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*(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

¹ 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) leaded 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

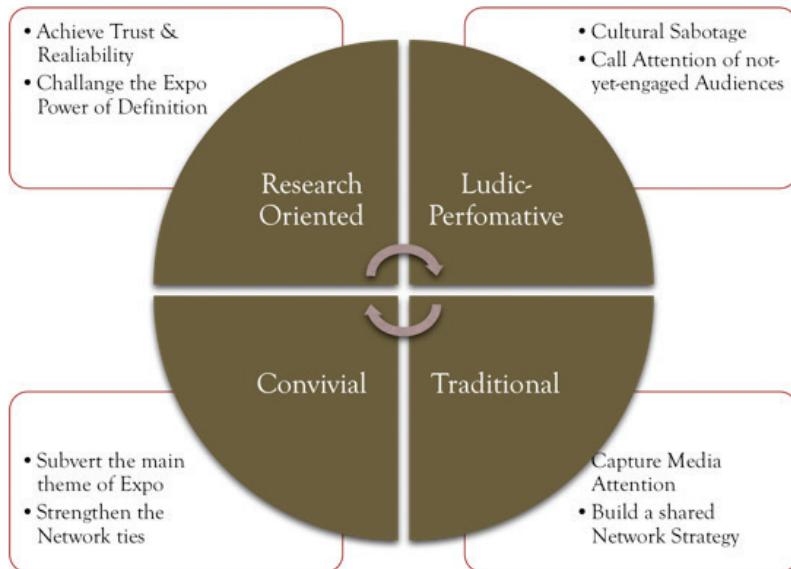


Fig. 1 – Various typologies of conflictual practices

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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