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 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 movements1 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)2 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.3 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.

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