30% said that they used the Internet more than once a week, 11% once a week, and 8% once a month. Overall, less than one tenth of the interviewees never accessed the Internet. This result is particularly significant if we consider that at the time of the survey the percentage of the Italian population accessing the Internet was estimated as 40% (Bentivegna, 2006).

As Figure 1 shows, the Internet is a medium that is entering activists’ everyday life. In fact, taking into account the most important means of communication used daily to gather political information, only newspapers were more frequently used than the Internet (46% against 42%). Indeed, the Internet was more frequently used on a daily basis by the interviewees in the sample than other ‘mainstream’ media of communication like TV and the radio (around 35%). It is also worth noting that the interviewees used unmediated forms of communication as a primary source of political information. Indeed, almost two thirds of the interviewees in the sample declared that they collected political information by talking politics with friends and colleagues daily. Even if they used different means of information, face-to-face relationships were considered much more important in the formation of their political opinions.

This data clearly shows that the Internet supplements other channels of information and serves to allow communication when face-to-face meetings are not possible but it is not substituting unmediated human communication (similar results can also be found in Di Maggio et al., 2001). In a movement that is considered heavily dependent on mediated forms of communication, face-to-face interactions are still at the core of communicative processes. A similar result was found when analysing in depth the forms of communication employed during the first European Social Forum in Florence (Mosca et al., 2009).

However, the Internet is not just a medium that provides alternative information. It can also be seen as a resource that supports political participation in several ways: by providing a new platform for debate and engagement, or by complementing offline participation through, for instance, facilitating organisation and communication between people already involved in social and political networks.

The political use of the Internet has to be understood as using the Internet to gather political information, to discuss political issues and to perform acts of dissent online. In order to assess if and how the Internet is used politically by participants in social movement protest events, interviewees were asked about how they use the Internet when online. The questionnaire contained indicators concerning different styles of Internet political use: to collect and produce political information; to exchange political opinions and to communicate with one’s own group; and to perform online forms of action (e-petitions, net-strikes etc.).

As can be seen in Figure 2, 86% of the respondents declared that they used the Internet to gather alternative political information. Around
half of the sample had used the Internet not only to collect information but also to publish reports of protest events. This data is very telling in that it underlines the fact that interviewees are exploiting interactive features of the Internet and acting as ‘prosumers’ (Toffler, 1980). They are not just passive receivers of information but they also act as active producers posting online reports of protest events that they have directly experienced. One of the more innovative features of the Internet, that is enabling users to take an active role in publishing their opinions online, seems then to be fulfilled by a significant number of interviewees.

The data also shows that the Internet is not only used to (passively and actively) inform but also to engage in interactive communication, exchanging political opinions in forums/mail-lists/chats (56%) or to communicate with one’s own political group (about two thirds of the sample). The results are quite different if we consider the last dimension of the political use of the Internet, which is to practice online forms of action. While the Internet is broadly used to support online campaigns and petitions (almost three-quarters of interviewees do that), only one quarter of respondents ever participated in online ‘radical’ forms of action (such as the net-strike). At this stage it is difficult to go behind the quantitative results to explain why ‘radical’ online forms of action are scarcely practiced by participants in protest events. Just as in the offline world, there is evidence of the existence of what we can call a “ladder of online participation” whereas less costly actions such as informing are more widespread while more costly activities such as discussing and protesting are less practiced. However, other studies (della Porta & Mosca, 2005b) lead us to hypothesise that this findings on radical online protest seems to be related to two different factors: firstly, the fact that information on the existence and the functioning of acts of electronic disturbance is not widespread among participants and, secondly, the fact that such online actions are perceived as ineffective and often disregarded by the targets to whom they are directed. More explanation of this will be provided in the qualitative section of this article.

Figure 1. Frequency of use of different media to gather political information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media</th>
<th>Every day</th>
<th>Several times a week</th>
<th>Once a week</th>
<th>Once a month</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>30.2%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>41.5%</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>61.3%</td>
<td>33.0%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summarising, the data shown demonstrates that the Internet is used politically at different rates: mostly for retrieving political information, campaigning and petitioning online, and to discuss in ongoing assemblies with one’s own political groups online. To a lesser extent, the Internet is used to actively produce information and to express political opinions online via forums, mailing-lists, blogs etc. Engaging in acts of electronic disturbance (i.e. net-strikes and mail-bombings) is instead still restricted to a reduced quota of participants in protest events.

In order to provide some tentative explanations of the political use of the Internet, I created synthetic indexes aggregating various indicators. This applies to the indexes of offline participatory experiences, offline organisational experiences, and political use of the Internet. Even if correlation coefficients do not tell us anything about the direction of a relation between variables, I hypothesise that offline (organisational and participatory) experiences could explain the political use of the Internet to gather information, to talk politics online and to perform acts of dissent on the Net (Figure 3).

It is worth noting that offline experiences and the political use of the Internet are strongly correlated. The index of political use of the Internet is in fact associated both with organisational experiences (0.270**) and, especially, with participatory experiences (0.438**). This result is interesting in that it seems to support those scholars (i.e. Norris, 2001) who claim that online participation does not come out of the blue but is indeed related to offline participation. However, these data only refer to politically active citizens and do not tell us anything about the political use of the Internet of unengaged citizens. More research is needed on the latter because only by focusing on those citizens who are not active offline can we assess the real capacity of the Internet to involve previously unengaged citizens in politics.
Another interesting result that requires more discussion concerns the fact that the political use of the Internet is especially associated with what I called “offline participatory experiences”. As we have seen, organisational experiences per se are not strongly associated with the political use of the Internet while participatory experiences are strongly related to it. The data from this research provides evidence that opportunities for online engagement offered by the Internet fit particularly well with people already used to engaging in different forms of action offline. In a nutshell, findings show that in a highly mobilised population (the participants in a protest event) participatory experiences matter more than organisational ones in explaining the political use of the Internet.

The hypothesis behind this classification of organisational experiences is that different movement families would adopt (and adapt to their needs) the Internet in different ways. In order to provide an answer to these questions, organisational and participatory experiences have been split into different categories. In relation to organisational experiences (Table 1), I created four categories recalling different movement families: ‘old’ left organisations, new social movement organisations, charity groups, solidarity and rights organisations and ‘new’ left organisations. The hypothesis behind this classification of organisational experiences is that different movement families would adopt (and adapt to their needs) the Internet in different ways. Diverse social movement families have in

Figure 3. Relationship between offline experiences and political use of the Internet
fact different identities, organisational formulas, repertoires of action, forms of communication, decisional styles etc. that affect their technological choices. This hypothesis could also be framed in terms of path-dependency (Pierson 2000): previous steps done by an organisation (in this case, a social movement family) in a certain direction (i.e. use of technology; strategies of communication etc.) lead to further movement in the same direction.

Table 1 shows that experiences in charity groups are not significantly related to the political use of the Internet; experiences in old left organisations are weakly associated with using the Internet for internal communication; participation in the activities of new social movement organisations, compared with other organisational experiences, are particularly related to supporting online campaigns/petitions; and engagement in new left groups is especially associated with the informative dimension of the political use of the Internet. Interestingly, all organisational experiences (excluding those in charity groups) are associated with the active use of the Internet to produce political information (publishing online reports of protest events).

Considering the additive index of the political use of the Internet, a great variance among organisational experiences in different social movement families was found. Taking into account different organisational experiences, we notice that only certain types of experience are not associated with the political use of the Internet while others are more associated with it: experiences in new left organisations or new social movements are more likely to be related to the political use of the Internet. In Italy organisations belonging to the new left family like social centers have been in charge of the creation of media centers during important protest events (like the anti-G8 summit in 2001; see Andretta et al., 2002) and have been at the forefront of innovative (and contentious) use of the Internet (see Freschi, 2003). Many alternative media and many groups active on immigrants’ rights have been born within social centers and developed later as something independent. Student groups also rely heavily on Internet communication, this sector of the population being among one of the most wired (Calenda & Meijer, 2008). As for new social movements, even if technology has been seen with skepticism by environmentalists, most of them have eagerly adopted the Internet (Pickering, 2003, p. 36). Peace groups (belonging to the family of new social movements, too) have particularly used Computer-Mediated Communication to organise important global

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political use of the Internet</th>
<th>Old left</th>
<th>Charity groups</th>
<th>Solidarity / rights groups</th>
<th>New social movements</th>
<th>New left</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ESF website</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>0.114*</td>
<td>0.228**</td>
<td>0.170**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protest organisation websites</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>0.135*</td>
<td>0.176**</td>
<td>0.303**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative information websites</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>0.174**</td>
<td>0.179**</td>
<td>0.297**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publishing protest reports online</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>0.175**</td>
<td>0.252**</td>
<td>0.279**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing opinions in forums</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>0.214**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating with own group</td>
<td>0.137*</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>0.144*</td>
<td>0.176**</td>
<td>0.195**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petition/campaigns</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>0.139*</td>
<td>0.193**</td>
<td>0.173**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical online actions</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>0.152*</td>
<td>0.126*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additive index</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>0.179**</td>
<td>0.266**</td>
<td>0.326**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: partial correlations controlled for the following variables: gender, age, education.
days of action like the worldwide 15th February protest in 2003 (Walgrave & Rucht, 2009). The Internet has also helped the international coordination of women’s groups, playing a key role in the development of the World March of Women (Leonardi 2000), though it also caused challenges because of access problems in the Global South (Guay, 2002).

As for participatory experiences (see table 2), the repertoire of action was divided into four groups: traditional, moderate, unconventional and radical. Looking at the table below, we again notice that the association with the political use of the Internet varies a great deal depending on different forms of action.

While having practiced traditional and moderate forms of action is not strongly associated with the political use of the Internet, experiences of unconventional and radical forms of action are clearly associated with it. However, while unconventional forms are equally associated with different dimensions of the political use of the Internet, radical ones tend to be associated with Internet use directly oriented towards protest. First of all, the low association between traditional repertoires of action and the political use of the Internet could be explained by the fact that the index was built to include forms of action related to traditional political actors like parties and unions, not amongst those more oriented toward a creative and inventive (political) use of the Internet. The interesting result is that more innovative forms of action such as participating in sits-in, boycotts and alternative types of demonstration are more associated with the political use of the Internet. Alternative types of demonstration such as critical mass and the May Day parade against precarious work rely heavily on the Internet which could help explaining the results. Boycotts can also be considered an individualised form of action (Micheletti, 2003) and this characteristic would fit very well with the political use of the Internet which is largely an individual activity.

It is worth noting that the data seems to confirm that participants tend to reproduce their offline styles of action online (see also Calenda & Mosca, 2007). In fact, those interviewees that adopt moderate repertoires of action are more likely to engage in moderate online forms of action like e-petitioning and e-campaigning while those more used to engage in radical forms of action offline are more likely to employ online ‘disruptive’ forms of action such as acts of electronic disturbance.

Table 2. Participatory experiences and political use of the Internet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political use of the Internet</th>
<th>Participatory Experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESF website</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protest organisation websites</td>
<td>0.109*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative information websites</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publishing protest reports online</td>
<td>0.132*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing opinions in forums</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating with own group</td>
<td>0.185**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petition/campaigns</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical online actions</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additive index</td>
<td>0.114**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: partial correlations controlled for the following variables: gender, age, education.
THE POLITICAL USE OF THE INTERNET BY DIFFERENT SOCIAL MOVEMENT FAMILIES AND ORGANISATIONS

After presenting quantitative data gathered on the individual level, this section focuses mostly on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews and websites analysis. First of all, the perception of the impact of Internet use by social movement organisations varies according to the different targets of their action. The Internet can be used both for in-ward oriented communication and for out-ward oriented communication, both for addressing public opinion in general and specific and peculiar constituencies or groups of citizens, such as public decision-makers and politicians. However, our interviewees claimed that the Internet is more effective for strengthening specific types of communication. This is also evident when analyzing social movement websites.

In general it does not seem that the Internet favored more interactions with public decision-makers as such actions made via the Internet were often ignored and seldom effective. It is clear that online mobilisation has more chance to influence decision-makers only when such issues have a certain visibility in the public discourse through traditional media. According to some interviewees, public decision-makers are generally neither competent nor interested in these online actions (interview 1). As a matter of fact, actions of electronic disturbance such as net-strikes and mail-bombings are not often recognised by their targets. The same is true for websites, which are often ignored. However, it is worth analyzing the ‘policy of links’ of social movement website. The 45% of them don’t provide any link or, when it provides them, it only has links going to like-minded organisations (i.e. same social movement family). The other 55% of the organisations seems more open since it has links to different social movement families. Only around one fifth of the analyzed websites provide links to public institutions (see Mosca 2005). Some scholars (Sunstein, 2001, p. 59) have stressed a sort of ‘balkanization’ of the web, which is the tendency to link only websites of the same ideological orientation.

While the Internet does not facilitate relationships with public institutions, it seems to be more effective in targeting and linking to other groupings. For example, it facilitates the movement’s relationship with the media because press releases, photos, and documents are published on websites that are used by journalists as sources of information for their articles. As the analysis shows, movements’ websites are very informative providing articles, papers and dossiers, conference and seminar materials, bibliographies and updated news. The Internet is also conceived as an important means for cross-referencing different media. Thanks to this medium, some groups more specialised in information production can act as the live sound track of political events (like counter-summits and social forums) as they happen (interview 2). The Internet allows multi-media coverage of protest events through audio files, photos and video, textual reports and discussions etc. In addition, when covering an event some websites permit their users to upload documents online, thereby generating a considerable amount of information collected in different formats and by people with different points of view. As already noticed in the quantitative analysis, awareness of the fundamental importance of communication is widespread and people become active producers of information. These media-activists have gained a central role in the coverage of protest events of the global justice movement and in the creation of transnational public spaces like in the case of the Euromayday parade (see Doerr & Mattoni, 2007).

Websites are employed to cover the current activities of the movement but also operate as archives and databases. Many interviewees refer to them as places of memory, where social movements can narrate their history, keep track of their past actions and store their documents and materials. This is for example clearly what happened with the ESF memory project using the Internet to recover and systematise information and knowledge produced within the

A clear understanding of the role of different Internet tools emerges from the interviews: different applications are used for different aims. If websites are used by SMOs as places to present themselves to the general public, other tools like forums and mailing-lists favor ongoing communication and discussion among individuals (interview 4). Most interviewees stressed the importance of mailing lists in the activity of their organisations. These applications, that are greatly appreciated and extensively used, are defined as ‘permanent assemblies’. One activist of a local social forum in Venice underlined the contribution of the Internet in terms of transparency of the organisational process (for similar results see also Kavada, 2006). Mailing lists are used to include people that could not attend physical meetings by disseminating assemblies’ minutes (interview 3). The very nature and contribution of the Internet to grassroots political processes is however contested and discussed. While some groups declare an instrumental vision of the Internet, other ones underline that it is a political locus in itself.

The symbolic/expressive function of the Internet is stressed by those groups declaring that the Internet helped in developing and strengthening their identities. This type of function is especially recognised by groups like local social forums which generally lack a physical place for their meetings. In these cases the Internet is referred to as a “virtual headquarters” or a “real virtual community” (interview 1).

One interesting feature of most websites of SMOs that are part of transnational networks is to make this immediately evident in the homepage of their websites. In fact, one of the first message that these organisations communicate to the general public is that they are part of a broader network. Still, there are very different ways to communicate such affiliation: the Communist Refoundation party puts the symbol of the Lilliput network and other coordinations it joins at the bottom of the homepage. The website of Arcigay, an organisation fighting for the acknowledgement of homosexual rights, claims on the homepage its membership to Ilga (International lesbian and gay association) and Ilga Europe.

Besides, lots of websites (Attac, Pax Christi, Lilliput, Cgil, the committee of the immigrants in Italy, the Communist Refoundation party, the Green party, the metalworkers union Fiom, and the campaign against ‘armed’ banks) have on their homepage the rainbow flag communicating to the public their belonging to the peace movement.

Protest-oriented organisations are in some way identified by photos of demonstrations that are put on the banner opening their homepage: this is the case of Attac, the Lilliput network and the Global project (website close to the ‘Disobedients’). In the case of the website of Lilliput, on the homepage (near the logo) there are three images of different demonstration where is it possible to read the words ‘justice’, ‘peace’, and ‘dropt the debt.’ On the homepage of the website of Attac-Italy there are four different images of demonstration: one of this --showing people that painted their hands white holding them high in front of the policies-- is easily recognizable as the demonstration of nonviolent groups in the Genoa’s antiG8 demonstration. In the case of Global Project another recognizable image is put on the homepage: demonstrators covering their bodies with protective materials (foam rubber padding, shin-pads, helmets and gas masks for protection against tear-gas), that is the typical way of demonstrating of the Disobedients.

The Lilliput network is however only partially inclined towards protest. It focuses a significant part of its action on the issue of political consumerism; i.e. a peculiar form of citizen engagement in politics with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices through consumer choices based on attitudes and values concerning issues of justice,
fairness or non-economic issues (Micheletti, 2003). According to political consumer strategy, consumers should conceive themselves as voters and corporations as candidates. Following this logic, shopping in a supermarket would correspond to voting in an election. Consumer-voters should use their shopping-bag power (Ceccarini & Forno, 2006) to ‘punish’ corporations-candidates producing goods without respect for the environment and workers’ rights, while rewarding fair trade producers. Very interestingly, Lilliput is trying to move the idea of political consumerism from food and clothes to other areas of consumption, such as technologies. For this reason, the old website created with proprietary software was discarded and substituted with a new one hosted on a server working with free software (interview 4). The adaptation of the logic of political consumerism to new technologies was also made explicit by Lilliput in a document explaining that

deciding to use free software and to elude the Microsoft monopoly is no different to choosing to buy fair trade products, participating in boycott campaigns or depositing your money in an ethical bank: using free software means consuming critically also in the informatics domain. (Glo Internet, 2003)

The discussion on technology within social movement networks is often associated with a reflection on internal democracy. Contemporary social movements are making big efforts to democratise their organisational practices (della Porta et al., 2006) and the Internet is perceived as an opportunity for facilitating the spread and share of power within an organisation and to widen participation in its organisational life, improving internal democracy. The Internet can help to open an organisation to rank-and-file activists. One of the reasons explaining the success of this information and communication technology among social movements is its prefigurative nature (Downing, 2001). In fact, it fits very well with the nature of post-ideological groups concretely practicing daily the values and principles of another possible world (i.e. radical democracy) and not postponing them to the future.

However, the adoption of new technologies can also produce inequalities of power. Websites requiring technical knowledge select those with the knowledge to tackle them. Experience has also shown that centralised management of information slows down the process of dissemination (interview 8). In such cases the webmaster can make arbitrary choices and can become a de facto gatekeeper.

While SMOs are aware that technology can become a source of inequalities, their active intervention on the digital divide is quite limited. Websites’ analysis shows that only few organisations openly express a concern with this topic, while the other ones tend to ignore it. Organisations with an older online presence are more aware of the digital divide probably because having started using the Internet before means knowing better risks and opportunities of this medium of communication.

In order to make an inquiry on the analyzed websites, a message was sent to the webmasters running them asking a series of questions. 75% declared to use free software. Besides, during the analysis the websites of two organisations (the Left Youth and Lilliput) were moving their contents to new websites realized with free software. Interesting enough, even if the websites are often realized with free software, only six of them (Attac, the fair trade association Botteghe del Mondo, the Abruzzo social forum, the ecopacifist association Peacelink, the youth branches of left-wing parties Left Youth and Young Communists) quote explicitly free software and / or open source on their homepage. This means that only few organisations conceive it as a strategic resource to empower social movements.

Many groups also created new websites to limit or get rid of webmasters increasing and favoring the participation of non-experts (interviews 4, 7 and 8). An open publishing system is employed on some websites in order to widen participation of their users. Principles such as non-hierarchy, public participation, minimal
editorial control, and transparency tend to inform the websites employing open publishing, though they do so to varying degrees (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_pUBLISHing). Although their adoption and implementation can be problematic, open publishing and open management systems are considered antibiotics to the monopoly of power in the hands of a few technologically skilled individuals. One of the first websites close to social movements adopting open publishing was the Indymedia network. Nevertheless, even Indymedia does not completely apply the logic of open publishing (Atton, 2003). Until recently, the Italian knot of Indymedia combined open publishing and the method of consensus (interview 6). However, after seven years, Indymedia-Italy collapsed and remained inactive between 2006 and 2008. Reasons explaining the temporary collapse of the network were: the decline in participation, the bureaucratisation of the project and the consensual decision-making method, thought to work only poorly in the mailing lists (Alice, 2006). The new Indymedia-Italy, which has been labelled soon as ‘Indymedia 2.0’, was again online during the summer of 2008. It now gives more room to news produced by regional knots. As a matter of fact, a unique direction of the website at the national level was perceived as blocking technical, methodological and political innovations (http://italy.indymedia.org/it/static/mission.shtml). Instead of relying on a single group of people, the project is now based on more groups but less numerous which are particularly active in specific territories and can discuss and interact frequently not only online but also offline. This brief report of the recent history of Indymedia-Italy illustrates that the need to link better online and offline realms produced a different organisation of the website.

Not only problems with website management are faced through moving processes from the online to the offline environment. Many SMOs try to intervene directly on the risks deriving from Internet communication by spreading technological skills within their organisation. As argued elsewhere (della Porta & Mosca, 2005a), SMOs can play an important role in socialising their members to Internet use. Being places where a great importance to new technologies is given, practices of media-activism and hacking developed within social centres. Most of them host what are know as ‘hacklabs’ (hackers’ laboratories), that is laboratories with a clear ideological leftist orientation socialising people to informatics knowledge, free software, freedom of expression, privacy, digital rights and self-management.

As the interviews show, some of the organisations created groups of people specifically to deal with Internet issues and to try to diffuse knowledge on Internet use among their participants (interviews 4 and 9). These groups are expected to inform and educate in using Internet communication in a proper manner as it takes time to learn to use email, file sharing and downloading, search engines etc. They also raise awareness on the alternatives to Microsoft’s proprietary software.

Another issue worth discussing concerns the characteristics distinguishing the Internet from previous communication media’s interactivity. Our findings show that in some cases interactive tools are not used by SMOs because they feel that they would require a great effort. This concerns especially more traditional organisations such as trade unions which some scholars have called “dinosaurs in cyberspace” (Ward & Lusoli, 2003). Most of them fear losing control of interactive spaces on their websites. As they do not have enough resources to devote one member of their staff to moderate interactive spaces, they just prefer to avoid them (interview 10). However, if on the one hand the presence of staff monitoring such spaces is important if one wants them to impact on organisational decisions and processes, on the other hand the presence of moderators can hinder free expression, and even censor inconvenient claims. In those cases while an explicit and clear netiquette (online code of conduct) can favor a polite and constructive discussion, the presence of moderators could have negative effects on the dialogic process (i.e. structuring it around pre-defined issues) and thus should
be kept to a minimum. With some exceptions, the tendency of ‘old’ organisations such as trade unions has been to use the Internet as previous media of communication, not fulfilling its most innovative aspects (such as interactivity) and using it for top-down forms of communication. Findings like this have been highlighted by different studies concerning the websites of political parties (Gibson et al., 2003; Margolis et al., 1999) and institutions (Coleman et al., 1999; Trechsel et al., 2003). Recent research on Belgian political parties has showed that because of negative experiences with interactive tools (i.e. discussion fora and blogs) the presence of such applications in their websites has even decreased in recent years, particularly during election campaigns (Vissers, 2009, p. 19; a similar result has been noted in the study of American MPs personal websites, see Zittel 2009, p. 19).

However, a generation gap within and between ‘old’ and traditional organisations/members and ‘new’ and innovative groups/activists in conceiving and understanding the Internet is referred to by some interviewees (interviews 1 and 11).

While the generation gap hypothesis needs to be deepened and tested with further research, one can notices that many interviewees (i.e. interviews 12, 13, 14, 15 and 17) tend to underline the importance of face-to-face relationships, irreplaceable by online communication. Many interviewees point to the fact that face-to-face interactions allow the construction of relationships of mutual trust, something that cannot be generated online (Diani, 2001; Kavada, 2006). That is, Computer-Mediated Communication is perceived as being something that can effectively complement face-to-face interactions but cannot substitute them.

Another important issue that is stressed by most of the interviewees is the difficulty related to the employment of the Internet as a decision-making tool. It has been suggested that the suitability of the Internet for making decisions could be application dependent: “applications facilitating real-time communication, such as chat, are better suited to decision-making, as they allow for complex negotiations to take place more quickly and efficiently than email and email lists” (Kavada, 2006, pp. 11-12). Still, many interviewees rejected the idea of using the Internet for making decisions. Others underlined that moving decision-making processes online can create new inequalities because access limitations, familiarity with written culture and technical expertise give power to a limited number of people. Thus, technology can become a new source of power asymmetry. Fear of excluding some activists led in some cases to limiting the use of new technology while giving value to face-to-face communication. (interview 19).

Together with the limits of the Internet for making decisions, interviewees point at the risk of overvaluing the Internet’s effectiveness in mobilising offline protestors. Some criticised the attitude of other SMOs and activists to ‘virtualising’ the conflict and relying too much on the Internet as an instrument for bringing people out onto the streets (interviews 1 and 16). Among structural limitations of Computer-Mediated Communication, activists are also aware of the issue of the digital divide. As we have seen, Internet access is still very much restricted to well-educated people with high incomes, while women and older people generally have lower rates of access. The majority of Italian people are still excluded by this media. This forces SMOs to adopt different tactics in order to reach non-wired people (interviews 13 and 18).

CONCLUSION

As the quantitative analysis showed, the Internet is used politically by many participants in protest events who employ it to gather alternative information, discuss politics online and perform different types of action online. Secondly, we also found that the Internet is more likely to be used politically by those individuals with previous radical and unconventional participatory experience while organisational experience is less important in this respect.
Thirdly, interviewees tend to reproduce their offline styles of action online. The qualitative interviews have shown that the Internet represents a ‘double-faced’ medium for social movements in that it provides new opportunities for practicing politics but it also implies a series of risks and challenges. On one side it is horizontal, bi-directional, interactive, and cheap, and it empowers resource-poor collective actors and individuals. On the other side, the problem of the digital divide raises a discussion on the democratic nature of this medium.

While most of the literature focusing on the Internet and politics tends to assess the positive contribution of Computer-Mediated Communication to political processes, this article has stressed both the positive and the negative consequences of the Internet for social movements. Some scholars (i.e. Garrett, 2006; Pickerill, 2003) have underlined the need to consider also the undesirable effects of the Internet: what types of constraint does it pose to collective action?

As we have seen, the Internet is used to address different targets in more or less effective ways. Some groups organised online campaigns to exert pressure on public decision-makers. However, in many cases politicians disregarded these. According to the interviewees, this concerns especially the older generation of politicians who – because of cultural and/or generation characteristics – have not incorporated the Internet into everyday life: most politicians experienced a belated socialisation to the Internet and they are forced to use it without a complete understanding of the potential of this medium (i.e. interactivity) using it as they would a previous medium of communication. As a consequence, online actions such as net-strikes and mail-bombings are not recognised and understood as genuine forms of action. At the same time, we found that only a limited number of SMOs really develop a ‘policy of links’: only a few websites provide links to organisations belonging to different social movement families and, even less, to websites of public institutions.

The Internet is considered by the interviewees more effective in addressing journalists and in attracting (mass) media coverage than decision-makers. Thanks to the Internet there has been a great increase in sources of information and journalists now have direct access to SMOs’ websites where press releases, mission statements, documents, leaflets, photos, video, f.a.q., etc. are stored. When covered, movements now have more chance that their point of view will be taken into account but in the end journalists are always those who build up the news, manipulating and modifying the movement’s original claims. Besides, movements cannot overcome the “selection bias” of the press. Journalists are still the gatekeepers of offline information and they tend to give greater visibility to institutional actors and processes (Gitlin, 1980; Ryan, 1991).

As we discussed earlier, the possibility of social movements using the Internet to address the general public is severely limited by the digital divide, i.e. lack of access to Internet communication, especially for older and less educated people. The Internet raises the risk of selectivity and exclusion for people without access to it. Besides, the great majority of Internet users tend to use search engines to orient themselves in cyberspace (Koopmans & Zimmermann, 2007). As some studies proved, website visibility is strongly determined by “googlearchy” (Hindman et al., 2003), i.e. the tendency of search engines to give greater visibility to the main actors in the political game. This means that general users, ignorant of the existence of social movements, are less likely to be directed to their websites when using search engines. However, the rapid rise of web 2.0 could create significant opportunities to by-pass the gatekeeping role of search engines.

Interviewees also stressed that not only the Internet is more suitable to address specific targets but also different tools serve different functions: websites are mainly used for external communication, while mailing lists and forums are employed for internal organisational communication and are conceived by activists as ongoing assemblies where discussion goes on
and on. SMOs use the Internet to address their activists, engaging them in their organisational life and establishing an ongoing relationship with them.\textsuperscript{20} Still, it risks being a ‘redundant’ and ‘self-referential’ medium in that it seems capable of reaching, on the whole, already active and informed people. In addition, efforts to strengthen internal democracy through the adoption of new technologies can be frustrated by the presence of a few technologically skilled individuals who manage and control them. That is, technology can become a new cause of power inequality, creating new hierarchies. In fact, people with technical skills can exert great power within an organisation heavily reliant on Internet communication. This problem has been partially faced by SMOs developing technological tools that can be easily used by non-experts, designing more participatory websites and also creating specific groups devoted to members’ socialisation to new technologies. Some SMOs’ websites, inspired by the principle of distributed management system, are not managed by a single webmaster but by a group of people. Hence, the continuous search for democratising the organisation offline is mirrored online. This seems to confirm that Internet use is shaped in accordance with offline identity, interests and goals (Calenda & Mosca, 2007).

Last but not least, the Internet is used by social movement organisations and activists as a complement to (and not as a substitute for) face-to-face social interactions. Sometimes the capacity of the Internet to inform and mobilise people in the streets is overestimated. Among interviewees nobody thought that the Internet could replace face-to-face communication but it is much appreciated because it multiplies possibility and frequency of communication among dispersed individuals. As observed by Loader (2008, 1930-1931) “there is little evidence to suggest totally new forms of separate online or virtual SMs [Social Movements]. Rather, we may say that new media are becoming a constituent part of the internal and external communications strategies of SMs … We are likely to witness more complementary online and offline SM activism”.

As the qualitative interviews have shown, the importance of this new medium of communication is very well recognised but activists also stressed its limits and claimed that it is a necessary but not sufficient condition for political action: face-to-face interactions still are the core of political action. That is, the political use of the Internet is just a continuation of (offline) politics by other means.

\section*{INTERVIEWS}

1. spokesperson of the Abruzzo Social Forum.
2. president of the weekly magazine, \textit{Carta} (paper).
4. activist of the Rete Lilliput working group on the Internet.
5. spokesperson of the Young Communists.
6. activist of Indymedia-Italy.
7. creator of the online magazine, \textit{Social Press}.
8. president of the Italian World Shops Association.
9. activist of the social centre, Bulk.
10. webmaster of the metalworkers trade union, Fiom (Federazione Impiegati e Operai Metallurgici).
11. editor of the communist newspaper, \textit{Il Manifesto}.
12. spokesperson of the Italian branch of the World March of Women.
13. activist of the non-violent group, Casa Pace (House of Peace).
14. president of the ecopacifist online portal, PeaceLink.
15. spokesperson of the Rete Lilliput.
16. delegate of the rank-and-file union Sin COBAS.
17. collaborator of the online magazine, \textit{Social Press}.
18. activist of the Italian branch of the World March of Women.
19. spokesperson of the COBAS Confederation.

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ENDNOTES

1 Social movements are defined as “informal networks, based on shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilise about conflictual issues, through the frequent use of various forms of protest” (della Porta & Diani, 1999, p. 16).

2 More information on the Bolkestein directive and the mobilization against it can be found in Parks (2006).

Both researches took place within the Demos project, focusing on conceptions and practices of democracy in the European Global Justice Movements (http://demos.eui.eu).

A probabilistic sample could not be built since for civil society events it is impossible to know exactly the characteristics of the population participating (indeed, lists of participants do not even exist).

All results of non-parametric correlations presented in this article have been previously checked with results obtained through cross-tabulations and other descriptive techniques. The significance levels of coefficients presented throughout the paper are reported as follows: ** means significance at the 0.01 level; * means significance at 0.05 level.

The concept of social movement family has been proposed by della Porta and Rucht (1995) to indicate sets of movements of similar type (i.e. new social movements, left libertarian movements etc.) sharing a number of values and a similar political culture.

The survey was directed by Donatella della Porta, and coordinated by Massimiliano Andretta and Lorenzo Mosca. I wish to thank Maria Fabbri, Anna Ferro, Egle Mocciaio, Linda Parenti and Gianni Piazza for their help in administering questionnaires.

We distributed 700 questionnaires and got back 500. Return rate was approximately 70%.

Among those who declared they did not access the Internet, 59% were women, 84% were undergraduates, 47% were more than 28 years old.

Net-striking consists of a large number of people connecting simultaneously to the same domain at a prearranged time, in order to ‘jam’ a site considered a symbolic target, in order to make it impossible for other users to reach it (Jordan, 2002).

The indicators aggregated in the index of offline participatory experiences were dummy variables concerning the following forms of action: signing a petition/referendum, participating in a demonstration, participating in an alternative form of demonstration (May Day parade, critical mass, etc.), participating in an official strike, participating in a wild cat strike, participating in a sit-in, boycotting, occupying public buildings (i.e. schools, universities etc.), carrying out cultural performances, subvertising/adbusting. The indicators aggregated in the index of offline organisational experiences were dummy variables concerning the following organisations: political party, trade union, socialist/social-democratic
organisation, communist organisation (3\textsuperscript{rd} International), Trotskyist organisation (4\textsuperscript{th} International), women’s group, citizens’ committee, environmental organisation, peace group, self-help group, voluntary organisation (charity), religious organisation, human rights organisation, gay/lesbian/transgender rights organisation, humanitarian/development assistance organisation, international solidarity organisation, social centre, migrants’ association, organisation for the unemployed, student group and alternative media. The index of the political use of the Internet included the above mentioned indicators: look at the website of the European Social Forum; look at the websites that provide information on the global justice movement’s protest events; visit a website of any source of ‘alternative information’; express political opinions in forums/mailing lists/chats; exchange information online within your political group; post reports of action online (in mailing lists, forums, blogs, websites, etc.); sign online petitions or participate in campaigns through mailing lists; participate in a net-strike and/or in other forms of online radical protest. Even if I do not want to disregard the impact of the Internet in shaping ways in which politics is perceived and experienced - especially by younger generations - it is clear that political socialisation, political culture and the values of the interviewees are mainly the product of offline processes.

Partial correlations controlled for the following variables: gender, age, education.

Clusters of organisational experiences were built on the basis of the score of correlation coefficients concerning similar organisational experiences. The additive index ‘old left’ includes the following organisational experiences: political party, trade union, socialist/social-democratic, communist (3\textsuperscript{rd} International), and Trotskyist organisation (4\textsuperscript{th} International). The additive index ‘new social movements’ includes the following organisational experiences: women’s group, citizens’ committee, environmental organisation and peace group. The additive index ‘charity groups’ includes the following organisational experiences: self-help group, voluntary organisation and religious organisation. The additive index ‘solidarity/rights groups’ includes the following organisational experiences: human rights organisation, gay/lesbian/transgender rights organisation, humanitarian/development assistance organisation and international solidarity organisation.

The additive index ‘new left’ includes the following organisational experiences: social centre, migrants’ association, organisation of the unemployed, student group and alternative media.

Clusters of participatory experiences were built on the basis of the score of correlation coefficients concerning similar participatory experiences. The additive index ‘traditional experiences’ includes the following participation experiences: worked in a political party and took part in a strike. The additive index ‘moderate experiences’ includes the following participation experiences: sign a petition/public letter and attend a demonstration. The additive index ‘unconventional experiences’ includes the following participation experiences: participate in a sit-in, boycott products and attend an alternative form of demonstration (i.e. critical mass, May Day parade etc.). The additive index ‘radical experiences’ includes the following participation experiences: take part in a wild cat strike, occupy public or private buildings and practice direct action against property/land.

The selection of websites mirrored the variety and heterogeneity of the global justice movement in Italy. We analyzed the websites of 37 SMOs including the most relevant ones belonging to three social movement families which –although sharing a common master frame based on democracy and social justice– differ for ideological orientations, organizational structures and repertoires of action (della Porta et al., 2006): the solidarity-ecopacifism sector (Lilliput network, Pax Christi, Tavola della Pace, Legambiente, the campaign against ‘armed’ banks, Sdebitarsi – Italian branch of Jubilee campaign–, the fair trade association Botteghe del Mondo, NGOs such as Unimondo, Un Ponte per and Emergency), the sector of institutional left (Attac-Italy, Arci, left-wing trade unions and red-green political parties), and the anticapitalist sector (Rete Naglobal, rank-and-file unions, anti-racist and inter-ethnic associations). Furthermore, we selected local social forums, media (i.e. Indymedia-Italy, Il Manifesto, Carta, Global Project, Peacelink, Radio Popolare) close to the movements but also groups at the ‘margins’ of the European social forum process (i.e. Euromayday campaign and the Italian anarchist federation), whose democratic deficit they criticize.

Namely: a) if there are individuals specifically employed to maintain the website; b) if there are volunteers helping with the website; c)