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

Introduction

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

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

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

CasaPound Italia

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

codes, cultural references and political discourse¹.

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

CasaPound was officially born in December, 2003, squatting in an entire building of a multicultural neighbourhood in Rome city centre. In the last few years it has managed to transform itself from a local experience to a national presence. In the most recent administrative elections it presented its own lists and candidates in many cities around the country². Even if its electoral presence is still very moderate, CasaPound has managed to recruit a significant number of people, mainly young, largely thanks to its network of rock bands, labels, pubs, squat-buildings, and for being strongly characterised as a grassroots and streets movement.

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

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

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

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

CasaPound's presence on the web

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

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

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

³ For more detail, see Caiani Parenti, 2013: 96; fig. 3.1.

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

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

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

How CasaPound uses the web

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

Identity strengthening as shown by Bartlett (2012) in his research⁵

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusions

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

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

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

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