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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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