The Purple Movement: Social Media and Activism in Berlusconi’s Italy

Lorenzo Coretti
Faculty of Media, Arts and Design

This is an electronic version of a PhD thesis awarded by the University of Westminster. © The Author, 2014.

This is an exact reproduction of the paper copy held by the University of Westminster library.

The WestminsterResearch online digital archive at the University of Westminster aims to make the research output of the University available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the authors and/or copyright owners.

Users are permitted to download and/or print one copy for non-commercial private study or research. Further distribution and any use of material from within this archive for profit-making enterprises or for commercial gain is strictly forbidden.

Whilst further distribution of specific materials from within this archive is forbidden, you may freely distribute the URL of WestminsterResearch: (http://westminsterresearch.wmin.ac.uk/).

In case of abuse or copyright appearing without permission e-mail repository@westminster.ac.uk
The Purple Movement:
Social Media and Activism
in Berlusconi’s Italy

Lorenzo Coretti

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
of the University of Westminster for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy

May 2014
I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, Letizia and Piero,

Thanks for your love and support
Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I wish to thank my director of studies, Anastasia Kavada, for her invaluable support. Her confident guidance, vast knowledge, and contagious enthusiasm made this thesis possible.

Special thanks should also go to my second and third supervisor, Alessandro D’Arma and Peter Goodwin, for their encouragement and faith in this project. I would further like to thank Maria Way for her acute editing eye. I would also wish to thank my colleagues at the university, particularly Anthony McNicholas and Tarik Sabry, for their time and knowledge.

I would also like to thank all the staff, in particular Fauzia Ahmad. She has always been very responsive in providing all the necessary information. Also – and finally – I am very grateful to my friend Daniele Pica, who incessantly encouraged me and helped me to achieve this.
Abstract

This research project assesses the relationship between the use of Facebook and the development of social movements throughout their life cycle by focusing on the case study of Popolo Viola. On 5th December, 2009, hundreds of thousands of Italian citizens took to the streets of Rome to say ‘no’ to the politics of Silvio Berlusconi’s government and to ask for his resignation as Prime Minister. The demonstration was planned and organized, mainly on Facebook, by a group of bloggers. A single-issue protest rapidly evolved into a social movement, called ‘Popolo Viola’, ‘Purple People’. The colour purple was chosen because it was not previously associated with any political movement, and as a word to the wise that the movement was not linked to any political party. New groups and pages arose on Facebook: apart from the page ‘il Popolo Viola’, which now had more than 460,000 members (data August, 2013), thousands of pages and groups were opened at a local level, both inside and outside Italy.

Through the lenses of Social Movement Theory and the Critical Theory of Technology this study focuses on the role played by the use of Facebook in the development of the movement’s organizational structure, the building of its collective identity, and its mobilization processes. The methodology adopted for this purpose includes both quantitative and qualitative methods: on the one hand, there is an analysis of membership data and interaction levels on the Popolo Viola Facebook page, and a survey; on the other hand, there are in-depth interviews with the Facebook page administrators, influential members and activists of the movement, and content analysis of the online conversations among activists.

The findings of this research show how Facebook proved to be an efficient mobilizing structure for the social movement only on a short-term basis. After its initial success, the incompatibility between the commercial interests behind Facebook’s design, and the ideology of Popolo Viola became manifest. Facebook failed to provide the movement with the necessary instruments in terms of a shared democratic management of its resources. The inability to manage Facebook pages and groups according to commonly agreed values promoted vertical power structures within the movement, contributing to controversial
management of the Facebook page and to internal divisions which significantly hindered the potential of the anti-Berlusconi protest.

Moreover, gradual changes in the Facebook code increasingly promoted top-down flows of communication which, in conjunction with controversial decisions in the moderation of discussions that were made by the page administrators, progressively decreased the plurality of voices within the movement’s page, and hampered the formation of a strong collective identity.

Facebook therefore proved to represent much more than a mere communication tool for Popolo Viola, playing a vital role in influencing the movement’s structure, leadership, communication flows and collective identity. The rise and fall of Popolo Viola, with all its complexity, constitutes a useful case study of the evaluation of technology as a problematic force for social change. That said, this is not an issue which relates to the technology itself, but rather to the values and interests that drive the actors who are involved in this power struggle. Taking into account the relationships between culture, technology and capital, this study offers a balanced assessment of the dynamics which characterize the development of social movement protest on commercial Social Network Media.
Table of Contents

Chapter One – Introduction ........................................................................................................... 5
Chapter Two – The Anti-Berlusconi Protest in Italy ................................................................. 13
  2.1 Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 13
  2.2 The Opportunity Structures of Popolo Viola ................................................................. 13
      2.2.1 Concentration of Power in Italy .................................................................................. 14
      2.2.2 Corruption and Mafia ................................................................................................... 18
      2.2.3 Cost of Politics in Italy ................................................................................................ 20
      2.2.4 Youth Unemployment ................................................................................................. 21
  2.3 Origins of Popolo Viola ....................................................................................................... 22
Chapter Three – The Affordances of Social Network Media: a Critical Perspective .......... 26
  3.1 Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 26
  3.2 Social Network Media ......................................................................................................... 28
  3.3 Technological Affordances ................................................................................................. 31
  3.4 Critical Theory of Technology ........................................................................................... 33
  3.5 Facebook and its Affordances ............................................................................................ 35
  3.6 The Political Economy of SNM and Facebook ................................................................. 42
  3.7 Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 46
Chapter Four – Social Movement Theory ............................................................................... 49
  4.1 Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 49
  4.2 Resource Mobilization, Political Process and New Social Movements ......................... 50
  4.3 Networks of Networks: Defining Social Movements ....................................................... 53
  4.4 Participation as the outcome of a Mobilization Process .................................................. 56
      4.4.1 Action Frames and Framing Processes ........................................................................ 58
      4.4.2 Circulation of Information: The Mobilizing Structures of Social Movements........... 60
      4.4.3 Individual Motivations to Participation ...................................................................... 61
      4.4.4 The Repertoire of Contention and WUNC of Protest ............................................... 63
  4.5 Collective Identity ................................................................................................................ 65
  4.6 Organizational Levels ......................................................................................................... 69
      4.6.1 Structure ...................................................................................................................... 69
      4.6.2 Leadership .................................................................................................................... 71
      4.6.3 Decision Making .......................................................................................................... 73
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>Social Movement Theory in the Age of Convergence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.1 Introduction</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.2 Categories of Internet Activism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.2.1 Collective vs. Connective Action</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.3 The affordances of the Internet and Social Media for Mobilization</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.3.1 The Personalization of Action Frames</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.3.2 Online Circulation of Information: SNM as Mobilizing Structures</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.3.3 The Internet and the Individual Motivations to Participation</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.3.4 Electronic Repertoire of Contention</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.3.5 Slacktivism</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.4 The affordances of the Internet and Social Media for Collective Identity</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.4.1 Fragmentation and Polarization of discourse</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.4.2 Moderation as a necessity</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.5 The affordances of the Internet and Social Media for Organizational Levels</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.5.1 The Structure of Online Movements</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.5.2 Leadership in Online Activism</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.5.3 Decision Making in Online Activism</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.5.4 From Membership to Affiliation</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.6 Internet and SM Lifecycle</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six</td>
<td>Methods</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.1 Introduction</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.2 Research Approach</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.3 Case study</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.4 Facebook data analysis</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.5 Content analysis</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.6 In-depth semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.7 Online Participant Observation</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.8 Survey</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven</td>
<td>The Life Cycle of Popolo Viola</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Eight – The Structure of Popolo Viola ................................................................. 175

8.1 Introduction ................................................................................................................... 175

8.2 Structure of the Catania Group .................................................................................. 175
  8.2.1 December 2009: The Involvement of Political Parties in the No Berlusconi Day 176
  8.2.2 June, 2010: Facebook Page Policy Changes and their impact on the Catania Group ............................... 179
  8.2.3 February, 2011: The “Final Purge” ......................................................................... 181

8.3 Structure of the Social Movement Popolo Viola ......................................................... 183
  8.3.1 The Initial Multiplicity of Popolo Viola ................................................................. 185
  8.3.2 The First Schism with Resistenza Viola ............................................................... 186
  8.3.2 The Second Schism with Rete Viola ..................................................................... 192

8.4 Leadership and Decision-Making .............................................................................. 197
  8.4.1 Popolo Viola as an ‘Open-source’ Movement: A Deceptive View ....................... 199

8.5 Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 202

Chapter Nine – The Mobilization Processes of Popolo Viola ........................................... 205

9.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................. 205

9.2 Facebook as a Mobilizing Structure of Popolo Viola ............................................... 205

9.3 Popolo Viola and the Mainstream Mass-Media ......................................................... 211

9.4 Individual Motivations to Action ............................................................................. 217

9.5 The Repertoire of Contention of Popolo Viola ......................................................... 222

9.6 Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 226

Chapter Ten – Identities and Participation ................................................................... 228

10.1 Introduction ................................................................................................................ 228

10.2 The Voices of Popolo Viola ..................................................................................... 228
  10.2.1 Place of Interaction .............................................................................................. 229

10.2.2 The Model of communication on the Page ‘Il Popolo Viola’ ............................... 231

10.2.3 The Memes of Popolo Viola: Scalability of Information on the Page ................. 236

10.3 Online Participation and its Implications in Terms of Collective Identity .............. 239
  10.3.1 Forms of Participation: Likes, Comments, and Wall Posts ................................. 239
10.3.2 Solidarity and Polarization: Users’ Attitudes towards the Movement.........................243
10.3.3 The Cognitive and Interactive Characteristics of Collective Identity Processes. 248
10.3.4 The Role of Moderation in the Il Popolo Viola Page.............................................252
10.3.5 The Misalignment of Popolo Viola’s Agenda .........................................................256
10.4 Conclusion ..................................................................................................................261
Chapter Eleven – Discussion and Conclusions...................................................................263
11.1 Introduction ..................................................................................................................263
11.2 Social Network Media and Movements’ Organizational Levels..................................266
11.3 Social Network Media and Movements’ Collective Identity .......................................272
11.4 Social Network Media and Movements’ Mobilization Processes.................................277
11.5 Social Network Media and Movements’ Lifecycle .......................................................284
11.6 Conclusions ................................................................................................................291
Bibliography .......................................................................................................................294
Appendices ..........................................................................................................................336
Appendix I – The Netiquette of Popolo Viola ....................................................................336
Appendix II – Coding Scheme for the Content Analysis ....................................................338
Appendix III – Roles of the Interviewees inside the movement .........................................339
Appendix IV – Sample Interview Guide ...........................................................................341
Chapter One – Introduction

On 19\textsuperscript{th} April, 2008, the British weekly publication \textit{The Economist} dedicated its cover to the Italian political elections, which had taken place a few days before. The heading was straightforward: “Mamma mia. Here we go again” (\textit{The Economist}, 2008). On the cover, the grin of the media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi towers over a white background, which seems to symbolise the political void behind him. Berlusconi had, in fact, just been elected Prime Minister of the Italian Second Republic for the third time.

Before him, his predecessor, Romano Prodi, had resisted at the head of a faltering centre-left government for only 23 months. Once again, the fragmentation of the Left provided Berlusconi’s populism with a highway to political power on which there was little room for discussion and contention. Just a few weeks before, the organization Reporters Without Borders had published the Press Freedom Index 2008, placing Italy in 44\textsuperscript{th} position, behind countries such as Moldova and Trinidad and Tobago. As Prime Minister, Berlusconi again had control over 90\% of Italian television and undisputed power in the realm of mass media. Under his rule, the country suffered the highest concentration of media, economic, and political power in the Western world.

12 months later, the same ranking saw Italy sliding to the 49\textsuperscript{th} position, overtaken by Moldova and Guyana, among other countries. In Parliament, opposition was very weak. Centre-left governments in the past had at least two chances to deal with Berlusconi’s conflicts of interest, but they did nothing. The sole attempt to resist Berlusconi’s apparently relentless dominion came from the efforts of unions, such as CGIL and FIOM, but they had little success. A country which has repeatedly hosted great displays of protest in the past such as, to name just one, the “Hot Autumn” in 1968, now seemed to be almost numb, unable to express strife, suffocated by a lack of media channels able to voice alternative views. The influence of newspapers such as \textit{La Repubblica}, that opposed the neoliberal logics promoted by Berlusconi, seemed very feeble considering the Italians’ strong ability to form
their opinions in front of the TV screen. The pessimism of the Marcusian ‘one-dimensional man’ seemed to be materializing in the ‘boot’ of Europe.

However, while traditional mass media portrayed an unsustainable concentration of ownership and very little space for dissent, the Internet provided an alternative channel for personal expression. The participatory or social web offered an arena for the exchange of information, especially through the rising platforms of social network media such as Twitter and, most of all, Facebook. In July, 2008, half a million Italian users joined the platform launched by Mark Zuckerberg. In December, this number had increased tenfold. In March, 2009, almost nine million Italians actively shared content and participated in discussions on Facebook on a daily basis. Politics seemed to be a relevant interest for the Italian online community, which also gravitated around the blog of the former comedian turned activist, Beppe Grillo\(^1\). The unvoiced frustration of millions of citizens seemed to have finally found a personal soapbox from which people could speak freely, openly and without restrictions, in front of like-minded users. As a matter of fact, in a few months, hundreds of groups and pages sprang up on Facebook in order to say ‘No!’ to the politics of Berlusconi’s government.

Among these activists/bloggers, a group from Catania, Sicily, headed by the anonymous figure of San Precario, understood better than anybody else the potential of human aggregation on Facebook and proposed, alongside other activists, the idea of a national demonstration to ask for Berlusconi’s resignation in the name of democracy and freedom of expression. In October, 2009, they launched the page “Una Manifestazione Nazionale per Chiedere le Dimissioni di Berlusconi”\(^2\) announcing a demonstration to take place in Rome on the 5\(^{th}\) December 2009. The page immediately reached an unexpected consensus. After only a few weeks, more than 300,000 users had joined the page and had announced via Facebook their presence at the event, which would be called “No Berlusconi Day”. Contemporaneously, hundreds of local groups formed and joined the initiative, both

---

\(^1\) Beppe Grillo is the charismatic leader of the ‘Movimento 5 Stelle’ (‘5 Stars Movement’), which in 2013 became the second most voted for party in Italy.

\(^2\) “A National Demonstration to Ask for Berlusconi’s Resignation”
inside and outside Italy. Thousands of young Italians, forced by a high level of youth unemployment to leave the Country and move abroad, planned parallel campaigns in cities such as London, New York, Paris, Sydney, and many others.

All these groups adopted the colour purple as the symbol of the anti-Berlusconi protest. The colour purple held a strong meaning for the spirit of the initiative: it distinguished the No Berlusconi Day campaign from any previous political movement, at least in Italy; moreover, it connoted the distance of the rising movement from all political parties and unions that were guilty of being too weak against Berlusconi and his slow but inexorable takeover.

As announced, on 5th December, 2009, hundreds of thousands of Italian citizens took to the streets of Rome. Parallel demonstrations took place all around the world, from London to Paris, New York, Sydney, and in other major cities. The success of the demonstration was unexpected and unprecedented in its spontaneity. After that day, the protest kept going, both on- and offline, coordinated and publicised by the organisers on the Facebook page “il Popolo Viola” (“purple people”), which in August, 2013, still had more than 450,000 subscribers.

The aim of this research is to explore, through the lenses of the Critical Theory of Technology and Social Movement Theory, how the use of social media affects mobilization processes, organisational levels and the collective identity of movements, such as Popolo Viola, through the course of their lifecycle. The main objective is to assess whether and how the corporate interests that are embedded within the design of a Social Network Medium, such as Facebook, have an influence on the social movements that adopt this platform as their main tool for communication. In order to achieve such objectives I will analyse the role played by Facebook as the main mobilizing structure of the movement, and how the affordances that have arisen through the use of Facebook have allowed the movement’s message to resonate, compelling thousands of citizens to join the Anti-Berlusconi Protest. Moreover, I will explore the relationships between the code and design of Facebook and the development of the movement’s organizational structure, in order to evaluate whether and how the former exercise an influence on
the latter. Finally, I will explore the patterns of interaction and discussion among the movement’s constituents in order to assess how they impact on collective identity building processes within Popolo Viola.

Facebook constitutes a central element within this study because of its capacity to gradually attract most social movement activities. From circulation of information to action, a great majority of the mobilizing process take place on this popular Social Network Medium (SNM). Such patterns took place mostly on “Il Popolo Viola”, the official page of the movement, where hundreds of thousands of users converged in order to interact and get information about the anti-Berlusconi protest. Facebook was not only the mobilizing structure of Popolo Viola, but also the main space for discussions among activists and organizers. It is here, then, that we find the space where the collective identity of the movement took shape and evolved. The ease of use and the extraordinary capacities of Facebook, in terms of interaction, mobilization, and discussion, ensured that that a major part of the organizational processes and decision-making converged on such SNM. Facebook here behaved as an extremely powerful centre of gravity that gradually monopolised any aspect of the movement. It is thus not preposterous to define Popolo Viola as a “Facebook movement”, rather than as a more general “online movement”. However, as the reader will discover through this study, such a concentration of activities is far from being unproblematic.

As anticipated, the present project will rely on the conceptual apparatus of Social Movement Theory and will adopt the Critical Theory of Technology as key frameworks in order to discover the relationships between the design of Facebook, its development, and the evolvement of Popolo Viola, from its rise to its decline. The notion of the ‘technical code’ is vitally important in placing the relationship between movements and technology within society rather than outside it. A technical code is “the realization of an interest or ideology in a technically coherent solution to a problem” (Feenberg, 2005: 52). For the concerns of the case study of this doctoral project, the question relates to whether the commercial interests which govern Facebook’s technical code, and which are translated into its design, are compatible with the open-source and horizontal values of the anti-Berlusconi protest.
As an activist and academic, I myself witnessed the rise and decline of the movement, I participated actively in the organization of events and the vibrant discussions about what the movement should and could have been, and about how social change in Italy could be achieved. However, my contribution to action was limited to the London-based ‘branch’ of the movement; my interest in the Italian protest was mostly academic. Impressively, I established fulfilling friendships with activists whom I have never had the honour of meeting face-to-face. I owe to the use of Facebook my acquaintance with this marvellous human force who were willing to dedicate themselves to improving the country.

The movement in London had its own parallel path, only partially influenced by the macro-dynamics taking place, on- and offline, in Italy. In spite of a distance that seemed to be only somewhat nullified by Facebook interaction, I had the chance to witness the growth of online engagement with the movement, the internal struggles which have plagued Popolo Viola since its early days, the consequent divisions and its final decline.

The second chapter of this thesis will help the reader understand the factors that have contributed to the rise of Popolo Viola; in other words, the social, political, and cultural preconditions which paved the way to the online anti-Berlusconi protest, such as the concentration of power, corruption, the presence of the mafia, youth unemployment and the economic crisis in Italy.

Chapter Three offers the reader an overview of the theoretical framework that is the foundation of this project, placing the context of the research within the more general relationship between studies of Information and Communication Technology and Society. Moreover, the chapter identifies the researcher’s approach within the tradition of the Critical Theory of Technology whereby the analytical tool of affordances, intended as the possibilities to action that are enabled by the use of technology, are central. The aim is to avoid any form of technological determinism. Furthermore, this chapter applies the paradigm of critical theory on the affordances of Facebook and how its political economy influences the ways in which information circulates.
In Chapter Four I illustrate, through the lenses of Social Movement Theory, the main concepts around which this project revolves. I start with a brief overview of the main frameworks that such an academic tradition has thus far developed, namely resource mobilization, political process, and new social movement theory. I therefore conceptualize the process of mobilization, relying on framing, the circulation of information, individual motivations, and the repertoire of contention as a way to theorize collective action. I argue that issues concerning the collective identity of social movements and their organizational patterns are necessary conditions for the survival of social movement campaigns. Furthermore, I introduce the reader to the most salient part of my study, which relate to the lifecycle of social movements and social movement organizations.

Chapter Five is essential in order to assess the academic debate concerning the relationship between the use of the Internet and patterns of mobilization, collective identity, and organizational levels. Here, I rely mainly on the work of Bennett and Segerberg in terms of connective and collective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, 2013). In spite of a growing body of literature producing interdisciplinary accounts in the fields of Internet Studies and Social Movement Theory, the academic debate has so far neglected how the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) may affect the lifecycle of social movements. My research intends to contribute to filling this gap.

Chapter Six explains the methodology adopted in this study for data collection and analysis. As a case study and a strategically situated online ethnography, the study relies in different methods, namely Facebook data analysis, content analysis, online participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and, finally, a survey.

The concept of the Social Movement lifecycle contributes to shaping both the Background and the Findings chapters. At its core, such a framework considers five separate stages of social movements’ development: unrest, excitement, formalization, institutionalization, and decline (Dawson & Gettys, 1929). The stage of unrest is considered as part of the Background chapter, as information relies upon a
review of literature rather than on the collection of data, which is explained in the Methodology Chapter. The following lifecycle stages are the object of analysis according to a three-dimensional repartition regarding organizational levels, mobilization processes, and collective identity.

Initially, Chapter Seven introduces the reader to the lifecycle of Popolo Viola, providing a historical account of the purple protest through the two-year period from Autumn, 2009, when the excitement stage of the movement took place, to its decline in 2011. Furthermore, Chapter Eight explores the organizational levels of Popolo Viola, highlighting issues of structure, leadership, and decision-making.

Chapter Nine focuses on mobilization processes, explaining the role played internally by Facebook, as the main mobilizing structure of the movement, and externally the role played by mainstream mass media as agents in the development of Popolo Viola’s public identity. Moreover, the chapter focuses on how Facebook influenced individual activists’ motivations to action and on the repertoire of contention adopted by the movement.

Chapter Ten evaluates the collective identity building processes of the movement, with specific attention being placed on online participation. In other words, it explores the voices of Popolo Viola as a negotiation between the organizers in charge of the movement’s Facebook page and their activist base. Furthermore, it analyses patterns of interaction and discussion within the page, assessing forms of participation and their potential for the development of the movement’s collective identity.

Chapter Eleven discusses the findings and applies them to present theory in order to assess the impact of the Internet on social movements’ initiatives, structure, and the nature of participation. The objective is to critically overcome the deterministic and over-optimistic views adopted by mainstream mass media about the real impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) on protest. On the one hand, the project aims to supersede, to use Umberto Eco’s vocabulary (Eco, 1964), the apocalyptic views of ‘slacktivism’ (Morozov, 2009a, 2011) in favor of a more integrated empirically-based stance which is constructed upon the
affordances of the Internet and its implications. I will argue that forms of online engagement that are dismissed by Morozov as being counter-productive actually constitute necessary preconditions to action. Moreover, I will debate issues around connective action and networked movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, 2013; Juris, 2004; Gerbaudo, 2012), adding some layers of analysis which focus on collective identity, underlining how solidarity and identity constitute influential factors that contribute either to the multiplicity or the fragmentation of social movement protest (Fenton, 2008). Finally, I will conclude by critically assessing the limitations of my contribution and discussing how future research could fill these gaps.
Chapter Two – The Anti-Berlusconi Protest in Italy

2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to provide the reader with a background to the social, political and economic situation in Italy at the moment of the rise of Popolo Viola. Firstly, the main opportunity structures which led to the anti-Berlusconi protest in 2009 will be illustrated, starting with the high level of the concentration of power held by the former Italian Prime Minister, the hindering burden of corruption, the unrestrained privileges of Italian politicians, the pervasive presence of organized crime in all layers of national society, and, finally, the combination of the economic downturn and youth unemployment. The second section discusses the mobilising structures adopted by Popolo Viola, namely Facebook, as the main Social Networking Medium utilised by the movement, and the other groups and organizations with which Popolo Viola, at least partially, shared its ideals and beliefs.

2.2 The Opportunity Structures of Popolo Viola

As it will be explained in more detail in Section 4.2, opportunity structures refer to factors that are exogenous to social movements that constitute the preconditions for promoting action. Strictly adhering to McAdam’s conceptualization of political opportunities (McAdam, 1992), we can point out that the relative openness of the Italian political system, the fragmentation of the Left, a sympathetic approach by the intellectual elite, and a lack of actual repression by the State, constituted favourable preconditions for the rise of a movement like Popolo Viola. However, these dynamics would fail to capture the peculiar nature of the purple protest and would not explain the specific reason which led to its rise. When an analysis of a specific case, such as the one that is the subject of this thesis, takes place, the characteristics of the national political system have to be considered alongside the economic and social surrounding. This is the line of reasoning that led me to consider the more general concept of opportunity structures, in order to distinguish a high level of power concentration, corruption, the lavish privileges of Italian politicians, the pervasive presence of the mafia at all levels of national society,
and, finally, the combination of recession and youth unemployment, as the main conditions that facilitated the rise of Popolo Viola.

2.2.1 Concentration of Power in Italy

The concentration of power taking in Italy represented the main opportunity structure for Popolo Viola. Italy is, in fact, the Western country where arguably economic, political, and media power suffer the biggest concentration. As a matter of fact, Silvio Berlusconi, beyond being the third wealthiest man in Italy, owns three national television channels, with a share of between 30% and 40% of the national audience (Data from Auditel, 2011). When Prime Minister, he also effectively held control of two of the three RAI channels, the national public broadcaster.

In order to understand politicians’ control over the public service broadcasting, it is worth describing RAI’s governance. The term lottizzazione is used to describe the process of sharing control or a public service such as RAI in Italy. Lottizzazione is in fact the division of power positions inside an institution operated by agreement between political parties in order to exercise control over the same institution through people according to strictly political criteria, rather than for their specific professional skills (Murialdi, 1997). The phenomenon of RAI’s lottizzazione goes back to 1961 when RAI’s second television channel was opened, but it became well-established practice only in 1975, when a telecommunication reform took control of RAI from the government and put it in the hands of Parliament in order to promote pluralism. With the introduction of a third channel in 1979 the division of influences was refined, with the Christian-Democrats having control of RAI1, the Socialist Party of RAI2, and the Communist Party of RAI3 (Murialdi, 1994 and 1997; Martini, 1990). With the end of the First Republic and the advent of a bipolar political system, the government was given control of two channels and the opposition of the remaining one.

RAI has historically been vulnerable to political pressure and party political interference and Berlusconi was no exception. In 2002, he took advantage of his power to eliminate the most threatening voices from the public broadcasting service. During a press conference in Sofia, Bulgaria, Berlusconi singled out the
journalists Michele Santoro and Enzo Biagi, and the comedian Daniele Luttazzi, as being responsible for criminal use of RAI. A few weeks later, following pressures from Berlusconi’s party, Forza Italia, the three were removed from RAI (Hibberd, 2007).

Berlusconi’s influence reached 80% of the total television audience in 2006-2009 before dropping considerably, due to his resignation as Prime Minister in 2011 and the decline of his influence on RAI, and to the increasing power of Rupert Murdoch’s satellite SKY channels (data from Mavise, Database of TV companies and TV channels in the European Union, 2010).

This situation of the concentration of power created an enormous conflict of interest that was never resolved by the Italian parliament. Berlusconi has often been accused of taking advantage of his political power to protect his corporate interests. One example that relates to his media power comes from the “Gasparri law” (from the name of the Minister who implemented it), of 2004, which was supposed to fill the regulation gap that allowed Berlusconi to reach close-to-monopoly level. According to Tonello, “there is no doubt that law n.112/2004 was conceived to protect Berlusconi’s broadcasting empire, grown in the last twenty years defying any attempt of regulating it”. (in Terzis, 2007, p.246). The left wing parties were accomplices in this situation and never implemented any policy to solve the issues of the conflict of interest. On the contrary, in 1999, the leftist government led by Massimo D’Alema offered a provisional license to Berlusconi’s channel Rete4 at the expense of the Europa7 channel, which would have had the right to occupy Rete4’s frequency spectrum according to the “Maccanico Law”, which had been enacted two years before. Three years later, during an official speech, the DS³ Member of Parliament Luciano Violante revealed an agreement between Berlusconi and the DS (at that time PDS⁴) in order to save ownership on his three TV channels in spite of a decision by Italy’s highest court, the Corte Costituzionale, which had declared that Berlusconi could not own more than two National channels (Veltri &Travaglio, 2001).

³ The DS, Democratici di Sinistra (“Democrats of the Left”), founded in 1998, was the main social-democratic party in Italy. In 2007 it will become PD, Partito Democratico (“Democratic Party).
⁴ Partito Democratico di Sinistra (“Democratic Party of the Left”)
Berlusconi still holds the majority of the advertising and publishing market in Italy. Cinema, insurance, banking, even football, with the ownership of AC Milan, are among his interests. In 2009, according to Forbes, he was the 12\textsuperscript{th} most powerful person in the world and the 90th richest, with a fortune estimated at US$9.4 billion (data from Forbes, 2009). Four times Prime Minister of the Italian government, Berlusconi has been involved in many trials but was sentenced for the first time only in 2013, for tax fraud (Davies, 2013).

Many claim that Berlusconi entered politics expressly to avoid bankruptcy and a probable involvement in trials, at a time when corruption scandals were wiping out the Italian so-called ‘First Republic’ and his companies were at risk from a high level of debt (Ginsborg, 2005). In 1994, when Berlusconi (to use his own words) “entered the field” of politics, his fortune was estimated at €162 million; in 2012, after 18 years, it amounted to €3 billion.

Under Berlusconi’s power, the mixture between media and political power reached unsustainable levels, to the extent that the American organization ‘Freedom House’ downgraded Italy’s press ranking from ‘free’ to ‘partly-free’, a unique case in the European Union (Press Release from Freedom House, 1\textsuperscript{st} May, 2009). Yet, it would be misleading to state that in Italy there was no freedom of the press, as many newspapers, such as the influential La Repubblica, or even Corriere della Sera, although historically conservative, were openly against Berlusconi. However, television remained by far the dominant source of information for Italians – according to a survey, in fact 77.8\% of Italians in 2008 considered television their main source of information and only 5.4\% relied on newspapers (Emmulo, 2008).

After all, Silvio Berlusconi has always been very popular, even following his conviction in 2013. His appeal was based on his rise from anonymity to the creation of a business empire.

His ability to depict himself as a man of the people was crucial in a country where populism, whether left-wing or right-wing, cultural or political, is endemic (McCarthy, 1996: 132).
Gomez and Travaglio point to four dimensions which characterize his media power: firstly, his monopoly on information guaranteed Berlusconi the perfect environment for his political patronage, where intellectuals, journalists, and opinion leaders could be rewarded for their loyalty. Moreover, owning media allowed him to filter information and show on television only the facts and opinions that were congenial to his political party and his corporate interests. The agenda setting power in Berlusconi’s hands allowed the channels he controlled to promote issues, such as immigration and security, which were favourable to Forza Italia. Finally, media became a means through which political adversaries and opposing voices could be stigmatized (Gomez & Travaglio, 2004). Nonetheless, it is debatable whether Italy under Berlusconi could be characterised as a media regime, and there is disagreement over the extent of Berlusconi’s control over the media. Scholars like Mancini, Pasquino and Newell would probably disagree with Gomez and Travaglio’s characterisation of Italy as a media regime (Mancini, 2008; Pasquino, 2007; Newell, 2009).

Berlusconi has, in fact, acted as an innovator in Italian politics. He has successfully introduced marketing techniques in electoral campaigns, affecting the form and the content of the political message. The same founders of “Forza Italia” were employees of Publitalia, Berlusconi’s advertising agency (Mascia, 2010). Marketing professionals replaced ‘spin doctors’ as protagonists in electoral campaigns that assumed the look of television commercials. As Pezzini commented:

the credibility he was seeking through the imagery he used was not grounded in reality but was more akin to that of the fiction serials, soap operas and game shows that had been the daily fare of his television channels for years (Pezzini, in Cheles & Sponza, 2001: 188).

Berlusconi’s media power is thus not the sole key to understanding his success. As Mancini states:

The Berlusconi case (...) seems to be a mixture of the old and the new. He has used the old and the new. He has used the old and consolidated tradition of political parallelism between mass media and the party apparatus. But he has also used this mix in a totally new way, understanding before, and better than his adversaries, how the public arena had been profoundly changed by the growth period and
transformation spurred on by the media commercialization of the 1980s. His business experience and, above all, his experience with television, deeply influenced his political adventure. None of this could have happened, however, if the political scene had not been so dramatically altered by ‘Tangentopoli’ and the subsequent disappearance of old-school political leaders (Mancini, 2008: 117).

Indeed, in order to overcome a simplistic account of Berlusconi’s rise to political power, and to better understand the reasons which facilitated the birth of Popolo Viola, we will have to illustrate issues of corruption and the shift from the First to the Second Republic that was enabled in 1992 by the judicial inquest ‘Tangentopoli’, also known as ‘Mani Pulite’ (‘Clean Hands’).

2.2.2 Corruption and Mafia

Berlusconi is not only the cause of what Popolo Viola’s activists consider to be the Italian illness, but he is a symptom as well. In fact, the other opportunity structures have been rooted in Italian history since Italy’s unification in 1861, and maybe even before that, from the high level of corruption in Italian institutions, to the presence of the Mafia. The non-governmental organisation Transparency International (TI) compiles the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) every year. The CPI ranks countries in terms of the degree to which corruption is perceived to exist among public officials and politicians. It is a composite index, drawing on corruption-related data in expert surveys carried out by a variety of reputable institutions. It reflects the views of business people and analysts from around the world, including experts who are locals in the countries evaluated (Transparency, 2005).

According to CPI 2010, Italy is one of the countries with the highest level of perceived corruption in Western Europe, coming before Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece. Moreover, Italy is one of the few countries that showed a deterioration from 2009 to 2010, together with the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Madagascar, Niger and the United States.
Different scandals have hit the Italian political class since the birth of the Republic in 1946. Worthy of note is the “Mani Pulite” (“Clean Hands”) investigation, as it wiped out the so-called “First Republic” (1946-1992) and paved the way for Silvio Berlusconi’s entrance into politics. The enquiry started with the arrest of the Socialist Party’s member, Mario Chiesa, and culminated with the resignation of then Prime Minister, Bettino Craxi. Several politicians from the DC (Democrazia Cristiana, “Cristian Democrats”) and PSI (Partito Socialista Italiano, “Italian Socialist Party”), at that time the two most powerful political parties, were arrested. Overall, more than four hundred members of Parliament were under investigation (Maran, 2010). All four parties in power in 1992 gradually disappeared, creating a political void which Berlusconi filled two years later (Colazingari & Rose-Ackerman, 1988). The inquiry was led, among others, by the public prosecutor Antonio Di Pietro, who himself entered politics, first as Minister for Public Works, then entering the Senate and founding the Italia dei Valori (“Italy of Values”) party. Di Pietro would later be involved with the Anti-Berlusconi protest, on the one hand supporting Popolo Viola financially, on the other, trying to exploit it for his own political and electoral goals.

The two-year period between 1992 and 1994 not only saw the Clean Hands inquiry, but also a fierce struggle between the Italian State and the Mafia, with various terrorist attacks and the so-called Maxi Trials, when many mob bosses, among them Salvatore Riina, called the “boss of bosses”, were prosecuted (Maran, 2010).

The presence of the Mafia in Italy represents a relevant opportunity structure for Popolo Viola. As we will see later, there is a strong correlation between Popolo Viola and anti-Mafia events, especially through the collaboration between Popolo Viola and other movements and organizations that fight against the Mafia. Berlusconi himself has been accused of being linked to the Mafia on more than one occasion. Vittorio Mangano, a Mafia exponent from Palermo, worked for many years in Berlusconi’s villa as a stables’ manager. Marcello Dell’Utri, probably Berlusconi’s closest work partner, has been accused and sentenced for mob association on more than one occasion. Moreover, Giovanni Brusca, a former mobster turned informant, accused Berlusconi of having paid £300,000 in order to protect his interests in Sicily (Pisa, 2011). Another informant, Gaspare Spatuzza, claimed that Berlusconi provided support for the Mafia bombings in 1993, implying that Forza Italia had become the party of reference for the Mafia (Squires, 2009). As at the time of writing, magistrates are still investigating and it will take a long time to verify the reliability of these informants. That said, allegedly the results of the general elections of 2001, when Forza Italia obtained all of the 61 available seats in the electoral unit of Sicily, in an unprecedented case in Italian history, would prove to be a link between Berlusconi and the Mafia (Popham, 2003).

2.2.3 Cost of Politics in Italy

Strictly connected to the corruption issue was the high cost to the taxpayer of the privileges of Italian politicians. In 2009, not only did Italy have the highest number of elected members of Parliament, almost 1,000, but they were the best paid as well. In Italy there were almost 154,000 national and local politicians. An Italian MP earned an average €149,215 annual wage (not including expenses), double the salary of French and British MPs. Their travel expenses were refunded
without any need for documentation. On an annual basis, the Italian presidential palace cost four times more than Buckingham Palace. Among the 629 researchers and secretaries employed by parliamentarians, 575 were paid under the table (The Economist, 2010). According to Reuters, many Italian public servants earned more than Obama as US President (Reuters, 2012). On top of this, Italian public administration run a fleet of 629,000 official cars, almost ten times more than the United States (The Economist, 2010). In 2007, Italian citizens spent €270 million to fund political parties, against only €89M in Germany (Stella & Rizzo, 2007; Fraser, 2009). The average British citizen spent little more than €9 annually in order to sustain the cost of politics; his Italian counterpart more than €152. These data, especially if compared to the very poor economic growth of the GDP in the past twenty years, reflect an extraordinary detachment of politicians from the material conditions of the ordinary citizens.

2.2.4 Youth Unemployment

Finally, economic preconditions facilitated the rise of Popolo Viola: recession, youth unemployment and “precariato”, the condition of young temporary workers struggling to obtain a permanent job.

As an analysis in The Economist underlines:

Italy’s economic illness is not the acute sort, but a chronic disease that slowly gnaws away at vitality. When Europe’s economies shrink, Italy’s shrinks more; when they grow, it grows less (The Economist, 2011: 11).

According to the OECD, after ten years of slothful growth, during the five-year period 2007-2011 the Italian economy shrank by 6.7%. 2009 was the worst year, with a decrease of 5.5% in the real GDP. The unemployment rate reflects the fragile economy of the Country. In 2007, after having reached the lowest levels of unemployment since 1983, with only 6.1% of the population being jobless, the unemployment rate started to increase steadily. In 2008 it reached 6.7%, 7.8% in 2009, and 8.4% in 2010 and 2011 (Ciccarone & Damioli, 2012). Data about youth unemployment are even worse. According to ISTAT, the Italian National Institute of Statistics, in 2010
21.2 percent of Italians aged 15 to 29 were in a statistical group known as NEET -- Not in Education, Employment or Training -- almost double the percentage of inactive youths in Germany (Aloisi, 2011).

The number of jobless young Italians will rise in 2013 to 36% (The Economist, 2013).

Linda Laura Sabbadini, Director of ISTAT, notes that:

80 percent of job cuts involve young people, they are the segment that has been hit the hardest by the recession (...) It’s alarming because it is a measure of social exclusion. The longer people stay without studying or working, the more difficult it becomes for them to either go back to school or find a job. These people are just hanging out in a limbo (quoted in Aloisi, 2011).

Young Italians are trapped in a sort of “pensiero pigro” (“lazy thought”) caused by the impotence of changing a situation of structural “immobilismo” (a situation of opposition or inability towards social progress), deprived of any hope for their future, abandoned by unions, too busy defending those who already have a permanent job, and leftist parties, struggling for their own interests’ survival (Mascia, 2010).

Popolo Viola is not the first movement to fight against the issues mentioned in this section. For example, Berlusconi was the target of protest even before his entrance into politics. In order to trace the origins of the movement back it will be necessary to describe briefly the anti-Berlusconi protests in Italy in the twenty-years period between 1990-2009. Such a time interval constitutes the basis of the unrest stage of Popolo Viola as a social movement.

2.3 Origins of Popolo Viola

The first actions of protest against the power of Silvio Berlusconi date back to 1993, with the campaign Bo.Bi., Boicotta il Biscione⁶. Founded by Gianfranco Mascia, now among the most fervent, and, as we will see later, controversial activists of Popolo Viola. Bo.Bi.’s slogan was:

---

⁶ “Boycott the big water snake”. The water snake is the logo of Berlusconi’s main company Fininvest/Mediaset.
let us all stop buying Berlusconi’s newspapers, and stop shopping in his supermarkets. Withdraw publicity from his magazines and television channels. Let us boycott his television power\(^7\) (Gesualdi, 2002).

The Bo.Bi. campaign met its end after only a few months, in February, 1994, when Mascia was the victim of vile aggression in his own office in Ravenna, allegedly by a group of extreme right-wing individuals (Spezia, 1994). The Bo.Bi. campaign was coordinated via phone and fax, and during its brief life numerous initiatives of peaceful protest were carried out (Mascia, 2010). Probably the most notable initiative promoted by Bo.Bi. was the “National Boycott Day of the Biscione”, with Berlusconi-owned television channels’ audience falling by almost 3 million viewers in 24 hours (ibid, 2010). During an interview released in January, 2013, Berlusconi admitted that he had to sell some assets after the protest seriously hit his business revenues.\(^8\)

After Berlusconi’s return to power in 2001, following a 6-year period in opposition (1995-2001), another wave of protest targeted Berlusconi’s government and its ‘Cirami law’, a decree intended to stop trials in which Berlusconi himself and Cesare Previti, a close partner, were involved (The Economist, 2003). The protest culminated on September 14\(^{th}\), 2002, when 800,000 people gathered in St John Lateran Square, summoned by the influential movie director, Nanni Moretti, the philosopher Paolo Flores D’Arcais, and the re-launched Bo.Bi., asking for Berlusconi’s resignation and respect for the Italian constitution, this one being breached by Cirami law, at least according to the protesters. The movement behind this series of demonstrations, called “Girotondi” (the Italian equivalent of ring-a-ring-o’roses), aggregates the ex-voters of Forza Italia\(^9\) and moderates for the first time (Willan, 2002). On top of the effort made by parties, unions, and associations in organizing the protest, we notice here a consistent use of web and mobile technologies for the first time. In one of his emails, Flores D’Arcais invited the addressees to:

\(^7\) Original text: “Smettiamo di comprare i giornali di Berlusconi e di fare la spesa nei suoi supermercati. Ritiriamo la pubblicità dalle sue riviste e dalle sue televisioni. Boicottiamo le sue reti tv”.

\(^8\) The interview was broadcast by the TV show “Servizio Pubblico” on the 10th January, 2013.

\(^9\) Forza Italia (“Go Italy”), an expression which borrows heavily from football, is the name of the political party founded by Berlusconi in 1994. In 2009, Forza Italia dissolved into Il Popolo delle Liberta’, (“People of Freedom”), a new political party led by the Milanese tycoon.
work together with the purpose of bringing to Rome tens of thousands of people even from the most remote places of Italy through using phones, emails, texts, and any form of personal ‘tam tam’ communication necessary to the success of the demonstration (Flores D’Arcais, quoted in Quaranta, 2006: 53-54).

Similarly influential was the contribution from the website www.manipulite.it\textsuperscript{10} which co-operated with the organization of ‘Legality Day’, an event organized by the girotondi, which took place in Milan in February and gathered forty thousand people, thanks also to the newsletters of the site.

In 2003, Berlusconi was, although only indirectly, the target of the biggest demonstration in Italian history, that took place in Rome on February 15th, against the war in Iraq. Three million protesters took to the streets of the Italian capital, responding to the appeal of the World Social Forum (Albertazzi & Rothenberg, 2006). The event is recorded as the biggest anti-war rally in history and Berlusconi was one of the main targets of the protest for his allegiance to the then American President G.W. Bush. The demonstration was part of a global protest which saw rallies taking place in other cities, such as Madrid and London. In terms of organization and mobilization, emails and websites helped the protest to reach a global scale (Bennet et al., 2008).

Although supported consistently by unions, another spontaneous wave of anti-Berlusconi protests took place in the period October-December, 2008, when thousands of students constituted the movement commonly called “L’Onda” (The Wave”), to protest against the university and research cuts that were included in the reform of the education system that was carried out by Berlusconi’s Minister of Education, Maria Stella Gelmini (Raparelli, 2009). Just one year afterwards, the turmoil created by “L’Onda” involved more layers of Italian civil society and favoured the preconditions for the rise of the Popolo Viola.

\textsuperscript{10} www.manipulite.it was a website created by the academic and politician Giovanni Pecora, opened to celebrate ‘Mani Pulite’ (in English ‘clean hands’), the series of anti-corruption judiciary inquiries which took place in the 1990s and led to the end of the so-called First Republic, intended as the period starting with the end of the Second World War and characterized in Italy by political antagonism between the Christian-Democrats, the Socialist Party, and the Communist Party.
Two relevant factors distinguish these previous forms of protest from the purple movement: firstly, the constant and often direct support that unions and left-wing parties provided to them. Secondly, the absence of social technologies as mobilizing platforms. These factors constitute essential dimensions within this research: as a matter of fact, the support, or, sometimes, the inerence of institutional actors, can influence both organizational patterns and the collective identity of a social movement; moreover, as we will see later, the usage of social network media provides new opportunities but also new threats to activism. The following chapter will review extensively the academic debate regarding the relationship between digital technologies and society, with a specific focus on social media. Furthermore, it will conceptualise the theoretical framework of this research.
Chapter Three – The Affordances of Social Network Media: a Critical Perspective

3.1 Introduction

Digital media has become a ubiquitous form of communication in the everyday life of citizens living in the world’s most advanced economies. Through multiple and different devices we seek, create, and share content; we cultivate relationships, from work-related acquaintances to more intimate friendships, even romantic relationships; online we express ourselves and develop different states of mind, from loneliness, stress, even rage. The ever-increasing relevance of media uses and practices has prompted a wide array of academics to analyse and assess the relationship between new technologies, new media, and society. What is the impact of such development on society? What are its positive and negative implications?

As Fuchs and Horfkirchner point out, the theoretical framework employed so far under the names of Internet studies, new media studies, and so on, hides a technologically deterministic understanding, since terms such as ‘Internet’ and ‘new media’ are technological concepts; hence they propose the term ‘information and communication technologies and society’ research (ICT&S) (Fuchs & Horfkirchner, 2006). ICT&S has been the object of study for more than two decades now and has touched various aspects and disciplines. Psychologists, sociologists, cultural and political theorists, still investigate the implications of the spreading of the Internet on society and on social change. Practically, all aspects of society can be scrutinized under the lens of ICT&S studies, from economics to more specific issues around identity and privacy.

I will start this chapter by arguing that concepts such as Social Media and Social Networking Sites (SNSs) hold analytical limitations for the case study that is analysed in this research. Social Media is a too general term which includes a range of platforms that differ significantly in terms of the features they offer to their users. A participatory news network, such as Indymedia, certainly portrays very different characteristics if compared to a platform such as Facebook; that said, they are both generally considered to be social media. Basing my argument on considerations
made by Meikle and Young (2012), I argue that SNSs is a reductive term considering how convergence has enabled Facebook to be a platform-agnostic tool, being both a website and an application for mobile phones and other platforms 11.

In order to overcome any form of technological determinism the concept of technological affordances (Gibson, 1979; Hutchby, 2001; Wellman, 2004) will be central to this thesis. Affordances are not to be intended as mere possibilities for action provided by the design of technology. Rather, affordances arise in the interaction between users and technological tools; thus, affordances result through the interaction between the capacities of the technology and the capacities, goals, and culture of the user. Any SNM has a distinctive selling point, so every platform in every context will produce a different mix of affordances.

The concept of affordances is at the basis of the critical theory of technology. Such an approach contemplates technology on two different layers: the critical theorist firstly decontextualizes the objects of experience, reducing them to their useful properties in order to identify affordances; secondly, she re-contextualizes the objects within their socio-political environment (Feenberg, 2004; 2005). “The primary level simplifies objects for incorporation into a device while the secondary level integrates the simplified objects to a natural and social environment” (Feenberg, 2004). For what concerns this study, it will, then, be necessary to identify the affordances provided by SNM and Facebook in particular, in terms of the creation of new relationships, group formation and the circulation of information. Afterwards, such affordances will be contextualized within the social environment in which protest takes place.

What is more, I will discuss issues concerning the political economy of SNM and society on micro-, macro-, and meso-levels. My aim is to add a layer to the academic literature which considers the problematic relationship between the values that drive the design of commercial SNM, such as Facebook, and the values of horizontality and deliberative democracy which characterize the anti-capitalist movements that have emerged in the last twenty years.

11 Websites can interact through the service “Facebook Platform”.

27
3.2 Social Network Media

In the early 2000s, following the bursting of the ‘dot-com bubble’, the web underwent a gradual and profound transformation, which sanctioned the passage of the Internet from a quasi-static entity to a platform for self-presentation, interaction, discussion and participation (Meikle, 2002). This passage, commonly described as the advent of Web 2.0, is described in corporate terms by Tim O’Reilly, who coined the expression, as:

a revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the internet as platform, and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new platform. Chief among those rules is this: build applications that harness network effects to get better the more people use them (O’Reilly, 2006).

The term ‘network effects’ is based on the principles of Metcalfe’s Law. This theorem affirms that “the value of a communication network increases proportionately to the square of the number of people that are connected to it” (Meikle & Young, 2012: 63). Any single communication device, be it a mobile telephone or a fax machine, is useless by itself if it is not connected to a network. The greater the number of nodes within the network, the greater the value of the whole network. Eventually the device moves from being useful to being necessary, as not being part of the network means exclusion from the flow of communication and the exchange of information. Metcalfe’s Law can be applied to explain efficiently both the commercialization of telephones in the early 20th century and the proliferation of Social Media in recent years.

Indeed, at least in the industrialized world, people are surrounded on a daily basis by forms of ubiquitous interaction through Social Media and Social Networking Sites (SNS) which provide us with an enormous amount of information and the opportunity to communicate at any time, both synchronously and asynchronously. It is quite common, not only among users, but also in the professional journalists’ and (so-called) media experts’ communities, to consider Social Media and Social Networking Sites as synonyms. Often, any platform which suggests characteristics of interactivity and participation is categorized as a social medium, without any
attention to its distinct peculiarities. After all, certain features certainly pertain to both categories. Actually, it would be more accurate to consider SNSs as a sub-category of Social Media.

Kaplan and Haenlein define Social Media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010: 60). It is possible to categorize six different types of Social Media: Collaborative Projects (e.g. Wikipedia); Blogs; Context Communities (e.g., YouTube); Social Networking Sites (e.g., Facebook); Virtual Game Worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft) and, finally, Virtual Social Worlds (e.g., Second Life) (ibid, 2010).

Figure 3.1. Classification of Social Media by social presence/media richness and self-presentation/self-disclosure (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010: 62)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-presentation/ Self-disclosure</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td></td>
<td>Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook)</td>
<td>Virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia)</td>
<td>Content communities (e.g., YouTube)</td>
<td>Virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Social Networking Sites are Internet-based applications which “enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles, and sending e-mails and instant messages between each other” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010: 63). Personal profiles contain information which is uploaded by its owners in the form of text, video, and audio. Profiles are typically complemented by walls where other users can share content. Users can send messages to each other, either through synchronous instant-messages, or asynchronous emails (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Moreover, through SNSs users are allowed to see the connections which are made by others within their personal network, promoting a sort of two-step flow of communication in which the information shared can go beyond the realm of personal connections.
The framework adopted by Kaplan and Haenlein utilises two dimensions in order to categorize social media: the first is formed by social presence and media richness (ibid, 2010). Social presence is defined “as the acoustic, visual, and physical contact that can be achieved” (ibid: 61) between the subjects involved in the communication process (Short et al., 1976). Intimacy (either interpersonal or mediated) and the immediacy of the medium (synchronous or asynchronous) affect social presence. “The higher the social presence, the larger the social influence that the communication partners have on each other’s behavior” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010: 61). Media richness consists of the amount of information that can be exchanged in a given time. According to Daft and Lengel any form of communication aims to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty as much as possible (Daft & Lengel, 1986). The richer the medium, the less uncertain and ambiguous communication will be (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Within this framework, SNSs are characterized by medium levels of social presence and media richness. That said, new features, such as the integration with Skype on Facebook introduced in 2011, considerably enrich the density of interaction on SNSs.

The second dimension regards levels of self-representation and self-disclosure. Goffman highlights issues of self-reward in communication processes. Any social interaction is influenced by the aspiration to govern impressions of the self by others (Goffman, 1959). Users present themselves online through creating blogs, webpages or profiles on SNSs. An important step in this process is constituted by self-disclosure, intended as “the conscious or unconscious revelation of personal information (e.g., thoughts, feelings, likes, dislikes) that is consistent with the image one would like to give” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010: 62). SNSs hold high levels of self-representation and self-disclosure, opening serious questions about the relationships between the use of social media and privacy (Boyd, 2008; Doctorow, 2012).

Following Meikle and Young (2012), I challenge the denomination ‘Social Networking Site’ in favour of the more accurate ‘Social Network Medium’ (SNM) (ibid: 60). There are two good reasons for doing this. Firstly, SNSs are now dispersed on the web through external applications, such as Facebook Connect and Facebook
Comments, which make interaction possible on a wide range of websites. Secondly, SNSs no longer rely solely on the World Wide Web. Now, the spreading of mobile technologies, such as the Android and Apple operating systems and the concurrent increase in bandwidth have enabled SNSs to become more pervasive and ubiquitous (Anderson & Wolff, 2010). In other words, such applications become platform-agnostic and are accessible through multiple devices, through the concomitant process of the convergence of content and the divergence of hardware. Jenkins describes as the “black box fallacy” the principle behind the proliferation of different devices, whereby instead of accessing all media by a single omnipotent device, users prefer different means (Jenkins, 2006). It did not take long for SNSs’ users to prefer technologies ‘on the move’ to ‘traditional’ computers. In February, 2013, Mark Zuckerberg announced that mobile users constitute 57 per cent of the Facebook population, with 680 million individuals now choosing their smart-phones and tablets to express themselves and communicate through the US-based platform (data Facebook, 2013).

The role of Social Network Media is both celebrated and criticized in terms of its relationship to society and its impact on social change. In order to escape a much polarized and fruitless debate that verges on technological determinism, I will rely on the concept of “technological affordances” (Gibson, 1979; Hutchby, 2001; Wellman, 2003).

### 3.3 Technological Affordances

Affordances constitute an interchange between the essential properties of technologies and the use that is made of them, intended as the users’ interpretation of the possibilities that such technologies offer for action (Hutchby, 2001: 447). The adoption of affordances as an analytical tool is becoming widely adopted in today’s ICT&S literature. As Livingstone has pointed out, the first decade of the 2000s witnessed a shift in terms of analysis from strong determinism’s language of impact, effect and transformation, positioning the technology as outside society and impacting upon it, to soft determinism's language of reconfiguring, establishing, affording, positioning the technology as precisely part of
society, and, by encoding its meanings and practices, in turn contributing to it (Livingstone, 2005: 23).

Such an approach constitutes a step forward in respect of the “rampant punditry” that is typical of the cyber-utopian and cyber-pessimistic views that are typical of the first Internet studies (Wellman, 2004). The complex and variegated nature of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) is at the core of soft determinism. As Wellman remarks:

the Internet is not a one-dimensional technology. Rather, it merges several media into one medium. Nor is it static. A set of current and imminent changes creates possibilities, ‘social affordances’, for how the Internet can influence everyday life (Wellman et al., 2003, online).

The adoption of an approach based on affordances compels the researcher to abandon a generalist view of SNM and to take into consideration the different possibilities that each platform provides. What is more, the new forms of action that technological innovation offers are often unexpected.

Different technologies make different kinds of human action and interaction easier or harder to perform. All other things being equal, things that are easier to do are more likely to be done, and things that are harder to do are less likely to be done. All other things are never equal. That is why technological determinism in the strict sense—if you have technology “t,” you should expect social structure or relation “s” to emerge—is false. (…) Neither deterministic nor wholly malleable, technology sets some parameters of individual and social action. It can make some actions, relationships, organizations, and institutions easier to pursue, and others harder. (…) However, within the realm of the feasible—uses not rendered impossible by the adoption or rejection of a technology—different patterns of adoption and use can result in very different social relations that emerge around a technology (Benkler, 2006: 17-18).

It is thus essential to keep at bay reductive accounts of the relationship between ICTs and society and the future implications of such relationships, as technology could develop different and unexpected patterns. Whether we are entering an Orwellian future or whether a more just and free society will arise, as forecast by authors such as Levy (1997), “is a choice we face as a society. The way we develop will, in significant measure, depend on choices we make in the next decade or so” (Benkler, 2006: 18). What is more, as Winston points out:
it is, of course, always possible that some technological development will have profoundly disturbing social effects, despite the fact, over time, most such technologies exhibit far less radical potential (Winston, 1998: 321).

There was a similar debate in regard to television and radio, with the division, as Umberto Eco theorized, being between the negative views of ‘apocalyptic’ intellectuals and the more encouraging interpretations of ‘integrated’ thinkers. Apocalyptic intellectuals criticized mass communication, defining it essentially as a paternalistic anti-culture which is subject to commercial logics and promotes conformism. Integrated views considered the positive aspects of mass communication, specifically, innovation in language and action in terms of the distribution of information and awareness (Eco, 1964). The proliferation of SNM has provided new sap for polarization within academic discourse which may result in a new technologically deterministic impasse. A critical approach will instead stress attention to technology as an agent that is driven by values which are rooted within society, rather than outside of it.

3.4 Critical Theory of Technology

Drawing upon the philosophy of technology and constructivism alongside principles typical of political economy approaches, the critical theory of technology considers technology at different levels:

a primary level at which natural objects and people are decontextualized to identify affordances, complemented by a secondary level of re-contextualization in natural, technical and social environments (Feenberg, 2005: 47).

Technology is not distinct from society but is an integral part of society (Williams, 1961; Feenberg, 1991; Winston, 1998; Fuchs, 2011; see also Braudel, 1982). Technologies are built in a social milieu with a design that is favourable to the power holders in society (Feenberg, 1991; 2005). The lowest common denominator in such a design process is called a technical code. A technical code is “the realization of an interest or ideology in a technically coherent solution to a problem” (Feenberg, 2005: 52) and represents the link between the technical and social conditions of such a problem. The presence of interests and the ideologies behind the design of
technology do not necessarily reduce its efficiency, but skew its accomplishment in favour of a social goal. Here, the technical code acts as a criterion that chooses among different possible designs in order to reach that social objective. Feenberg goes back to the industrialization period to provide an exemplary case of this process, describing how the de-qualification of labour was the imposed requirement of technological innovation, rather than the preservation and improvement of workers’ conditions (Feenberg, 1991; 2005). In fact, while technology could have been designed in order to help humans produce more efficiently, instead it was implemented in order to act as a substitute, supplanting human labour in order to cut production expenses, in spite of the social costs involved. As Feenberg states:

the degradation of labor, education and the environment is rooted not in technology per se but in the antidemocratic values that govern technological development (Feenberg, 1991: 3).

The critical theory of technology serves as an excellent tool with which to examine the relationship between society and technology, because it emphasizes the human component of technology. Since the process of establishing a technical code is the result of human decisions, technology is open to alternative designs that promote democratic process instead of hampering it. The scope of this project is to apply this argument to contemporary Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) on SNM. Whereas much of the contemporary literature focuses on the micro- and macro-level issues relating to the exploitation of users’ creativity by large corporations, governments’ surveillance and control, this thesis aims to point out the dialectical relationship between society and technology of Social Movement Organizations and protest at a meso-level.

As will be explained in detail later in this thesis, the design of a platform such as Facebook, is built on specific commercial interests and this has certain negative consequences for the use made of it by organizations and individual users in terms of seeking social change. As noted in the introduction, the political economy of SNM has an impact which goes beyond the mere exploitation of creativity, surveillance, and control. While personal networks on Facebook are deployed along horizontal mechanisms of interaction, Facebook pages become increasingly vertical in order to
promote top-down communication which is more beneficial to the commercial interests of the page owners. These dynamics imply specific affordances. Such affordances impact on mobilization, collective identity building processes, and even on the same structure of those Social Movement Organizations (SMOs) which adopt Facebook as their main tool for organizing and networking. Here, I do not intend to consider commercial interests as the unique drivers in the shaping of design, but rather to find a balanced view which considers the decisional power of all the actors involved in such discourse. After all, as I will explain in this chapter, in the past non-commercial actors had already managed to implement changes in code and design, overcoming the apparently unstoppable power of corporate interests. The future leaves room for non-profit actors in the power relationships that regulate, design, and govern the Internet. The bottom line, as conceptualized by Feenberg in 2001, is still valid nowadays:

The utopian and dystopian visions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were attempts to understand the fate of humanity in a radically new kind of society in which most social relations are technically mediated. The hope that such mediation would enrich humanity while sparing human beings themselves was disappointed. The extension of technical control overtakes the controllers beyond a point we have long since reached. But the dystopians did not anticipate that once inside the machine, human beings would gain new powers they would use to change the system that dominates them. We can observe the faint beginnings of such a politics of technology today. How far it will be able to develop is less a matter for prediction than for practice (Feenberg, 2001: 142).

The scope of this thesis is thus to scrutinize such dialectical development, stressing attention on the interplay between political economy, design, and affordances of technology, within social and political discourse.

### 3.5 Facebook and its Affordances

Mark Zuckerberg, Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes launched Facebook in February, 2004. Initially intended to connect Harvard students with each other, Facebook soon extended its reach to the whole of the Internet community. On Facebook, users can build a profile, where they can express their tastes in music, books, movies and television shows. Through ‘friendships’,
membership of groups, and ‘likes’ to pages, they can also share pictures, videos, and text. Most of all, they can discuss and communicate with an ever-growing community that in January, 2013, amounted to more than 1.06 billion active users around the world, 50% of whom logged in every day (Facebook Statistics, 2013). Facebook is the most popular SNM, available in 70 different languages, with more than 30 billion pieces of content (web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photo albums, etc.) shared each month. As time goes by, the average Facebook user becomes more and more prolific. In September, 2011, each user created 90 pieces of content each month, against 70 in July, 2010 (Facebook Statistics, 2012).

Facebook is not the first platform to appear in the Web 2.0 galaxy. Platforms such as SixDegrees, Friends Reunited, Friendster, and Myspace emerged years before Facebook, but did not manage to equal the success and penetration that Facebook had amongst its users, at least in the Western world. It is in fact necessary to point out that different parts of the world tend to adopt different SNM. For example, the Google-owned Orkut is the major player in India and Brazil, while Vkontakte is the leader in Russia. That said, VKontakte has less than 330 million users, and Orkut barely 33 million users (data, 2013), far from the staggering numbers of Facebook users. Then, what are the reasons behind the success of Facebook? Facebook outsmarted its competitors thanks to three major factors: firstly, Facebook is free (“and always will be”, according to its homepage), while other platforms charge for a full service, according to a ‘freemium’ business model (Rappa, 2006); secondly, it presents a “simple and uncluttered” (Meikle & Young, 2012: 64) design, which makes it very efficient in terms of usability; thirdly, the commercialization of Facebook took place at a fortunate time, when in Western Countries the digital divide was shrinking and users were already familiar with the principles of sharing that are typical of SNM (ibid, 2012).

“Social media is collaborative and participatory by its very nature and it is defined by social interaction” (Bertot et al., 2010: 266). “Sharing” is at the basis of Facebook technology. In terms of affordances for its users, sharing has to be intended as being aimed at generating connectedness, “directing users to share information with other users through purposefully designed interfaces” (Van Dijck,
Connectedness is thus the first teleological principle of Facebook design. Within such a general framework, Facebook holds the possibility to enable a series of dynamics which promote connectedness, which mainly relate to the *creation and maintenance of new and pre-existing relationships, group formation and circulation of information* (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Shirky, 2008; Boyd, 2010). Such affordances are more pronounced in Facebook, while their potential is more nuanced in other SNM. According to Boyd and Ellison, most social platforms online “support the maintenance of pre-existing social networks, but others help strangers connect based on shared interests, political views, or activities” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007: 210). While initial research claimed the irrelevance of new ties in SNM (Acquisti & Gross, 2006), further analysis shows how SNM, such as Facebook, allow and promote the formation of both strong and weak ties (Valenzuela et al., 2009). Moreover, Clay Shirky highlights the potential of SNM platforms for group formation that are taking place at an exceptional speed: “as more people adopt simple social tools, and as those tools allow increasingly rapid communication, the speed of group actions also increases” (Shirky, 2008: 161). The obliteration of transaction costs and the creation of new ways of coordination pave the way to “an explosion of experiments with new groups and new kinds of groups” (ibid: 54).

Shirky’s assumption hides a technologically deterministic stance, as it implies a cause/effect connection between technology and society. The affordances of Facebook do not command users’ behaviour, but rather “configure the environment in a way that shapes participants’ engagement” (Boyd, 2010: 39). The properties and architecture of SNM are essential in understanding the social processes that characterize mobilization and collective identity building, but their analysis alone would provide a skewed account. An assessment of the social milieu where mobilization is taking place is then necessary as, often, behaviour does not necessarily follow the patterns that are imposed by technological design itself.

In terms of the creation and circulation of information, Facebook and SNM provide four main social affordances that are based on the principle of openness, namely *Persistence, Replicability, Scalability* and *Searchability* (ibid, 2010). Persistence relates to the recording and archiving of any online material. As a Latin
The proverb goes, *verba volant, scripta manent*12. The problem is that, after time, the meaning of text can be decontextualized, easily leading to controversies and confusion. Replicability of digital content makes content duplicable and alterable. Circulation of content makes it difficult to distinguish the original content from its altered versions. Scalability is the potential for any content to go ‘viral’, reach a large audience and to attract high levels of visibility. However, such a process is often unpredictable, often going beyond the purpose of the information producer. It is rare for social issues to gain more visibility than pop music videos or pet images. Finally, searchability makes every user traceable online. Every step taken online leaves a trail (ibid, 2010).

The Timeline feature and other Facebook-related services, such as www.archivedbook.com, offer users the chance to retrieve information which was published even years before, thanks to sophisticated optimized search tools. Persistence and searchability promote transparency of information, as even after some time, it is always possible to retrieve content. Consequently, avoiding accountability on Facebook is not an easy task. Moreover, replicability and scalability have potential strengths in terms of empowerment (Bertot et al., 2010). Facebook provides a voice for the unvoiced, allowing anyone with an Internet connection to potentially broadcast information. In order for information to be replicable, scalable, and searchable, it has to be clear, simple, and memorable. The word meme was first introduced by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (Dawkins, 1976). Dawkins defines a meme as

- a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation (...) Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain (Dawkins, 1976: 206).

12 “Spoken words fly away, written words remain”
SNM enable the potentially global reach of memes. Users have the possibility to create graphically captivating images including simple text. Memes can spread instantaneously through social platforms (Boyd, 2012). The problem with memes is that such elementary units of information can hardly hold meaningful layers of information. As Atran argues, “the most memorable and transmissible ideas are those most congenial to people's evolved, modular habits of mind” (Atran, 2001: 374).

Interaction on Facebook takes place through a series of different features such as profiles, groups, chats, pages, and events. Each feature provides different affordances that complicate the theorization of Facebook. While certain features promote interpersonal communication, others resemble the more traditional broadcast model.

Profiles are characterized by stress on exclusivity and individuality. This feature enables one-to-one, one-to-few, and one-to-many communication flows. Any user on Facebook is connected to a specific and unique information flow according to the users who are part of their network. What is more, they are able to broadcast messages beyond their personal network. This affordance is portrayed as “mass-self communication” by Castells (2009: 8). Such a process involves mass-communication as users are allowed by SNM to generate a message which can potentially reach people on a global scale. Simultaneously, it is self-communication, because it is self-generated, self-directed, and self-selected (ibid, 2009: 55). In other words, the message is created by the individual, who defines the potential audience which, in turn, has the chance to retrieve and amplify the message (ibid, 2009). The concept of mass self-communication is far from unproblematic, as it seems to imply a uniformity of messages in terms of scope. As Meikle and Young argue, certain messages are framed with a specific receiver in mind and thus they do not necessarily aim at reaching scalability, whilst others are “intended for whoever comes across them” (Meikle & Young, 2012: 68). Interaction on SNM is thus multifarious and hardly generalizable. Rather than creating new forms of communication, it generates a co-existence of personal and broadcast communication (ibid, 2012). Moreover, Castells’ use of the term ‘mass self-
communication’ is devoid of connotations, since terms such as autonomy are not self-explanatory and may be interpreted in various different ways (Fuchs, forthcoming). Certainly, as we will see later, communication flows on Facebook are not autonomous of capital.

Facebook groups behave as online communities. Before the advent of SNSs, online participation took place mainly in communities characterized by shared interests and inclusivity (Boyd, 2006). In fact, within a specific online community, every user will have access to the same information and the same interface, which guarantees equal access to information for everyone. Groups are among the first features launched by Facebook. Intended to constitute a space of aggregation for small and medium communities, groups can be open, closed, or secret. Content in open groups is public and available to everyone; in closed groups, it is available only to members; secret groups are unlisted and are visible only to users who have accepted an invitation to become members. Groups offer affordances for horizontal communication and reach, as any post in any group will be provided with the same visibility amongst its members, and because any post will be notified to its members (unless they choose to opt out).

Personal interaction is also peculiar to the chat feature, which was introduced in April, 2008. Users on Facebook can send and receive instant messages, either inside their network of friendships or inside a group. In July, 2011, Facebook implemented a video-chat integration with Skype. One month later, Facebook Messenger, the mobile version of the chat feature, also enabled users to interact from their smartphones. Facebook chat offers affordances for one-to-one and group synchronous communication.

Described as “tools for your business, brand or organization”, pages were introduced in November 2007. Pages are similar to individual profiles, however they are tailored for advertising, thanks to customization, tabs, and additional functionalities. In fact, pages resemble a mere one-to-many flow of communication. Any new information uploaded by page owners, be it a status update, picture, or
video, is visible to their subscribers, called ‘fans’, or ‘likers’, to use the Facebook jargon. While personal profiles and groups have a limit of 5,000 connections, no maximum is set for pages, offering thus a huge potential audience to page owners. Furthermore, the ‘insights’ tool offers analytics on the usage of the page. In other words, page administrators can access basic characteristics of their fan-base and see how they use the page. Facebook pages are structured upon the classical broadcast model, with some variations. While the traditional broadcast model, defined as “mediated quasi-interaction” (Thompson, 1995), describes a one-way flow of information with no possibility of feedback, the communication model of Facebook pages includes some space for mediated interaction through comments and post uploads. As we will see later, during the three years period 2009-2011 Facebook pages’ design changed considerably, significantly influencing the affordances for mediated interaction.

The affordances provided by Facebook and SNM carry implications on the micro-, macro- and a meso-levels. I will summarize these implications here in spite of their numerous overlaps. On a micro-level, they may promote social convergence, creating invisible audiences, a collapse of contexts, and the blurring of private and public (Boyd, 2006; 2010). In real life, the architecture of the environment makes audiences discernible. On SNM it is very hard to say who is listening; messages which are valid in a certain context may be misinterpreted by an unexpected audience, who may decontextualize their meaning. Context thus collapses and makes it difficult for a user to handle different contexts simultaneously. Eventually, the grey zone between the private sphere and the public context collapses along with privacy (Boyd, 2008; 2010). The fact that the individual contribution of content is searchable opens Facebook communication to risks that involve society as a whole in terms of surveillance and control. On a macro-level, Facebook affordances promote the exploitation of human creativity by capital, degrading creativity to free-labour

---

13 Until April 2010 any user could ‘become a fan’ of a page; afterwards, users had the option to ‘like’ the page.
14 “News Feed — the center column of your home page — is a constantly updating list of stories from people and Pages that you follow on Facebook” (from Facebook Help Centre, available at https://www.facebook.com/help/?page=132070650202524, last accessed 7th June, 2012). Newsfeed works on algorithms that aim to visualise only the news that is most relevant to and popular with the user, according to her behavioural history.
(Fuchs, 2008; 2011; Fenton & Barassi, 2011; Curran et al., 2012). Moreover, they encourage a minimalist conception of participation (Carpentier & de Cleen, 2008) and open individual and groups’ information to control by authorities (Morozov, 2009b; MacKinnon, 2012).

On a meso-level, or, in other words, in relation to the concerns of organizations and communities, we find similar issues. Firstly, the openness of SNM communication flows facilitates control by authoritarian regimes over oppositional groups. For example, during the Green Revolution in 2009, the openness of Twitter allowed the Iranian security apparatus to identify and hunt down the protestors. It is not preposterous to say that some protestors lost their lives because of Twitter (Burns & Eltham, 2009). As Morozov noted:

Tehran - caught up now in a bloodcurdling Stalinist show trial - had successfully deflected the Twitter threat, and the revolutionary spirit had been whittled down. What seemed like Leipzig in 1989 was beginning to resemble Beijing of the same year (Morozov, 2009b: 11).

Secondly, the corporate character of SNM marginalizes content that is shared by alternative media:

As in old media, the alternative voices can only be found if you know where to look and it requires substantial stamina and cultural capital to access this confusing multitude of communicators (Fenton, 2008: 45).

Thirdly, in encouraging individualism and multiplicity, the design of SNM facilitates the fragmentation of organizations. Drawing on Castells (1996), Fenton points out how

Non-hierarchical forms of disorganization that make decisions on the basis of collective consensus become harder to achieve, the larger and more disparate the collective (Fenton, 2008: 45).

### 3.6 The Political Economy of SNM and Facebook

A strand of scholars, drawing from an approach which is more focused on the political economy of SNM, points the finger at the corporate manipulation of human interaction through a process of the dispossession of personal users’ data. Such an
approach emphasises issues of exploitation, whereby users are providers of unpaid immaterial labor and SNM are the sites where creativity is boxed and control is exercised (Andrejevic, 2007; Lessig, 2006; Fuchs, 2008, 2011; Sandoval & Fuchs, 2009; Fenton & Barassi, 2011; Curran et al., 2012). The argument made by Fenton and Barassi deserves to be quoted at length here:

Digital citizens are far from being autonomous from capital. On the majority of platforms that they visit, their personal data and online behavior is stored and assessed to generate profit by targeted advertising. The users who Google data, upload or watch videos on YouTube, upload or browse personal images on Flickr, or accumulate friends with whom they exchange content or communicate online via social networking platforms such as MySpace or Facebook, constitute an audience-turned-commodity that is sold to advertisers. (Fenton and Barassi, 2011: 192)

There are three broad ways to exercise corporate surveillance over Internet users. One way is implemented through the continuous monitoring of traffic and data over networks such as Google, where advanced software records websites’ analytics in order to calculate where users go and what actions they take. A second way involves the use of ‘cookies’, strings of code which record every activity undertaken by a specific IP on a website (Curran, 2012). Cookies are extensively used for re-targeting purposes. In other words, through the use of cookies, users are shown personalized advertisements concerning those products or services that they have browsed without concluding a transaction (Lambrecht & Tucker, 2011). A third way entails the complex mix of strategies that are implemented by Facebook in order to monetize users’ traffic. While connectedness is the basis of Facebook affordances, connectivity is the leading principle behind the Facebook business model. In Van Dijck’s formulation, connectivity regards the sharing of users’ data between Facebook and third parties (Van Dijck, 2013). Connectivity takes place through three coding features that have been designed by Facebook developers, namely Beacon (now disabled after a fierce struggle focusing on privacy issues), Open Graph, and the Like Button (ibid, 2013). The common purpose of the three features consists in the aggregation and processing of users’ data and their sharing with third parties, such as businesses and advertisers. These features operate on top of the more traditional display advertising that allows businesses to target market
segments on Facebook with extreme precision. In fact, whereas with television advertising it is not possible to know exactly who is going to be exposed to the commercial message, with Facebook advertising, companies know in advance the peculiar characteristics of the receiver, such as their gender, provenance, and even purchasing habits. The more users share personal information, the better Facebook can implement profiling and sell such profiles to marketers.

The difference between the audience commodity on traditional mass media and on the Internet is that on the Internet the users are also content producers (...) We are excessively and ever more deeply commodified as so much more of our daily habits and rituals take an informational technology form. During much of the time that users spend online, they produce profit for large corporations such as Google, News Corporation (which owns MySpace), or Yahoo! (which owns Flickr). Advertisements on the Internet are frequently personalized, which is made possible by the surveillance of, storing of, and assessing of user activities and user data with the help of computers and databases (Andrejevic, 2004, 2005). The audience turned producer does not, in this context, signify a democratization of the media towards a truly participatory system. It certainly does not confer autonomy from capital, but rather the profound and sub-cybernetic commodification of online human creativity. (Fenton and Barassi, 2011: 192)

When users become creators, marketing gets a fifth “P”, offering capitalism a new weapon. While marketing strategies were traditionally based on Product, Place, Promotion and Price, now SNSs deliver a fifth P to capitalism: People. Users provide corporate interests with resources, both in terms of personal information to be sold to marketers and of immaterial labour to exploit (Fuchs, 2009). As a popular ‘meme’, which ironically spread on Facebook, said, ‘If you’re not paying for the product, you are the product’. Despite its plain reductionism, this slogan summarizes the contradictory nature of the democratic potential of SNM.

Moreover, a ‘power law distribution’ typifies communication on SNM (Benkler, 2006; Shirky, 2010). Firstly, issues of access and the digital divide still constitute the limit of the interactive potential of SNM.

While the Internet may increase the circle of participants in the public sphere, access to its tools is skewed in favour of those who already are well-off in society-in terms of wealth, race and skills (Benkler, 2006: 236).
Fenton and Barassi give attention to the importance of “being in the media” in order to transmit a message efficiently. “The more powerful and influential individuals are, the better placed they are to get their message across” (Fenton & Barassi, 2011: 193). As Shirky points out, only 2 per cent of Wikipedia users ever contribute material (Shirky, 2010). Similarly, according to a study conducted by Yahoo! Research and Cornell University, a small elite of 20 thousand users, amounting to less than 0.05 per cent of the whole Twitter population, attracts half of all attention within the popular SNM (Wu et al., 2011). Furthermore, in 2008, 90% of the content shared on Twitter came from only 10 per cent of the users (Piskorski et al., 2010). Although the Internet is an open network, most of the traffic is concentrated in a few sites, replicating the mass-media model. Ownership is in the hands of only a few subjects, as discovered in a study carried out by Noam (2003). A few years after Noam’s research, the situation is far from improved. At the end of 2010, more than half of the global online advertising market was in the hands of only three subjects. In fact, according to Strategy Analytics, Google alone owned 43% of the global market, Yahoo 8.7%, and Microsoft 3.2% (Strategy Analytics, 2010). This phenomenon, on a long-term basis, could have a disruptive impact on the neutrality of the Internet.

As Benkler states, “under oligopolistic conditions, there is a threat that the network will become too expensive to be neutral as among market and non-market production” (Benkler, 2006: 240). The end of the Internet’s neutrality could happen through collusion between competitors. Internet providers could block applications or content from a rival thus harming competition. Similarly, companies could hinder the activity of a third competitor, damaging consumers. The result would consist of making applications more expensive, reducing the range of available applications, and, finally, depressing innovation (Laxton, 2006). According to Laxton, slim but efficient antitrust laws and a competitive marketplace are vital safeguards against these risks (ibid, 2006). A non-neutral Internet would considerably hamper users’ autonomy and the mobilizing potential of social movements, especially because the low cost of tools is one of the main factors that has enabled protests a global range.

Moreover, it is unclear whether the many-to-many communication models that are typical of SNM can replicate the same power that the one-to-many model of
radio and television had in the 20th century, and that they still possess now in terms of the Fourth Estate as watchdogs of democracy. Similarly, on the Net, grassroots communication cannot really replace economically and politically powerful media as watchdogs of democracy. Only well-funded actors can have the power to avoid scrutiny and control by governments (Benkler, 2006). This happens also because of the nature of grassroots communication in SNM. These forms of communication constitute a double-faceted phenomenon: in fact, if, on the one hand, they expand the democratic potential of the Internet, enabling individual users to produce and share information, on the other, they create serious issues with regard to the reliability and strength of the same information. According to Schiller, as new media technologies advance, the boundaries between news, advertising and entertainment falter (Schiller, 1999). For McNair:

> technology has contributed not just to the globalization of news culture, but the dissolution of boundaries between truth and lies which journalists have jealously guarded since the seventeenth century (McNair, 2006: 11).

Keen warns against the marginalization of journalists, as irreplaceable cultural gatekeepers, being replaced by “monkeys with typewriters” (Keen, 2007). SNM risk acting as the bullhorns of misleading information. As Garrett underlines:

> if individuals, because of the ease with which they can disseminate information online, exert less effort to vet information before sharing it with others, the quality of social movement information online could decline (Garrett, 2006: 10).

In spite of the exaggerated fears claimed by Keen (2007), the concerns regarding inaccuracy of online information invite further reflections in favour of a more informed and responsible use of SNM by individuals (Fenton, 2009).

### 3.7 Conclusion

While protest groups in the early days of the Internet commercialization were relying mostly on non-market platforms, the most recent movements such as the uprising in Tunisia and Egypt, the Occupy Wall Street, and the Spanish Indignados, largely relied on commercial SNM such as Facebook and Twitter. Non-market platforms provide a certain freedom in terms of manipulating code in order
to improve and personalize certain features, whilst corporate platforms rely on obscure coding systems which do not allow any manipulation by their users.

Organizations and social movements rely on SNM for what concerns their primary issues, organization, coordination, recruiting, and mobilization. In order to do so they operate within a technical code which is driven mainly by commercial interests. In fact, platforms such as Facebook encourage connectedness in order to promote the exchange of information among users, and connectivity in order to exploit users’ creativity turning users into free labour, creativity into commodity, and information into a corporate asset. As the reader will notice in the findings, these issues became even more important when Facebook decided to launch its initial public offering, which took place on 18th May 2012. In order to satisfy the needs of stockholders, Facebook focused its design upgrades with the objective of increasing revenues in mind. Such a move increased the unbalance between the promotion of connectedness and the need to maximize connectivity, pitting the needs of its users against the needs of its stockholders.

For example, Facebook pages became the main tool of communication for social movements, for its affordances promoting one-to-many communication towards large audience. That said, Facebook pages are designed in order to be powerful marketing tools for brands and businesses. They are characterized by proprietary management and vertical flows of communication. Do such characteristics influence those movements that adopt them as tools for mobilization?

On the simplest level, the aim of this research is to start from the academic debate around the affordances provided by such platform in order to establish a relationship between SNM design and Social Movement Organizations. More specifically, the purpose is to add new layers to the theoretical debate about issues of capitalist domination of information flows. The issues elaborated by relevant literature in terms of exploitation and commodification are essential but alone do not explain the complex relationship between protest and technology.
The leftist social movements which emerged in the last twenty years hold values of horizontality, freedom of speech, and deliberative democracy. When such movements adopt corporate SNM as their main mobilizing structures their constituent values clash against the capitalist ideology and commercial aims which shape the technical code of SNM such as Facebook.

A deeper and more specific investigation will focus on mobilization processes, collective identity, organization processes, and lifecycle of social movements. The next chapter will conceptualize such concepts according to relevant literature in the field of social movement theory. The Fifth chapter will discuss how these concepts fit within the discourse of ICT&S studies.
Chapter Four – Social Movement Theory

4.1 Introduction

In spite of protest action being an essential driver of progress in history, academic accounts of social movements gained relevance only in the 1950s, paving the way for a plethora of studies, different in their academic approach, and the cultural and social context on which they focus. The academic debate initially focused on issues of collective behaviour, but shifted in the early 1960s towards collective action and social movement organizations. “(M)echanisms of mobilisation and opportunities to seek redress” (McAdam & Scott, 2005: 6) replaced issues of irrational behaviour as object of analysis. Whereas the collective behaviour approach pointed its analytical lens at the psychological dimensions of protest, in terms of isolation and social exclusion, collective action perspectives started to consider political and economic motivations (ibid, 2005).

Emotions are dominant within the collective behaviour tradition: panic, hostile outburst, craze, shame, grief, disgust, and surprise all constitute the propulsive force behind more or less spontaneous forms of protest. Such approaches, although based on irrationality, proved unable to provide a deep understanding of movements such as Nazism in Germany, the student movement and other forms of protest that took place in the second half of the twentieth century (Smelser, 1963; Izard, 1977; Plutchik, 1962; Oberschall, 1973; Kenniston, 1968; referenced in Klandermans, 1984). What is more, they failed to analyse how rational economic and political grievances find expression through organized groups. Such issues were central to more recent collective action approaches. It was at this stage that different interrelated outlooks started monopolising the researchers’ approach to the mechanisms of protest: initially with the resource mobilization and political process perspectives; later, in the 1980s, new approaches such as new social movement theory emerged. In spite of numerous overlaps, these perspectives are different in some essential aspects, since they focus on different features of social movement activity.
4.2 Resource Mobilization, Political Process and New Social Movements

Excluding the initial accounts of collective behaviour, which are largely deemed obsolete by recent relevant literature, the Resource Mobilization, Political Process, and the New Social Movement traditions constitute the core of the traditional Social Movement Theory approaches.

The resource mobilization Theory (RMT) perspective focuses on structures and organizational processes. These aspects are, according to the supporters of this perspective, essential for the survival of social movements (Zald & McCarthy, 1987; McAdam & Scott, 2005). If a movement wishes to persist, the forms of organisation required are “leadership, administrative structure, incentives for participation, and a means for acquiring resources and support” (McAdam & Scott, 2005: 6). The emphasis of this approach thus lies in the rationally strategic issues of mobilization. As Della Porta and Diani affirm:

The capacity for mobilization depends on the material resources (work, money, concrete benefits, services) and/or nonmaterial resources (authority, moral engagement, faith, friendship) available to the group. These resources are distributed across multiple objectives according to a rational calculation of costs and benefits. Beyond the existence of tensions, mobilization derives from the way in which social movements are able to organise discontent, reduce the costs of action, utilize and create solidarity networks, share incentives among members, and achieve external consensus. The type and nature of the resources available explain the tactical choices made by movements and the consequences of collective action on the social and political system (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Edwards & McCarthy, 2004, cited in Della Porta & Diani, 2006: 15)

A parallel strand of thought focuses on the relationship between movements and the social systems surrounding them.

The central focus of political process theories is the relationship between institutional political actors and protest. In challenging a given political order, social movements interact with actors who enjoy a consolidated position in the polity (Della Porta & Diani, 2006: 16).

The political process theory (PPT) emphasises an external focus on political opportunities and an internal focus on mobilizing structures and framing processes as means to facilitate the creation of networks and the circulation of information within
these same networks that is necessary for collective action (Tilly, Tilly & Tilly, 1975; Tilly, 1978; McAdam, McCarthy & Zald, 1996; Garrett, 2006).

The concept of political opportunities, or political opportunity structures, derives from Structural Theory, and comes from the assumption that a social system contains attributes that can restrict or enhance the progress of collective action (McAdam, 1996). Political opportunity structures refer to the environment surrounding the action itself. These factors are exogenous to social movements and are initially interpreted by McAdam in a four-dimensional pattern: opportunities are, in fact, created by the relative openness of the political system, the solidity or fragmentation of alignments among elites, the presence of elite allies, and finally the propensity for repression by the state (McAdam, 1996; Garrett, 2006). These opportunities hold not only political characteristics, but also for economic and social features. This is why, henceforth, I will use the more general term opportunity structures.

In 2005, Della Porta and Tarrow pointed out the following dynamics as being the main opportunity structures for current social movements: the crisis of representative democracy; the disengagement from conventional forms of political participation; internationalization and globalization, and, finally, the rejection of secular governments in parts of the world and terrorism (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005). In the light of the economic collapse following the credit crunch in 2008, Clement added as a relevant fifth factor the structural crisis of capitalism (Clement, 2011). The specific opportunity structures relative to the case study in this research have been illustrated already in Chapter Two.

The theoretical paradigms of RMT and PPT still proved inadequate in explaining the forms of social conflict that emerged in the late 1960s, such as “Mai 68” in France, the “Hot Autumn” in Italy the following year, and the anti-war movements in the United States of America (Melucci, 1994, 1996; Della Porta & Diani, 2006). According to McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, resource mobilization accounts overestimated the role played by rationally deliberated strategy, overlooking “contingency, emotionality, plasticity, and interactive character of
movement politics” (MacAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001: 15). Similarly, political process theorists were often accused of having downplayed social-psychological and cultural issues (ibid, 2001: 16). While traditional social movements were focusing the objective of protest around class issues, the new social movements emerging in the Western world were shifting towards principles of freedom and identity. From the LGBT movement to the students’ marches in Paris and Rome, new social movements have been strongly characterized by an orientation towards minorities. The whole society seemed to have become:

non-social, where cultural categories replace social categories, and here each person’s relations with herself are as important as mastering the world used to be (Touraine, 2007: 3).

This shift is seen as a consequence of the passage from an industrial to a post-industrial society, where non-materialistic values, such as human rights and self-expression, were drawn up alongside materialistic values, such as economic and physical safety (Inglehart, 1977). Promoters of new social movement theory thus give priority to the cultural and identity-related aspects of protests, rather than to the economic and political ones. As Pichardo states, “much of the new social movements discourse can be said to be a direct reaction to the perceived deficiencies of Marxism” (Pichardo, 1997: 412). Through the contribution of new social movement theorists, literature about “framing processes that affect the interpretive schema movement participants construct as they make sense of their social world” (Hunt, Benford, & Snow, 1994: 185), and about “personal and collective identities movement actors construct in their everyday accomplishment of collective action” (ibid, 1994: 185) has flourished.

With resource mobilization and political process theorists who are based in the United States focusing on strategic issues, and new social movement intellectuals in France stressing identity themes, it would be tempting to draw a line between ‘American’ and ‘European’ approaches (Cohen, 1985). That said, it would be of no use to over-emphasise the distinction between these traditions as, since the 1990s, most scholars have embraced a common agenda, differing only in the relative prominence given to different factors in that spectrum of concepts.
4.3 Networks of Networks: Defining Social Movements

Current literature, as Diani noted, considers the word ‘movement’ “as a largely denotational term that is used to identify phenomena which could be - and indeed frequently are - equally referred to with cognate terms such as ‘protest activity’, ‘coalition’, ‘sect’, ‘interest group’, ‘voluntary action’, etc.” (Diani, 2001: 3). RMT analyses any form of collective action using a conceptual apparatus that “could apply to any organization trying to mobilize participation and other resources on behalf of any collective goal” (ibid, 2001: 3). Such an approach could thus explain the dynamics which are pertinent to any actor, from political parties to lobbies, and that fail to provide a theoretical framework specific to social movements. In fact, “although extremely useful as a theory of collective action, as a theory of social movements, resource mobilisation is unspecified” (ibid, 2001: 3).

From a PPT perspective, Tilly defines a social movement as:

a sustained challenge to power holders in the name of a population living under the jurisdiction of those power holders by means of repeated public displays of that population’s worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment (Tilly, 1999: 257).

The PPT seems thus to focus more on varying forms of political contention than on actual social movements. In fact, the attention here is on the dialectics between protesters and other actors, rather than among the protesters themselves (Diani, 2001).

Although giving a full comprehensive definition of a social movement appears to be an impossible task, considering the immense bibliography and the very different ontological approaches undertaken by scholars, Diani, in his article The Concept of Social Movement (1992), attempts to identify a common thread between the analyses of collective action, including issues around identity, as proposed by new social movement theorists. According to Diani, social movements can be analysed through four dimensions:

1) networks of informal interaction, which can be either loose or tight;

2) shared beliefs and solidarity, adopted in order to “assign a common meaning to
specific collective events which otherwise could not be identified as part of a common process” (ibid, 1992: 9); 

3) collective action on conflictual issues, be it political or cultural, and, finally, 

4) action which displays largely outside the institutional sphere and the routine procedures of social life (ibid, 1992).

In emphasizing these aspects, Diani concludes that a social movement is 

a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organisations. The boundaries of a social movement network are defined by the specific collective identity shared by the actors involved in the interaction. Social movement actors are engaged in political and/or cultural conflicts, meant to promote or oppose social change either to systemic or non-systemic level (ibid, 1992: 271)

This definition can be applied to all kinds of social movements, from the campaign against the closure of Portobello Market in London to the Global Justice Movement; even extremist groups, such as the English Defence League or Al-Qaeda, can be considered to be social movements.

The new definition outlined by Diani emphasises how movements represent forms of collective organisation 

with no formal boundaries, which allows participants to feel part of broad collective efforts while retaining their distinctive identities as individuals and/or as specific organizations (Diani, 2001: 6).

Diani’s view of movements as networks implicitly highlights the communicational and interactional properties which shape movements’ own existence and survival.

On a similar note, the German sociologist Dieter Rucht defines a social movement as:

a temporary action system of mobilized networks of groups and organizations that is based on a collective identity and aims to induce, prevent or reverse social change by means of public protest” (Rucht, 1994: 338-339).

Social movements thus begin to be defined as ‘networks of networks’.

Several studies stress the importance of networks for social movement mobilization processes (Snow, Zurcher, & Ekland-Olson, 1980; Beinin & Varel, 2012).
Alberto Melucci describes social movements as networks “of small groups submerged in everyday life” (Melucci, 1984: 829) that spring up in order to act towards, or react against, social change though political protest. Whereas, on one hand, a campaign constitutes a demonstration of unity in order to show institutions that certain claims are relevant to large societal strata, on the other hand, social movements are far from being cohesive and homogeneous (Tilly, 1984, 2004; Staggenborg & Lecomte, 2009).

Often, literature seems to deal with social movements and their organized apparatuses, Social Movement Organizations (SMOs), as if they were the same object. A SMO is a:

complex, or formal, organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or a countermovement and attempts to implement these goals (Zald & McCarthy, 1980: 2).

SMOs are to therefore be considered as the organizational networks acting within the broader SM framework. Both social movements and SMOs operate within a Social Movement Industry (SMI), intended as the sum of all the SMOs with “relatively similar goals (just as an economic industry is all firms offering similar products)” (ibid, 1980: 2).

Movements are usually constituted of:

a variety of SMOs or groups, linked to various segments of supporting constituencies (both institutional and individual), competing amongst themselves for resources and symbolic leadership, sharing facilities and resources at other times, developing stable and many times differentiated functions, occasionally merging into unified ad hoc coalitions, and occasionally engaging in all-out war against each other (Zald & McCarthy, 1980: 1).

SMOs can cooperate within the same social movement or within the same social movement industry. They often differ in terms of ideology and in the manner in which they pursue social change. According to such differences they can cooperate or compete against each other. “Interlocking” between different SMOs and overlapping memberships seem to promote cooperation. “The more SMOs have overlapping constituencies, the more they should be constrained toward
cooperation” (ibid, 1980: 18). On the other hand, competition occurs when the availability of resources declines, and increases when different SMOs, differing in the tactics they adopt, are competing for similar audiences (ibid, 1980: 12).

Movements thus behave as ‘networks of networks’, where the whole social movement acts as an umbrella network, constituted by different networks, from Social Movement Organizations to the informal personal networks of each participant. This view has gained even more relevance with the introduction of the Internet and the affordances provided by social media and SNSs. Experiences such as the Zapatistas in Mexico and the alter-globalization movement have led authors to define protest in terms of “networked movements” (Juris, 2004, 2008; Castells, 2004) or “connective action” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, 2013). That said, as we will see in the next chapter, all these definitions are not immune to limitations, as they do not fully explain the development of protests such as, for example, the Arab Spring in the Middle East, the Indignados in Spain, and the Occupy Movement in the United States, not to mention Popolo Viola’s experience in Italy, the case study of this thesis. It will thus be necessary to assess these new forms of categorization in a critical and balanced way, pointing out the affordances provided by the different platforms adopted by movements and then to re-contextualise them within the specific social environment where protest takes place. That said, in the first place, it will be essential to analyse the processes of mobilization, the organizational levels necessary to sustain mobilization, and how such dynamics fit into the lifecycle of social movements.

4.4 Participation as the outcome of a Mobilization Process

Staggenborg has grouped the outcomes that activism seeks to achieve under three different categories: policy outcomes, mobilization outcomes, and cultural outcomes (Staggenborg, 1995). Policy outcomes are every action that is aimed to influence the legislative or institutional activity of governments, for example, campaigns to block the approval of specific laws or decrees. Mobilization outcomes are the result of every action which has the purpose of inducing groups of people to collective action. Cultural outcomes consist of the benefits in terms of social and
cultural change for society as a whole (ibid, 1995).

Due to the impossibility of drawing a clear line between the three outcomes because of their numerous overlaps, I argue that the focus should shift from mobilization as an outcome, to mobilization as a process. According to Cheta, this refers to the process by which inspirational leaders or other persuaders can get large numbers of people to join an SM or engage in a particular SM action (Cheta, 2004: 194).

Any effort to mobilization is constituted of two main factors: consensus and action (Klandermans, 1984).

Consensus mobilization refers to the attempt to win support for the movement’s causes. It includes the collective good, a strategy for the movement, confrontation with the adversary, and the results obtained. Here, a collective understanding of “who should act, why, and how” (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2010: 7) is necessary; such an understanding is influenced by protest organizers through framing processes (ibid, 2010).

Framing is the bridging mechanism between the more individual social psychological concepts of grievances and emotions and the more sociological concepts of meaning and interpretation (ibid, 2010: 7). Framing is necessary in order to develop the formation of a movement’s collective identity (see Section 4.5).

Action mobilization is the process of calling up potential activists to take part in protests. Specific factors lead individuals to become mobilized and to participate in collective action. In order to participate in social movement protest, potential activists need to share the cause and beliefs of the movement (to sympathize); to become a target of mobilizing process (to know); to find a motivation towards action; and, finally, to be able to participate (Klandermans, 1984). The first stage of such a process relates to the outcomes of consensus mobilization. After all, action is not possible without consensus (ibid, 1984). At first, leaders will frame a call for mobilization and circulate it to citizens in their own networks. To fully comprehend these stages a deep understanding of the concepts of framing processes will be
insufficient without an account of the mobilizing structures that are adopted by movements in order to recruit and spread material. Only after gaining the necessary information are activists able to ponder on whether to join in action or not, according to a cost-benefit analysis, considering the risks involved and the expectations of success. To understand these latter stages, an analysis of the identification, the repertoire of contention and the threshold of risk concepts is essential.

4.4.1 Action Frames and Framing Processes

An action frame is “a set of action-oriented beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate social movement activities and campaigns” (Gamson, 1992, in Klandermans 1997: 17). Frames are socially constructed through a communicative process which takes place through public discourse, which “is the interface of media discourse and interpersonal interaction” (ibid, 1997: 45), persuasive communication, and the raising of consciousness during the events and initiatives where the movement is present (ibid, 1997: 45). The concept of framing processes comes from a study by Snow et al., who associated social movement theory to social psychology and Erving Goffman’s frame analysis (Goffman, 1974; Snow et al., 1986). Framing processes are:

- strategic attempts to craft, disseminate and contest the language and narratives used to describe a movement. The objective of this process is to justify activists’ claims and motivate action using culturally shared beliefs and understandings (Garrett, 2006: 204).

Framing processes aim to influence the levels of identification and collective identity building.

In order to implement action frames, social movement leaders need to achieve three main framing tasks: diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivation framing. Diagnostic framing detects situations or events as the problem to critique and solve; prognostic framing identifies the possible solutions for the problem, the solving agent, and a suitable strategy to adopt; agreeing on the points may not be enough to take action, though. Indeed, the motivational framing consists of the creation of the reasons and motives that enable the activist to be compelled
to take action (Mills, 1940; Benford, 1993, cited in Hunt et al., 1992). As Hunt et al. state:

not only do framing processes link individuals and groups ideologically but they proffer, buttress, and embellish identities that range from collaborative to conflictual (Hunt et al., 1992: 185).

The process can be un-consciously strategic at the outset of the movement, when members may not be aware of the narrative process in which they are involved; things change, though, in the later stages, where diverse factions and groups inside the movement struggle in order to impose the strategies they consider to be more efficient (McAdam, 1996). Leaders try to model their message according to the values and beliefs of targeted groups, elaborating “a set of frame alignment strategies” (Hunt et al., 1992: 191). The process of alignment is completed when there is correspondence between leaders’ and individual activists’ frames, with a consequent resonance of the same frame (Snow et al., 1986; Snow & Benford, 1988). Snow et al. distinguish four types of frame alignment: frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension, and frame transformation (Snow et al., 1986). Frame bridging is the correlation between two or more ideologically similar, but not structurally connected frames relating to a specific issue. It connects social movements to like-minded, but not organized groups. Frame amplification is the process of the invigoration of an interpretive frame on a specific issue, which aims to strengthen shared values. Frame extension allows social movements to broaden their “audiences”, to include the views and interests of other groups. Frame transformation takes place when the alignment process fails and social movements have to transform frames through the use of new values and meanings (ibid, 1986).

The next section will illustrate the locus where framing processes take place. The mediated and unmediated exchange of information becomes a crucial step in the mobilization process, whereby every space for interaction will influence information flows according to their “architecture of environment” (Boyd, 2010) and the communicative affordances they provide.
4.4.2 Circulation of Information: The Mobilizing Structures of Social Movements

Once a social movement message is framed, potential activists become targeted by mobilization efforts. Both mediated and unmediated communication processes are central in this process. At a pre-Web 2.0 stage, mediated efforts were considered problematic, firstly, because often the mass media twist, or even falsify, the portrayal of social movement activities (McCarthy, 1997: 72); Secondly, because they constitute a very expensive form of communication. Unmediated communication thus became necessary through face-to-face interaction, “either because (a movement) lacks the means to use other channels or because the impact achieved through other channels is too weak” (ibid, 1997: 72). Formal and informal personal networks constitute an essential factor in terms of the circulation of information and mobilization. According to McCarthy and Zald:

(s)ociety provides the infrastructure which social movement industries and other industries utilize. The aspects utilized include communication media and expense, levels of affluence, degree of access to institutional centres, pre-existing networks, and occupational structure and growth (McCarthy & Zald, 1977: 1217).

Networks of individuals, who are supposed, ideally, to be free from state or corporate control, constitute the setting where ideas circulate and solidarity builds on micro-mobilization procedures. According to Snow et al., micro-mobilization refers to:

a set of interactive processes that are relevant to the operation of SMOs and that are analytically distinguishable from macro-mobilization processes such as changes in power relationships and opportunity structure (Snow et al., 1986: 464).

McCarthy defines these networks as mobilizing structures, intended as the

more or less formally organized everyday life patterns upon which movements build collective action, ranging from religious groups and neighborhood associations to workplace cliques and friendship groups. Building upon these preexisting social relations, activists can facilitate mobilization, because they are spared the greater effort of creating new social relations and networks of communication between constituents from scratch (McCarthy, 1997: 249).

Mobilizing structures act as communication channels through which social
movements recruit and motivate individuals and groups to action. The relevant literature here underlines the view of social movements as unified actors, overlooking their nature as spaces for interaction (Kavada, 2007). Moreover, “perceiving the communication process in a top-down way does not do justice to the complexity and interactive nature of mobilizing and recruitment” (ibid, 2007: 45).

Firstly, activist recruiters are both producers and receivers in the mobilization process: they actively mobilize others, but they also have to be mobilized in order to operate within campaigns (Klandermans, 1984, 1997). The interactive process involved here will provide different affordances according to the mean of communication involved. This is what Boyd calls the “architecture of environment” (Boyd, 2010). The tone and the content of any exchange of information are influenced by the possibilities and restraints provided by the surrounding environment.

What are the implications for social movements? Different channels of interaction, be it over the telephone or via digital media,

may have an impact on the capacity of their social networks to act as agents of mobilization since different media afford different degrees of trust and sociability (Kavada, 2007: 46).

Hence, the strength of the interpersonal ties that different media enable is crucial in assessing the efficacy of mobilization.

4.4.3 Individual Motivations to Participation

An efficient message circulating through large and cohesive mobilizing structures may not be enough to guarantee participation. According to Klandermans, resource mobilization theory focused too much on structural factors, almost discarding social-psychological motives (Klandermans, 1984, 1997).

At the heart of every protest are grievances, be it the experience of illegitimate inequality, feelings of relative deprivation, feelings of injustice, moral indignation about some state of affairs, or a suddenly imposed grievance (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2010: 2).

People may participate in the same demonstration for many different individual motives. The main factors which contribute to participation can be
emotional, such as identification, or instrumental, such as opportunities and expectations of success.

Gioia defines individual identity as “a general, if individualized, framework for understanding oneself that is formed and sustained via social interaction” (Gioia, 1998: 19). The social context contributes to influencing the approach and behaviour of individuals towards protest (Veenstra & Haslam, 2000). Kelly and Kelly have demonstrated a direct connection between the intensity of bonding and affinity within networks and the motivation to take part in protesting (Kelly & Kelly, 1994). In other words, the higher the identification, the more the conditions for participation are present. The concept of identification must not be confused with issues about collective identity. While a strand of authors seems to define the terms as synonyms (see, for example, Garrett, 2006; Van Laer, 2010), it is worth distinguishing them clearly, as they describe different dynamics. As Van Stekelenburg points out, “group identification (…) forms the bridge between the individual and collective level of identity” (Van Stekelenburg, 2013). The individual is therefore the object of studies about identification, while the collective actor will be the object of analyses about collective identity (Klandermans & De Weerd, 2000).

In terms of opportunities, participation will take place only if an individual “knows the opportunities to participate, if s/he is capable of using one or more of these opportunities, and if s/he is willing to do so” (Klandermans, 1984: 584). Finally, motivation to participate is connected to expectations of success. Hardly anyone would like to participate in protest without the potential for success. Expectations relate to the number of demonstrators, how an individual can contribute to possible success, and how change can be achieved if a large number of protestors participate (ibid, 1984).

Leaders will thus try to involve as many people as possible in order to empower citizens and to enable social change to take place. After all, social change cannot be achieved if action is expected to be undertaken only by someone else (Gamson, 1975). The risk of free-riding in acts of protest is ever present. According to Klandermans:
a free rider is someone who believes that his/her own contribution to the probability of success will be very small, but who believes that the number of participants and the probability of success are large enough to expect that the collective good will be produced (Klandermans, 1984: 585).

In order to increase numbers, it would thus be ideal to choose those techniques of contention that have the potential to attract the highest number of people.

### 4.4.4 The Repertoire of Contention and WUNC of Protest

Charles Tilly utilises the term ‘repertoire of contention’ in order to describe “the whole set of means [a group] has for making claims of different kinds on different individuals or groups” (Tilly, 1986: 4). Traditionally, the repertoire of contention includes petitions, demonstrations, sit-ins, occupations, and more violent action, such as the destruction of property. MacAdam, Tarrow and Tilly describe repertoires as “limited ensembles of mutual claim-making routines available to particular pairs of identities” (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001: 138).

The interpretation of repertoires as routines links action to the surrounding circumstances in the dialectic between power holders and movements. Actions of protest follow a script, but not to the letter.

They resemble conversation in conforming to implicit interaction rules, but engaging incessant improvisation on the part of all participants (ibid, 2001: 138).

Different targets will require different repertoires. Strikes are most likely to take place in the presence of protest against government policies that are perceived to be unjust, or against employers outsourcing production. Forms of contention, such as boycotts, may be more suitable in order to contrast he policies of governments in foreign countries, such as the “Boycott Israeli Campaign” which took place internationally at the times of the Intifada (Awartani, 1993).

Three dimensions characterize different forms of contention: particularism, scale, and mediation (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001). Particularism refers to the relationship between the claims of protest and the specific geographic and social surroundings’ circumstances. Scale is assessed through the number of individuals or
groups participating in protest. Mediation concerns the “degree to which the communication of claims depends on privileged intermediaries, as opposed to direct confrontation with objects of claims” (ibid, 2001: 141).

Innovation and modularity constitute the components that are necessary in order to make protest effective. Stereotyped performances lessen any tactical benefit for their perpetrators and do not reach the attention either of the public or of the mass media, as potential amplifiers of the movement’s cause. Modularity “refers to the ease with which a pattern of contentious behaviour can be learned, adapted, routinized, and diffused from one group, one locale, or one moment to another” (Traugott, 1995: 7).

Expectations of success and a cost/benefit analysis are not the only factors which influence the individual’s choices to participate in collective action. The evaluation of risk is another essential condition which influences participation. Marsh introduced the concept of threshold of risk in order to assess the level of risk and commitment that an action requires from the single activist; the higher the risk, the higher the threshold (Tarrow, 1998). It is therefore possible to consider petitions and legal demonstrations as actions with low thresholds, and violent action and illegal demonstrations as actions with a high threshold (Marsh, 1977). Similarly, Barnes and Kaase differentiate moderate intensity actions from militant intensity actions (Barnes & Kaase, 1979). Action can thus be categorized as conventional, disruptive and violent (Tarrow, 1998; Costanza-Chock, 2003). Often movements start with disruptive or violent action before strategically opting for more conventional tactics (Tarrow, 1998). That said, usually individuals involved in action that is characterized by a high threshold have already been engaged in low threshold activities (Collom, 2003). This process is described as the ‘stepping-stone theory’ (Verhulst & Van Laer, 2008).

Once a social movement has chosen what tactics to adopt, how do we assess the efficacy of its tactics? Tilly has coined the term WUNC (Tilly, 2004; 2006) to describe the impact of the collaborative self-representations of social movements on the public. Initiatives within the repertoire of contention aim to display Worthiness,
Unity, Numbers, and Commitment to the authorities. The whole act of protest could fail if the combination of these factors were not efficient. A big demonstration can fail without unity. On the contrary, a small protest can still be effective if the participants are strongly committed and manage to prove how worthy their cause is. WUNC acts as a movement’s scorecard, both externally and internally: in the case of high levels of WUNC, movements are able to show the authorities how strong their mobilizing power is; on the other hand, they empower their own constituents and consolidate internal leadership. Since social movement campaigns extend beyond individual initiatives, WUNC characterizes demonstrations, but also other social movement activities, even attendance at public meetings. As Tilly states, “WUNC matters politically because it conveys crucial political messages” (Tilly, 2006: 292). An essential precondition to high WUNC is the development of a strong collective identity.

4.5 Collective Identity

The concept of identity is central to the study of new social movements, as it paves the way from a rationalist to a more culturalist approach (Kavada, 2007: 62). Within academic debate, there is no consensus on a shared definition of the concept. Some definitions place collective identity in the individual sphere, describing it as “an individual’s cognitive, moral and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution” (Polletta & Jasper, 285). However, such a designation seems contradictory, as it implies an essentialist interpretation of individual identity, disregarding its construction within a social environment. In other words, this definition seems rather to describe the collective-related elements of individual identity, greatly overlapping with the principles of individual identity, as demonstrated in Section 4.4.3. Other definitions, which are mostly based on Melucci’s studies, place collective identity within a space shared among individuals. For example, Taylor and Whittier define collective identity as “the shared definition of a group that derives from members’ common interests, experiences, and solidarity” (Taylor and Whittier, 1999: 170). While the individual is the subject of Polletta and Jasper’s definition, collectiveness is at the centre of Taylor and Whittier’s account. I will therefore adopt the latter conceptualization, as it
entails a shared sense of “we-ness” (Snow, 2001) and of collective agency which is lacking in the previous one.

What is more, the concept of collective identity is distinct from, but is related to the notion of public identity, which instead “captures the influences that the external public have on the way social movement adherents think about themselves” (Johnston, Larana & Gusfield, 1994: 18-19). Such external actors may be constituted of:

non-members, state agencies, counter-movements and the media, whose definitions of the movement and interactions with its participants shape both its collective identity and the individual identities of its members (Kavada, 2007: 63).

Collective identity develops on different levels: symbolic, cognitive, and emotional (Melucci, 1996; Kavada, 2009). Gerbaudo provides the term ‘physical characteristics’ as well, asserting that it involves not only passions and feeling, but also the bodies and senses of the activists. For example, whereas the latest Egyptian uprisings became aggregated, both emotionally and symbolically, around the figure of Khaled Said, the young man beaten to death by the police, Tahrir Square was the physical space where aggregation was taking place (Gerbaudo, 2012).

The concept of collective identity is supposed to fill the gap between the subjective personal motivations behind action, and the structure, intended as the objective circumstances that constitute a precondition for action. The questions here are: How do activists make sense of collective action? On what basis do individual motivations come together and create a collective actor? The existence of a social movement as a collective actor should not be considered as a datum, but rather as a continuous process which needs to be explained (Melucci, 1995: 43-44). Groups or individuals construct this process through their reciprocal and repeated interaction. Melucci describes this process as ‘identization’, rather than identification, to underline the fluid nature of collective identity building. Collective identity is not a ‘thing’, but rather a “system of relations and representations”. It is not “reality” itself, but rather an analytical tool through which is possible to read reality. It is experienced as “action” rather than “situation” (ibid, 1995: 50-51).
According to Melucci, “collective identity as a process refers thus to a network of active relationships between the actors, who interact, communicate, influence each other, negotiate, and make decisions” (Melucci, 1995: 45). The collective identity building process allows movements to go beyond singular protests or campaigns. It not only promotes success in collective action, but becomes an objective itself (Gamson, 1992). Within such a process, the content constitutes an important variable which describes the meaning of a collective identity. We distinguish four types of content: constitutive norms; social purposes; relational comparisons with other social categories; and cognitive models (Abdelal et al., 2006).

Constitutive norms refer to the formal and informal rules that define group membership. Social purposes are the goals that are shared by members of a group. Relational comparisons define an identity group by what it is not, i.e., the way it views other identity groups, especially where those views about the other are a defining part of the identity. Finally, cognitive models relate to the worldviews or understandings of political and material conditions and interests that are shaped by a particular identity (ibid, 2006: 3).

Interaction and discussion provide the grounds on which the identity is constructed. In social movements this take place on different levels: firstly, the two-fold communications flow between the protest organisers and the activists’ base, both top-down and bottom-up; secondly, in the horizontal communication between activists themselves. In order to understand the collective identity of social movements as a process, it is thus necessary to understand the patterns of communication between the organizers and the activist base, and among the activists themselves. As Holland, Fox and Daro state,

a movement’s collective identity is continually emerging, forming and reforming between people and groups in multiple sites and places of contentious practice. More specifically, following a Bakhtinian conceptualization, identities are constructed in dialogues across difference between two or more actors with the result that new cultural forms of knowledge are produced and subsequently appropriated for use in later interactions (Holland, Fox & Daro, 2008: 99).
How is it possible, then, to measure collective identity? According to Melucci, the process of collective identity is a negotiation involving three different spheres: firstly, a cognitive definition of the movement; secondly, active relationships with other participants; finally, the creation of emotional bonds with the movement’s constituents (Melucci, 1989). In order for collective identity to build up, the communication platform from which this process takes place has to provide an ideal space where these three spheres can develop. The scope of communication is, then, three-fold: participants need to understand, interact, and bond together. The quality of content, the potential for one-to-one communication, and solidarity can therefore constitute efficient variables through which to consider collective identity building. According to Abdelal et al., solidarity and contestation are essential variables in considering the degrees of collective identity.

Contestation refers to the degree of agreement within a group over the content of the shared identity. Far from being understood as fixed or unvarying, collective identities, in this conceptualization, vary in the agreement and disagreement about their meanings (Abdelal et al., 2006: 3).

Mobilization cannot take place in the presence of a weak collective identity. This is especially true in a historical moment of societal fragmentation. Solidarity becomes crucial in order to hinder fragmentation (Fenton, 2008). The affordances for communication that are provided by the spaces where information exchange takes place, become an essential features of analysis. As Kavada states, “(t)hese settings are not considered simply as containers of the interaction, but as spaces that shape and influence it” (Kavada, 2009: 822). The design of such spaces affects these affordances according to the technical code upon which they are built (Feenberg, 1991). The ideology and interests that govern design affect the affordances for communication in terms of openness, accessibility, inclusivity, cohesiveness, solidarity, and bonding.

The relevant literature seems to have started to pay attention to the emotional levels of collective identity analysis only recently, and too little has still been done in terms of the relationship between spaces for interaction and the nature of that interaction under the lenses of political economy. This research
intends to explore such relationships in order to consider ICTs not as mere communication tools but, rather, as agents in the collective identity development of social movements.

### 4.6 Organizational Levels

While the maintenance of high mobilization levels is a crucial objective for the survival of a social movement, such a goal is not possible without the sustaining of a degree of organized structure. Networks play a crucial role for both consensus and action mobilization in terms of organizational levels, collective identity, and the circulation of information respectively. In fact, according to Diani, networks ease “mobilization and allocation of resources across an organizational field, the negotiation of agreed goals, the production and circulation of information” (Diani, 2003: 10).

Organization is a central issue in social movements. Organizational levels distinguish social movements from other political actors, such as political parties and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Organization is necessary in order to mobilize resources for collective purposes (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). As Turner and Killian state:

> there is always enough discontent in any society to supply the grass-roots support for a movement if the movement is effectively organized and has at its disposal the power and resources of some established elite group (Turner & Killian, 1972: 251).

I will assess organizational issues through four essential components: structure, membership, leadership, and decision-making. Here also, the political economy and the affordances provided by the platforms for communication may play an influential role.

#### 4.6.1 Structure

Social movements may host various and different organizational forms, both on a general level and within their constituencies. That said, while social movements tend to adopt decentralised structures, the single constituents that are part of the same movement can have even more diverse organizational formats, from being
very hierarchical to having seemingly horizontal structures (Kavada, 2010). Relationships within SMOs will tend to be more formal than in other groups. These features have characterized movements from the first forms of protest to the most recent Internet-based campaigns.

In regard to the concerns of the general structure of social movements, literature tends to rely on the SPIN model, a paradigm coined by Gerlach and Hine in 1970, which sees social movements as decentralised configurations that are characterised by a) Segmentation, b) Polycentrism, and c) INtegration (Gerlach and Hine, 1970; Gerlach, 2001). Social movements are therefore segmented, as they entail the sum of different units with different interests, with flexible margins differentiating SMOs, informal groups, and more or less influential individual activists. They are polycentric, consisting of multiple coordination and decision-making centres. The Initial SPIN model utilized the term ‘Polycephalous’ (many heads) in order to emphasize leadership. Later, Gerlach moves to the term ‘polycentrism’ to connote a stress on informal leadership, the personalization of voices, and multiple memberships (Gerlach, 2001). Finally they are integrated, with interpersonal relationships and common interests and beliefs that provide the glue that connects the different instances within the movement, concurring to create a sense of collective identity (ibid, 2001).

The fluidity of social movement structures has been interpreted also as fragmentation. As Fenton points out:

(f)ragmentation has been variously interpreted as multiplicity and polycentrality when focusing on the potential for social agency and disaggregation and division when focusing on the potential for increased social control (Fenton, 2008: 53).

Fenton also argues that solidarity is essential in order to increase polycentrality, intended as a benefit, and to decrease fragmentation, which could threaten the unity and stability of the movement (ibid, 2008). As we will see in the next chapter, the adoption of ICTs has made this issue even more salient.
4.6.2 Leadership

Issues of leadership are at the core of the polycentric nature of social movements. According to Ganz, “leadership is accepting responsibility to create conditions that enable others to achieve shared purposes in the face of uncertainty” (Ganz, 2008: 1). Wilson distinguishes three factors that characterize leadership: charisma, ideology, and pragmatism (Wilson, 1973). Placing charisma as a key ascending factor is problematic, as it opens the discussion to opposing interpretations. On the one hand, such an approach seems to disregard the agency of followers, as charisma is a trait linked to personality rather than actions (Melucci, 1996) but, at the same time, it assigns a central role to followers in attributing charisma to leaders (Weber, 1978; Platt & Lilley, 1994). Agency thus shifts from followers to leaders. As Michel points out, followers turn into disciples, abandoning agency into the hands of their leaders, and allowing them to make decisions and act on their behalf (Michel, 1962).

Drawing on interactionism, Chan defines ideology as a:

set of interconnected authoritative beliefs, which are manifested in both cognitive and affective modes, that command the evaluative statements of a group or population and that compel and make sense of participants’ behavioral bearings within particular social contexts (Chan, 2013: 4).

Rather than being ‘real’, the personality of the ideological leader is constructed, almost romanticised, by its followers (Meindl, 1995). The charismatic and ideological qualities of leadership lie within the imaginary of followers, but also in the capacities of leaders to drive such an imaginary. Emirbayer and Goldberg emphasise the pragmatic aspects of leadership. “Leaders and activists are non-emotional calculators who manage the emotions of others in pursuit of ends that seem not to be influenced or shaped by emotion” (Emirbayer & Goldberg, 2005: 477).

Pragmatic leaders constitute an essential resource for the operations of any social movement: “they inspire commitment, mobilize resources, create and recognise opportunities, devise strategies, frame demands, and influence outcomes” (Morris & Staggenborg, 2002: 171).
The concept of leadership in Social Movement Theory was introduced with the forming of the resource mobilization’s school of thought. Traditionally, leaders were thought of only in terms of external relationships, specifically concerning their approaches, from bargaining to violence against authorities, with the purpose of promoting or stopping social change (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Resource mobilization scholars highlight further dynamics, both internally and externally, regarding “mobilizing supporters, neutralizing and/or transforming mass and elite publics into sympathisers, achieving change in targets” (ibid, 1977: 1217).

Social movements leaders tend to be “temporary, situational, and charismatic” (Kavada, 2007). Authority is here exercised more by moral persuasion than through political and economic pressure. Leaders are, in fact, the subjects who have the most power in framing messages, selecting the techniques of contention and the agenda of confrontation. When researching on environmental organizations, Snow found that the most successful groups were the ones with leadership at the centre of their agenda, training leaders and developing healthy patterns of leadership (Snow, 1992).

That said, as with voluntary associations, in social movements:

authority is uncertain and leadership is precarious (...) Though the authority of many association leaders is weak, the demands of the office are great. The chief officer of a voluntary organization must usually combine the executive task of maintaining the organization with the leadership task of defining and advancing its objectives (Wilson, 1973: 215).

Leadership can have a great influence on both the nature and initiatives of a social movement. It can affect how individual activists are recruited and how much they become committed to a movement’s stance. What is more, issues over leadership have the potential to extinguish the whole potential of a movement.

Leadership is essential during the emergence of social movements. Leaders, in fact, “make a difference in converting potential conditions for mobilization into actual social movements” (Morris & Staggenborg, 2002: 175). Afterwards, there is more space for negotiation. Structural and organizational configuration, alongside
patterns of membership, may influence expectations from a leader. Exclusive SMOs will require leaders to focus on mobilization, while inclusive organizations will expect a wider range of responsibilities, from mobilization to affiliation and framing (Zald & Ash, 1966).

4.6.3 Decision Making

Leaders can articulate basic shared beliefs and direct action, but they seldom make decisions which bind all of the participants and that speak for the movement as a whole (Gerlach & Hine, 1970: 36). The capacity of leaders for independent decision-making varies according to the organisational structure in which they are operating.

Drawing on studies relating to democratic theory and the public sphere, Ferree et al. (2002) distinguish four different types of democracy levels: the representative liberal, the participatory liberal, the discursive, and constructionist (Ferree et al., 2002). Representative liberal approaches “are described by the norm of limiting access to the public sphere to elites representing a certain constituency” (Haug, 2006: 3). Participatory liberal and discursive theories are based upon popular inclusion, and participation in debate. The differences between these two approaches lie within their style of public communication. Whereas the latter is focused on deliberation and the principles of dialogue, mutual respect, and civility, the former promotes the empowerment of citizens and a wide range of styles, even sometimes being against civility. Lastly, constructionism aims at a full expansion of the political community in favour of minorities. Such a theory rejects “the norm of expertise, non-experts should speak from their own experience and use creative means of expression, coherent with their own identity” (ibid, 2006: 5).
Figure 4.1 – Criteria for good democratic public discourse (source: Ferree et al., 2002)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory types</th>
<th>Criteria for good democratic public discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who participates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elite dominance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative</td>
<td>Expertise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>liberal</td>
<td>Proportionality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory</td>
<td>Popular inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>liberal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discursive</td>
<td>Popular inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructionist</td>
<td>Popular inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The practices of democracy are central to social movements in what concerns both the surrounding political system and their internal processes of decision-making. Social movements can adopt different types of decision-making. Hierarchical organisations will tend to leave autonomy to their leaders, adopting mostly representative or, less often, participatory liberal types of democracy (Eichler, 1977) while collectivist organisations will adopt consensus-based processes that are typical of the discursive and constructionist approaches (Stoecker, 1990). The anti-capitalist movements which have characterized the protests of recent years, on which most of the literature is focused, see participatory and deliberative democracy as a goal in itself where, ideally, decision-making is implemented through the mechanism of direct democracy, and power is broadly distributed among the constituents (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). Within such discourse, the decision-making process takes place through an informal process of “unstructured and un-patterned negotiations” (Diani, 2002: 6).
Deliberative democracy plays a central role within social movements. It increases solidarity among constituents; forms new leaders; promotes experimentation with new tactics and new structural forms (Polletta, 2002). Della Porta defines deliberative democracy through the dynamics of preference (trans)formation, orientation to the public good, rational argument, consensus, equality, inclusiveness, and transparency (Della Porta, 2005).

Preference (trans)formation regards the interaction among activists which promotes new opinions through a process of discussion between different points of view (Miller, 1992). Orientation to the public good “draws identities and citizens’ interests in ways that contribute to public building of public good” (Cohen, 1989: 18-19, in Della Porta, 2005: 2). Through horizontal communication and reciprocal listening, activists are able to establish a rational argument upon which consensus can be reached. Consensus, as opposed to majority voting, concerns a process of decision-making whereby approval is legitimated by all the participants in a discussion. In order for consensus to be achieved, deliberation must be equal, inclusive, and transparent. Transparency constitutes a crucial principle within the organizational aspects of social movements, constituting their democratic character. From an international relations perspective, transparency regards the act of providing, in a clear way, the logic and the process behind any decision or policy towards a public (Issing, 1999). When technology becomes the tool used for decision-making, its affordances become central to the promotion or hindrance of transparency.

4.6.4 Membership

The flexibility and de-centralised nature of leadership and the search for deliberative democracy are connected to informal membership in movements. Citizens do not need to be part of any specific organization to consider themselves part of a movement or movements. Issues of membership vary significantly, depending on whether the object of study is a social movement, one of its constituent groups, or SMOs. Membership “implies very different levels of organizational involvement in different SMOs” (McCarthy & Zald, 1977: 1227). Two
dynamics are in place here: one concerns the nature of the SMO itself; the other relates to the level of commitment of the individual activist. In terms of membership, groups and SMOs can be inclusive or exclusive. Membership in inclusive groups will be less formal and more flexible than that in exclusive groups (Zald & Ash, 1966). In terms of commitment, it is possible to distinguish different categories of membership, namely the cadre, the staff, and the workers (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). The cadre are highly involved within SMOs, including involvement in their decision-making process. Members of staff, too, are involved, but they do not take part in any decision-making processes. Workers collaborate occasionally in organizational responsibilities, usually receiving solidarity incentives (ibid, 1977).

In social movements, boundaries are informal and membership depends on mutual recognition. As Della Porta notes, “membership rarely involves holding a membership card” (Della Porta, 2005: 12). Stricter membership rules could significantly hamper the spirit of identification among activists.

A movement is in place - as opposed to a set of political organizations dealing with the same issues - when movement identities coexist along with more specific organizational identities (Diani, 2001: 6), and ends when “organizational identities become overwhelmingly dominant” (ibid, 2001: 6). Fenton highlights the lack of membership forms as a major characteristic of New Social Movements (Fenton, 2008). Along this line, an increasing number of scholars has adopted the term ‘affiliation’ instead of membership, because it connotes higher levels of flexibility and informality.

As movements are dense networks of associations, multiple associational membership is the rule rather than the exception. That said, it is not clear whether multiple memberships represent a benefit (Della Porta, 2005) or a disadvantage for movements’ collective identity. Without solidarity, multiplicity may turn into fragmentation, or even factionalism (Fenton, 2008).

4.7 The Lifecycle of Social Movements

Mobilization, collective identity, and organizational issues constitute the core of the development of social movements and profoundly influence the way they
form, grow and eventually decline. Every social movement has its own natural life process, a metamorphosis from birth to death. While the field of Organisation Theory has debated extensively on the organisations’ evolutionary and dynamic processes, only a few scholars have attempted to establish a model that will explain the development of social movements (Whetten, 1987). The question was first asked by Tarrow, in his article *Aiming at a Moving Target* in 1991: “if cycles of protest are such watersheds of social and political change, then why is it that ... we have so few studies of such cycles?” (Tarrow, 1991: 11). In the light of the increasing use of ICTs, such interrogation is more urgently needed than ever.

Back in 1929, Dawson & Gettys, in their book *An Introduction to Sociology*, provided the first insightful model of the life cycle of social movements, distinguishing four different life stages - unrest, excitement, formalization, and institutionalization, through which every movement goes before its eventual dissolution (Dawson & Gettys, 1929). Zald and Ash (1966), and, later, Blumer (1969) proposed similar frameworks, paying more attention to the causes of decline of social movements. Blumer (1969) points at four ways in which social movements could end their activities: success, organizational failure, co-optation, or repression. Studies by Miller (1999) and Macionis (2001) identify in the establishment with mainstream a fifth possible option (Miller, 1999; Macionis, 2001). My intention here is to synthesize these views into a single framework that includes five different stages: unrest, excitement, formalization, institutionalization and decline, considering this last stage as a possible consequence of success: organizational failure, co-option, repression, or establishment within mainstream society.

4.7.1 The Lifecycle, from Unrest to Decline

Social unrest is the basis of every social movement. A sense of frustration deriving from social injustice, sudden disruptive social changes, and the lack of tools to deal with new social situations, provide rich soil from which social movements spring (Dawson & Gettys, 1929). It is in this stage that the opportunity structures of protest take shape. Changes in societal values and norms cause psychological and cultural drifts that break, to use Durkheim’s vocabulary, the social equilibrium
(Durkheim, 1897). This conflictual dialectic generates a clash between the old rules of social relations and new beliefs, constituting the motivational aspects for new social movements (Blumer, 1969). In a Hegelian definition, a:

conflictual dialectic provides no room for a middle way, an alternative course, and a genuine synthesis that comes out of communication and dialogue. It continues to persist in searching in a pluralistic world of uncertainty for the imagined certainty by upholding the belief that only one truth, one way, and one model is and should be universal (Yaqing, 2010: 137).

This state of increasing polarization and diffuse unrest can last for many years, sometimes entire generations, and may develop only when a focus around a specific cause is found. The Civil Rights’ Movement of the 1950s in the United States provides an excellent practical example of this stage. In fact, while the movement materialized only after the arrest of Rosa Parks in 1955, the stage of unrest against the segregation of minorities goes back to the 19th Century.

While the stage of unrest could take many years, the stage of excitement is usually really brief. People start gathering and debating and social movements start taking shape (Dawson & Gettys, 1929). Many quasi-movements appear, most of them lacking in leadership, organization, and strategies. Agitation is mostly inconclusive, but an esprit du corps takes shape (Blumer, 1969). It is here that individuals turn into activists, and their individual motivations grow in order to overcome barriers to participation.

Drawing on a biological analogy, this is the moment where the natural selection process takes place. This stage has two possible outcomes: either the cause becomes focused around the most efficient and popular campaign, or it loses its grasp on the potential activists, with a consequent loss of interest and potential. This stage is also known as emergence (ibid, 1969).

Only movements with acceptable levels of organization and mobilization can reach the formalization stage. During the formalization stage, movements organize themselves in order not to disperse the human capital that forms them. First, their
ideology is formed, with objectives and shared beliefs. Who or what is responsible for the sense of discontent is identified. Here:

unrest is no longer covert, endemic, and esoteric; it becomes overt, epidemic, and exoteric. Discontent is no longer uncoordinated and individual; it tends to become focalized and collective (Hopper, 1950: 273, quoted in Christiansen, 2009: 3).

Collective identity starts taking shape, with mutual recognition among the activists. Then a quasi-bureaucratic form takes place, with officers and fundraisers. Similarly to the excitement phase, this stage is also usually brief (Dawson & Gettys, 1929). This stage is also known as coalescence.

With the conclusion of the formalization process and the beginning of the institutionalization phase, the nature of the movement finds its definite form, with a well-established ideology. Formal SMOs emerge as bureaucratic centres wherein decision-making and leadership converge. This moment can last for many years, ending only with the dissolution of the movement, sometimes when the objective is achieved, otherwise because of a lack of efficiency and the consequent dispersion of the activist base (ibid, 1929). Known also as bureaucratization, this stage holds risks for the efficiency of protest. In fact,

as movement organizations bureaucratize, they may well reduce their effectiveness by turning from the disruptive activities that succeeded in the movement’s earlier stages to more conventional activity by working within the system instead of outside it (Piven and Cloward, 1979, quoted in Barkan, 2010).

After the stage of institutionalization, social movements decline for two obvious reasons: success or breakdown (Miller, 1999). Breakdown may take place through repression by the authorities, legitimate or not; when their leaders are ‘bought’ by the institutions that are the target of the social movements’ campaigns, with the often false premise of changing things from the inside through a process of co-optation (Miller, 1999). Macionis adds a fifth reason: establishment within the mainstream. This happens when the mainstream adopts the goals and objectives of the movement, and there is no longer a need for it to exist (Macionis, 2001).
Otherwise movements “escape” into a state of encapsulation, this transforms them into a “more or less self-contained subculture” (Castells, quoted in Boggs, 1986: 75).

4.7.2 Structural Transformations

According to the characteristics of the leaders, within informal groups, and of the formal SMOs which frame and control a social movements’ agenda, different types of transformation can take place throughout the SM lifecycle. A movement’s organizational structure can go through several transformations, according to the interpersonal dynamics that are taking place within and among such groups. Drawing upon organizational and institutional analysis, Zald and Ash distinguish a series of transformation processes which can affect movements’ organizational centres, namely goal transformation, organizational maintenance, oligarchization, coalitions with other organizations, organizational disappearances, factional splits, and increased rather than decreased radicalism (Zald & Ash, 1966: 327-328).

**Goal transformation** means a change in the aims of the movement. It could take place as the “diffusion of goals” (ibid, 1966), when leaders supplant unfeasible purposes with diffused ones, in order to target a wider array of objectives. More often, it takes the form of an increased conservatism, accommodating the “dominant societal consensus” (ibid, 1966: 327). **Oligarchization** is the process which leads groups to concentrate power in few hands. Such a concept implies a previously democratic situation, while some movements may obviously undertake a reverse path to de-oligarchization. Furthermore, through the formation of coalitions, different groups could merge into one, quelling their previous organizational forms. **Coalitions** are open to risks. On the one hand, they do not necessarily enlarge the activist base of the movement. On the other, they often antagonize the most radical or conservative members. A **Factional split**, or schismogenesis, takes place when a faction abandons a movement. The preconditions to factions and splits include “the heterogeneity of social base and the doctrinal basis of authority” (ibid, 1966: 337). Exclusive organizations will therefore be more exposed to splits, as access will be narrower than it is in inclusive organizations. On the other hand, ideological divisions hold the potential to lead to discussions about the legitimacy and authority of
leadership. The consequences of splits may entail a decrease in membership, but can also lead, at least on a short-term basis, to higher levels of cohesion and consensus and an increased freedom for the attainment of organizational goals.

To conclude, a degree of organization is necessary for a social movement to endure and reach its objectives. While, in its initial stages, a bureaucratic structure and a clear leadership are not necessary, only a clear and solid structure can help protest persist on a long-term basis. Moreover, collective identity is constantly negotiated between the various SMOs and their constituents within a movement through a continuous process of “identization” (Melucci, 1996). A failure of the collective identity building process could happen at any stage of the lifecycle, sanctioning the failure of the whole movement. Demonstrations and initiatives at different lifecycle stages may display different levels of WUNC according to how much the cause of protest is deemed worthy at that moment, and according to how much the constituents within the movement are united, committed, and able to attract the highest numbers of people.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated the main theoretical concepts upon which this research is based. Participation is here intended as the outcome of a mobilization process. Within such a process, factors such as frames, mobilizing structures, individual motivations, and the repertoire of contention, are essential in order to understand the development of the protest flow. Worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment act as items on a scorecard which are useful in order to assess the impact of protest. Within the mobilization cycle, collective identity plays a fundamental role in bridging individuals’ motivations and collective action, and in influencing WUNC levels. Collective identity is the soil in which contention thrives, thanks to the discussion and interaction taking place among activists, groups, and SMOs. Participation may vary significantly throughout the movement’s lifecycle. Here, organizational levels act as a major factor in terms of characterizing and categorizing the lifecycle stages and, furthermore, in order in understanding how such stages may affect the WUNC of the movement’s initiatives.
Together, these principles will be essential in terms of organizing and framing the findings of this research case study. Mobilization and participation have been theorized by social movement theorists as being social-psychological processes which take place through several steps, moving from awareness to collective action. The communicative nature of the process is complex and multifarious, and literature is still far from providing a fulfilling framework which takes into account the affordances of the media that are utilized within a movement’s stages. This issue becomes crucial in the light of the spreading of Computer-Mediated Communication and the coming of Web 2.0 and Social Media. Yet, to reach a fully comprehensive overview of a series of the interactive processes which are mediated online, the role played by the Internet, especially in its participative configurations in social media and Web 2.0, must be assessed. This will be the focus of the next chapter, where the relationship between the affordances of SNM and their use by social movements is assessed.
Chapter Five – Social Movement Theory in the Age of Convergence

5.1 Introduction

The present chapter aims to provide a synthesis of the different currents of thought that have arisen from Information, Communication, Technology and Society (ICT&S) studies and the principles of the Social Movement Theory. This will include aspects relating to the specific affordances provided by the use of technology in serving the causes of the most recent social movements. The relationship between social movements and the Internet will be analysed with a specific focus on issues of mobilization processes, collective identity, organizational levels, and the SM lifecycle. While the first three topics are now central to the agenda of the academic literature, the latter issue seems to be overlooked. In terms of social movements’ lifecycles, this chapter attempts to gather accounts which concern temporal issues of protest and to apply them to the framework created by Dawson and Gettys in 1929, later developed by other authors (Dawson & Gettys, 1929; Blumer, 1969; Miller, 1999: Macionis, 2001).

Theorists initially attempted to categorize forms of online activism according to the levels of use of the Internet (Clark & Themudo, 2006) and the purposes of their action (Vegh, 2003). The latest accounts privilege more complex classifications which focus on communication flows, organizational levels, frames, and leadership (Juris, 2008; Gerbaudo, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Bennett and Segerberg (2012), distinguish ‘connective’ from ‘collective’ action, and propose a taxonomy that is based on framing and organizational levels, which I will adopt here and later discuss according to the findings of the research.

5.2 Categories of Internet Activism

There is a wide range of literature which attempts to classify Internet activism through different perspectives. For example, Sandor Vegh suggests a categorization of social movements according to the purposes of the protest (Vegh, 2003). On the other hand, Clark and Themudo propose a classification of Internet activism according to the level of the usage of technologies (Clark & Themudo,
2006). As Van de Donk et al. state, it is hard to describe the use of ICTs by movements, for their nature is fuzzy, fluid, and often without clear boundaries (Van de Donk et al., 2004). As we have seen already, social movements usually lack formal and visible hierarchies; they can be short-lived depending on the issues they face, and they can even change their goals during their lifecycle. “A social movement is a ‘moving target’, difficult to observe” (ibid, 2004: 3).

Vegh identifies three types of Internet activism: awareness/advocacy; organization/mobilization; and action/reaction (Vegh, 2003). Movements which are focused on awareness and advocacy aim to achieve public awareness on the Internet “largely focusing on events and issues not reported, underreported, or misreported in the mainstream mass media” (Vegh, 2003: 72). Organization and mobilization-focused activism corresponds to the more general features of SMOs, which attempt to mobilize activists to street protest. Action and reaction activism refers to any action against the authorities that attempts to censor and control the Internet, through disruptive and, at times, violent forms of internet-based action, such as disrupting websites in actions of hacktivism, or participating in virtual sit-ins (See Vegh, 2003; Chadwick, 2006, and the section about the repertoire of contention in this chapter). This form of activism is epitomised by the “Anonymous” collective.

Despite accepting these categories as being very general indicators, we have to acknowledge that the fluid nature of social movements does not allow us to label each movement as part of only one category, aimed at a single specific goal. The behaviour of social movement actors largely depends on single specific issues and shifts continuously among strategies and, consequently, among categories. A classification such as the one provided by Bennett and Segerberg (discussed below) will be more efficient, as it stresses attention to organizational issues and frames, which are central issues within this research.

5.2.1 Collective vs. Connective Action

Analysing large-scale protests, such as the London-based Put People First (PPF) and the Spanish Indignados campaigns, W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg propose a distinction between two action network types, contrasting
them to the more classical accounts of collective action.

Figure 5.1 – Elements of connective and collective action networks (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012: 756)
The distinction between collective and connective action does not intend to
distinguish in any sense between offline and online action. *Au contraire*, it aims to
emphasize the differences in organizational coordination and action frames within
action networks, utilizing social technologies to increase participation and direct
objectives. Collective action, then, is used in to describe: “large-scale action
networks that depend on brokering organizations to carry the burden of facilitating
cooperation” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012: 755) and “to promote more exclusive
collective action frames” (ibid, 2012: 755). Their use of digital media aims to mobilize
resources “rather than inviting personalized interpretations of problems and self-
organization of action” (ibid, 2012: 755). Collective action is thus characterized by
strong organizational coordination and collective action frames.

At the opposite end of the spectrum we can find connective action networks,
which are self-organized, i.e., they tend not to rely on leading organizations, using
technology as an organizational agent, and promoting personalized action frames
through technology. Here lies the main thesis behind Bennett and Segerberg’s
classification: within connective action, “the communication network becomes the
organizational form of the political action” (ibid, 2012, 745). This statement has
attracted critiques of technological determinism, which I will assess later.

In the middle of the connective action framework there is a hybrid model
which encompasses organizations as hidden coordinators that tend to step:

back from projecting strong agendas, political brands, and collective
identities in favour of using resources to deploy social technologies enabling
loose public networks to form around personalized action themes (ibid, 2012: 757).

Bennett and Segerberg use the Occupy movement as example: a network with a
degree of organization based on self-organization and self-expression.

The account of connective action is similar to the ‘networked movements’
framework outlined by Juris (2008). Drawing on studies around the Zapatistas and
the Global Justice Movement, commonly known as the anti- or alter-globalization
movement, the anthropologist Jeffrey Juris defines networked social movements as
those forms of protest which “made innovative use of global computer networks,
informational politics, and network-based organizational forms” (Juris, 2008: 341). In his theorization, Juris is strongly influenced by the principles of Manuel Castells on the network society (Castells, 1997). In fact, as Castells establishes, the:

networking, decentered form of organization and intervention, characteristic of the new social movements, (is) mirroring, and countering, the networking logic of domination in the information society (Castells, 1997: 362).

Such forms of contention have, in the past, been defined as “Netwars” by Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2001). The Internet plays a vital role here, providing the technological infrastructure and reinforcing the organizational logics of movements with its architecture (Juris, 2008).

Decentralized, flexible, local/global activist networks constitute the dominant organizational forms within global justice movements, reflecting the broader logic of informational capitalism (Juris, 2008: 349).

Paradoxically, the political economy of the Internet serves as both an enemy and an ally at the same time. As Pickard affirms, “as neoliberal logic increasingly structures the Internet, new possibilities for resistance multiply” (Pickard, 2008: 625-626). Networked social movements are structured upon principles of horizontalism and cultural logics of networking (Juris, 2008).

This logic specifically involves an embedded and embodied set of social and cultural dispositions that orient actors toward: (1) building horizontal ties and connections among diverse, autonomous elements; (2) the free and open circulation of information; (3) collaboration through decentralized coordination and directly democratic decision-making; and (4) self-directed or self-managed networking (Juris, 2008: 342).

The logics of networking constitute not only an organizational goal, but a broader cultural principle and ideal.

The self-produced, self-developed, and self-managed network becomes a widespread cultural ideal, providing not just an effective model of political organizing, but also a model for re-organizing society as a whole (Juris, 2008: 353).

The ideas of a “network of brains” and a “space of flows” that were developed by Castells thus shape much of the Juris’ discourse and reinforce the logics of connective action depicted by Bennett & Segerberg (2012; 2013).
In the following sections I will re-frame the analysis of connective and collective action within separate narratives that are respectively focused on the concepts that form the theoretical framework of this thesis. Following Feenberg’s epistemological framework it will first be necessary to point out the specific affordances that are provided by technology before re-contextualizing them within a social and cultural environment.

5.3 The affordances of the Internet and Social Media for Mobilization

In the previous chapter, I described mobilization as a process that moves from sympathy to participation (see section 4.4). I focused in particular on four concepts: action frames, mobilization structures, individual motivations, and the repertoire of contention. The question here regards whether and how the use of digital media, SNSs in particular, can affect the mobilization process through providing affordances (or constraints) which can be used by movements.

5.3.1 The Personalization of Action Frames

The relationship between the use of ICTs and social movement action frames can be assessed through different approaches. As seen in section 4.4.1, frames are the narratives of protest. Leaders shape the political message which develops through public discourse. The approach undertaken here focuses specifically on the hypothesis proposed by Bennett and Segerberg for ICTs, and for the SNM in particular, promoting a personalization of action frames.

In personalized action formations, the nominal issues may resemble older movement or party concerns in terms of topics (environment, rights, women’s equality, and trade fairness), but the ideas and mechanisms for organizing action have become more personalized than in cases where action is organized on the basis of social group identity, membership, or ideology (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012: 744).

For example, protests such as the uprisings in Northern Africa, were largely framed around the figures of Khaled Saeed and Mohamed Bouazizi, in a framing process which Halverson, Ruston and Trehewey call the “martyr narrative” (Halverson, Ruston & Trehewey, 2013). Saeed and Bouazizi perished, respectively in Egypt and Tunisia, victims of the regimes which became the objects of protests.
These figures became the symbolic vehicles of discontent through their images, which were spread through SNM and shared by thousands of individual users. Similarly, the Occupy movement saw the proliferation of personalized messages, such as ‘We Are 99%’, or the famous quotation from Rousseau ‘When the people shall have nothing more to eat, they will eat the rich’. These frames circulated through social media in the form of ‘memes’.

In terms of access to information, the Internet constitutes an immense database, not only of memes but, more significantly, of news stories provided both by mainstream and alternative media; of reports and publications that are disseminated by governmental and non-governmental organizations, and of websites like Wikileaks, that allow whistle-blowers to publish government information which is supposed to be inaccessible to a wider public (Kavada, 2010). As information on mainstream media is often controlled by subjects with interests opposite to those of the activists, the Internet has the potential to serve as an alternative medium for news and information. The Internet and SNM promote “the production and the appropriation of resources that are crucial for a global society based on information” (Melucci, 1994).

Memes are central in terms of the personalization of frames. Personalization characterizes framing within connective action. Of course, not every mobilization process is characterized by personalization. Collective action is still present and takes place through frames that are socially constructed. That said:

these more conventionally understood collective action frames are more likely to stop at the edges of communities, and may require resources beyond communication technologies to bridge the gaps or align different collective frames (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012: 746).

If individual activists have the possibility to create, adjust, and replicate information, movement leaders need to act not only as creators themselves, but also as filters for information and to give voice to individual expression. The central questions here are: do SNM actually allow personal frames to circulate with the same efficiency as collective frames? Moreover, what is the specificity of Facebook in these regards? This is a question which, in fact, concerns the design of the
platforms that are adopted by movements for the circulation of content, but also the willingness of leaders to embrace such potential. These considerations should compel researchers to overcome naïve and reductive accounts which see SNM communication as purely horizontal.

The term horizontal communication is used here to indicate an ideal-type of communication that exhibits, as far as possible, the following characteristics: tools of production that are inexpensive and widely available, rather than concentrated in a few hands; circulation that is many-to-many, rather than one-to-many; content selection and filtering that is performed socially or by transparently delegated editors, rather than by professionals or elites; decision making that is participatory and consensus based, rather than compulsory and hierarchical. (Costanza-Chock, 2006: 2)

The view of SNM as being horizontal platforms is based on principles such as Bernard Stiegler’s concept of individuation and Manuel Castells’ input about creative autonomy (Stiegler, 2006; Castells, 2009). In contraposition to mass media, an SNM would constitute the “spaces for the construction of a digital singularity” (Fenton & Barassi, 2011: 182) and “processes of psychical and collective individuation” (ibid, 2011: 182) just “by the act of speaking out” (Stiegler, 2008: 37). Castells’ creative autonomy, generated by the mass communication of the self, asserts the implementation of creative audiences (Eco, 2009), but it leaves certain issues open to debate. Firstly, Castells’ description of the Internet as a “network of brains” and as a “space of flows” (Castells, 2009) leads to an incorporeal view which sees cyberspace as being oppositional to real life. As Gerbaudo says:

counter to this disembodied view we need to understand media in general and social media in particular as processes responsible for ‘re-cast[ing] the organisation of the spatial and temporal scenes of social life’ (Barnett in Couldry & McCarthy, 2004: 59) rather than as involved in the construction of another ‘virtual’ space bereft of physical geography” (Gerbaudo, 2012: 11-12).

Secondly, the individualistic characteristics of horizontal communication on social media, where users interact in a state of ‘virtual proximity’, but are not fully engaged with others (see Bauman, 2001) clash against the physical proximity experienced in the 2001 protests in Tahrir Square, Egypt, and the Occupy Movement, where social media have been used as an aggregation tool. According to Gerbaudo, such physical
contiguity cannot be fully explained by following Castell’s and Stiegler’s arguments (Gerbaudo, 2012). Thirdly, theories based on individuation and creative autonomy do not explain the relationship between the individual and collective dynamics of participation in social media. As Fenton and Barassi argue, far from being empowering, the logic of the self-centered participation that is promoted by social media can represent a threat to political groups, rather than an opportunity (Fenton & Barassi, 2011: 183). Finally, as Costanza-Chock observes:

the flow of information through social movement websites is often vertical. Many such sites are little more than online versions of traditional party organs, with a small handful of writers and an even smaller number of editors who make all publishing decisions (Costanza-Chock, 2006: 2).

This thesis will aim to contribute within such academic debate taking into account how Facebook’s design influences the patterns of circulation of information and focusing on the relationship between the virtual nature that characterizes interaction within Popolo Viola and the physical proximity that characterizes its main initiatives and demonstrations.

5.3.2 Online Circulation of Information: SNM as Mobilizing Structures

As explained in the previous paragraphs, memes act as symbolic units which circulate through big communities. Be it collectively or personally framed, the creation of information is promoted by the affordances of access to information, persistence and replicability, whilst its circulation is eased by scalability that allows it to travel across large populations of networked publics (Boyd, 2010). Information goes viral through blogs, alternative media, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, YouTube etc. often even reaching the attention of mainstream mass media.

The cheapness of these tools, alongside the coming of web-enabled phones and the reduction in the prices of computers, are promoting the diffusion of social movement information and “quickly level the technological playing field” (Smith, Costello, & Brecher, 2009). Social Media play a crucial role here. For example, instead of websites, which still require a level of technical skill in order set them up and maintain them, activists can open Facebook pages and adopt them as
alternative media with at least the same efficacy. They can utilize Facebook Events and Twitter hashtags in order to organize specific demonstrations and initiatives. With Facebook events, organizers can easily keep track of how many activists intend to participate. Furthermore, a wide range of applications that were commercialised in the early 2010s, allow material to be automatically shared on other platforms. An example of this simple process is provided by the photo-application Instagram. Once a picture is taken, it can be automatically distributed simultaneously on Facebook, Twitter, emails, Flickr, Tumblr, and Foursquare. This process of integration is only expected to improve with the proliferation of new applications and tools.

Social technologies help movements that operate on a global level, and also help in targeting discrete sets of activists who share common interests and beliefs, guaranteeing scalability to the protest itself (Smith, Costello & Brecher, 2009). The Internet pushed social movements to go beyond the nation state to question the policies of international economic and political actors (Cammaerts & Van Audenhove, 2005; Anheier et al., 2001; Fiorini, 2000; Guidry et al., 2000). The huge scale of protests such as the movements against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, or the Global Justice movement, are explainable mainly through consideration of the networks created through the Internet (Bennett, 2003, 2004). Movements can now operate on three different, but often co-existing levels: on the local, global, or multi-level scale. Local movements target specifically confined issues, such as the Italian No-Tav, a campaign against a high-speed rail corridor passing through the Alps which was heavily opposed by the residents, or issues on a national level, such as anti-corruption or gay rights’ movements. The scale depends on the nature of the target of protest, from a local council to the state government. Global movements instead seek social change at a worldwide level, such as The World Social Forum or environmentalist groups against multinational corporations. Multi-level movements operate on multiple levels at the same time, according to the needs of the singular campaigns (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005).

The use of SNM facilitates a multi-step flow of communication. Wu et al. applied the two-step flow model, developed by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), and found extraordinary similarities in terms of the diffusion of information (Wu et al.,
According to Lotan et al., “news on Twitter is being co-constructed by bloggers and activists alongside journalists. (...) Twitter supports distributed conversation among participants” (2011: 1400), promoting the idea of the circulation of information as a conversation.

That said, not all action frames travel with the same efficacy. The potential for circulation is not enough without a receiver who is ready to adopt the message. As Bennett and Segerberg point out, “both political opportunities and conditions for social adoption may differ from situation to situation” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012: 746). For example, both collective and personal frames often clash against the ideological apparatus of established groups. Moreover, users can easily perceive the circulation of information in social media as invasive. It is not uncommon for users to ‘hide’ content from ‘verbose’ pages and contacts. An exaggerated production of information can be counterproductive for movements, considerably limiting the mobilizing potential of these platforms.

What is more, thanks to the possibility of forming new forms of aggregation easily, new distributed networks can see the light, with the potential to become powerful mobilizing structures. The process of the distribution of information consequently creates those networks that are necessary for mobilization and organization. In fact, as Wellman and Haythornthwaite observe, the flow of communication facilitates affiliation and even the arrangement of new face-to-face interactions (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002).

(A)part from activating existing social networks, the Internet also facilitates the establishment of new ones. Email lists and Facebook groups help to create inclusive communication networks that allow anyone interested in the movement to be informed about its activities and to come in contact with other participants (Kavada, 2010: 108).

Studies in the field of political communication provide useful insights. As Castells highlights, the Obama campaign in 2008, localised tactics of mobilization, enabling individual sympathizers to organize their own campaigns, and providing them with tools and material in order to mobilize their personal networks (Castells, 2009). SNM act as mobilizing structures with a formidable potential. As Rojas and
Heaney have stated, “social networks are a critical part of the mobilizing structures of all social movements” (Rojas & Heaney, 2008: 7). SNM surpass “older” platforms for mobilization, such as websites and blogs, in terms of popularity and efficiency, for at least three reasons: in the first place, because the most popular websites and blogs are not strictly participatory. In other words, they are open to comments by the users, but they do not promote a real generation of unique content by them. Second, groups are more easily created on Facebook than in the blogosphere, where social connections are less transparent and the anonymity of the users facilitates flaming. Finally, because “your audience on Facebook begins with the number (often in hundreds) of social connections you’ve already made on the site, and then multiplies rapidly through network connections” (Faris, 2008: 4).

The incredible reach provided by SNM and the creation of new mobilizing structures can still prove inadequate without the right motivations for individuals to participate in collective action.

5.3.3 The Internet and the Individual Motivations to Participation

In spite of the increasing relevance that the field of social media and activism is gaining, there is still a lack of research on the individual motivations that may compel online users to engage in protest. The question that needs to be discussed here is whether the use of ICTs and SNM has the potential to foster individual motivations to activism.

According to Van Laer, the affordance of group formation that is provided by SNSs has the potential to significantly strengthen both instrumental and emotional motivations to participation (Van Laer, 2010).

(I)strumental motives are about the belief that something can be changed and that participating in a demonstration is an effective means to do so (ibid, 2010: 409).

Emotional motivations relate to how individuals identify themselves as part of a group. Identification has played a relevant role in several Internet-based campaigns. New social movements have risen over shared concerns, such as the protests in defence of Internet privacy breaking in 1996 against Lotus marketplace (Gurak,
1996) and in 1999, at the time of the launch of the new Intel Processor Pentium III (Leizerov, 2000). On the one hand, discovering a critical mass of like-minded users with similar grievances can empower citizens; on the other, seeing how many people may participate in demonstrations in advance may increase the expectations of success. Through the ‘Events’ feature, Facebook provides the number of people who state that they intend to participate in a specific initiative. Theoretically, Facebook can partially forecast the participation levels of an event that is planned there. That said, it is necessary to remember that data provided by SNM are often unreliable. For example, the fact that a user joins an event on Facebook does not necessarily imply that s/he will actually participate in the initiative.

By fostering individual motivations to protest, the use of SNM can attract new strata of the population. “By putting reports, photographs or video images online, a whole new range of people, formally or informally attached to particular movement organizations, can share in the excitement of an action as a result of which support and participation in subsequent events may develop” (Van Laer, 2010: 409). A recent study found noteworthy dissimilarities between participants who were mobilized through SNM and participants who were recruited through more traditional organizations, highlighting the younger age and the lower socio-economic status of those mobilized through online platforms (Enjolras, Steen-Johsen, & Wollebaek, 2012). The following quotation seems to encapsulate efficiently what has been explained so far.

Social media mobilize specific socio-demographic segments, they change how individuals are informed and motivated to participate and they constitute a new form of mobilizing agency that neither simply reflects nor crowds out existing formalized and established structures. Participation in Facebook groups has strong and independent effects on mobilization, and social media such as Facebook must therefore be conceived as supplements both to established organizational society and to mainstream media as information structures for mobilization (Enjolras, Steen-Johsen, & Wollebaek, 2012: 15).

However, I argue this description is far from being unproblematic. The “strong and independent effects” (ibid, 2012: 15) mentioned by Enjolras, Steen-Johsen, & Wollebaek, deserve an accurate critical academic debate which the
5.3.4 Electronic Repertoire of Contention

The adoption of digital media has provided movements with both new forms and new fields of contention. On the one hand, the Internet eases the organization and the coordination of traditional offline action. On the other, it becomes itself the ground of contention, with forms of protest that see the Internet as their base and target together. Hence, scholars distinguish between offline action that is supported and eased by the Internet and action that is Internet-based (Gurak & Logie, 2003; Vegh, 2003; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2009). The online repertoire of contention represents the collection of the strategies adopted by movements in the Internet, from online petitions to extreme forms of cyber-terrorism. Many different terms have been coined to address this collection, such as virtual activism, net protest, hacktivism, cyberjamming, or, more simply, Online Direct Action (ODA) (Rolfe, 2006). Research in this field is affected by the continuous and fast evolution of these strategies.

The concepts of the repertoire of contention and the threshold of risk have been extensively illustrated in Section 4.4.4. From the figure created by Van Laer and Van Aelst, we can see how techniques such as email petitions can be considered as an extension of traditional techniques, and therefore are situated closer to the Internet-supported typology (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2009). The same applies to donations of money, where individuals rely almost entirely on electronic payments through online systems, such as pay-pal.
The distinction between Internet-supported and Internet-based strategies is subtle and blurred, given that movements usually utilize different strategies at the same time. For authors like Bimber, the distinction between the online and offline realms no longer makes, as the two environments are completely dependent on each other (Bimber, 2000). The perception of risk constitutes a significant barrier to action. ‘Confrontational’ actions, such as virtual sit-ins and denials of service, constitute a much higher risk than ‘persuasive’ actions, such as email petitions (Postmes & Brunsting, 2002). Activists will compare and contrast the risks of going through legal issues with an expected efficacy of action before engaging in such forms of protest.

Economic costs constitute another factor that is taken into account by movements and activists. For example, organizing an online petition demands an amount of money that is much lower (virtually nothing) than that required to participate in a demonstration far from home. Furthermore, a street demonstration often entails the risk of conflicts with police forces. The Internet seems to influence
participation thresholds, lowering some of them, but also creating new ones (Van Laer & Aesle, 2009). Thus, in roughly 20 years, a whole new set of strategies have arisen. The electronic repertoire of contention, as Costanza-Chock (2003) names it, includes virtual protests, cyberpetitions, virtual blockades, virtual sit-ins, email bombs, gripe sites, computer viruses and web hacks (Lasn, 2000; Denning, 2001; Costanza-Chock, 2003; Meikle, 2003; Rolfe, 2005).

As pointed out in 3.4.4, we can break down these ways of protesting into three categories: conventional, disruptive, and violent (Tarrow, 1998). These categories, as Tarrow notes, may overlap, and a single act of protest may include elements that come from more than one category.

Conventional electronic contention is the use of the web to increase, enlarge and intensify traditional communication by movements. This represents the majority of online activity. As Costanza-Chock notes, it makes little sense to enumerate the countless different strategies that pertain to this group, and it is more meaningful to state their purposes. The range of purposes for the utilization of this set of strategies includes representation, information distribution, research, artistic production, fundraising, lobbying, and tactical (Costanza-Chock, 2003). Representation takes place through the establishment of websites: these constitute a way of presenting the missions, projects and history of groups and SMOs. Representation can constitute the only way for social movements to establish a constant and observable presence. Information distribution is sometimes repackaged according to the target, be it the activists’ base or the press. Distribution is usually preceded by research: here the Internet is essential as a resource for gathering information that is relevant to the movement’s causes. Artistic production involves every form of art produced by the artists involved, or supports the movement’s activities posted and distributed online. Fundraising is essential for the survival of SMOs by donations, memberships and the sale of ‘merchandise’. Lobbying comprises various forms of pressure on institutions, usually through online petitions and email campaigns. Strategies of lobbying include Letter-Writing Campaigns which, similarly to online petitions, require the individual to print and send a letter to the target institution, and boycotts, e-mailing campaigns inviting recipients not to buy products from target
companies or countries (Earl, 2006). The tactical use of the Internet aims to coordinate mobilization and collective action. This is the link between offline and online activism. As Costanza-Chock notes, this is on the boundary between the ‘conventional’ and the ‘disruptive’ (Costanza-Chock, 2003).

Disruptive electronic contention includes all the strategies that are meant to disturb the electronic activity of targets, such as institutions or corporations. Costanza-Chock enumerates various techniques, such as email floods, form floods, fax bombs, viruses, worms, Trojan horses, data theft or destruction, site alteration or redirection, denial of service, and virtual sit-ins (Costanza-Chock, 2003). Email floods are constituted by the act of sending as many emails as possible (often with large attachments) in order to overload target websites. This is sometimes called form flooding, when using application forms for membership or feedback instead of emails, or fax bombing, when targets are fax machines. Viruses, Worms, and Trojan Horses are utilized for a variety of purposes, “including data destruction, providing access to restricted files, allowing remote control of targeted servers, or simply displaying a message” (ibid, 2003: 178). Data theft or destruction is, instead, the act of stealing or destroying data from a target server. This is similar to site alteration or redirection, i.e., the act of entering a website illegally, altering its content or redirecting the users to another website, usually with an opposite viewpoint. Another diffuse form of disruptive contention is the denial of service: this constitutes a mix of different strategies that are aimed at blocking the activity of a target site, like virtual sit-ins. According to Costanza-Chock, this is a form of denial of service, that blocks the activity of a website, overloading it with process requests, sometimes forcing server administrators to cut off the website so as not to overwhelm the whole server’s functioning (ibid, 2003).

Every form of violent electronic contention is also known as cyberterrorism, and this ranges from the illegal corruption of data to potentially harmful action, like, for example, the act of disrupting networked computer-controlled systems, such as air traffic control or gas mains (ibid, 2003: 180). The boundaries between legal and illegal action are often unclear. As Van Laer and Van Aelst observe, “whether a particular tactic is defined as legal or illegal heavily depends on time and place” (Van
Laer & Van Aelst, 2009). For example, in Western Countries mass demonstrations began to be considered legal only in the 1960s, while in the 1980s, a massive discussion took place among peace activists in Europe about whether or not illegal actions, such as train rail blockades, were to be discarded as too dangerous and counter-productive (ibid, 2009). In regard to online direct action, the activist group ‘Critical Art Ensemble’ tried to launch the expression ‘electronic civil disobedience’ instead of ‘hacktivism’, as the latter was considered too pejorative (Meikle, 2002). Governments in the Western world have taken these aggressive forms of electronic contention very seriously, especially after the attacks of 11th September, 2001, on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon.

That said, because of issues of surveillance and the terms of use of SNM, the use of social media seems to be characterized by low-threshold tactics of contention, leading to the risk of what Morozov calls “slactivism” (Morozov, 2009a). This potential limit for online activism deserves a lengthier explanation.

5.3.5 Slactivism

A potential downturn in online activism, which has been discussed by relevant literature, relates the tendency to limit individual engagement to “political activities that have no impact on real–life political outcomes, but only serve to increase the feel–good factor of the participants” (Christensen, 2011). These low-commitment online practices have been described in a derogatory manner as ‘slactivism’ (Morozov, 2009a, 2009b; Christensen, 2011; McCafferty, 2011; Rotman et al., 2011; Breuer & Farooq, 2012). Liking pages on Facebook, signing online petitions, re-tweeting posts: these are just some of the examples of slactivist practices.

When the marginal cost of joining yet another Facebook group are low, we click “yes” without even blinking, but the truth is that it may distract us from helping the same cause in more productive ways. Paradoxically, it often means that the very act of joining a Facebook group is often the end – rather than the beginning – of our engagement with a cause, which undermines much of digital activism (Morozov, 2009a).
Morozov’s view is shared by Gladwell, who argues that social media and online communication can only create weak ties, which have no power to compel people to take to the streets (Gladwell, 2010). That said, the same practices that Morozov dismisses as useless are deemed as fundamental in the mobilization processes by other authors. Christensen argues that if slacktivist activities do not replace offline activism, it is not proved they are detrimental. On the contrary, they may help raise awareness about political issues and even mobilize citizens to take other forms of action outside the virtual world (Christensen, 2011).

On a different note, Gerbaudo criticises Morozov and Gladwell for adopting an essentialist vision of social media as being automatically either suitable or unsuitable as means of mobilisation. These approaches tend to look at social media in the abstract, without due attention to their intervention in specific local geographies of action or to their embeddedness in the culture of the social movements adopting them (Gerbaudo, 2012: 5).

This thesis attempts to contribute to this academic debate in order to provide empirical evidence and to overcome anecdotal accounts of the real impact of computer-mediated communication. Assessing participation levels of specific initiatives in the light of the communication flows that precede them could provide material to dispute Morozov’s statements and highlight the power relationships that are in place between the agendas of the actors involved.

**5.4 The affordances of the Internet and Social Media for Collective Identity**

As I explained in the Third Chapter, collective identity forms through interaction at various levels. The Internet facilitates interaction both on the one-to-one and group levels. Hence, we can state that the Internet facilitates the collective identity building process. Forums, chats, SNM, Instant Messaging platforms, and other tools allow activists to share ideas, opinions, and material, in order to collectively shape a common ground from which identity can be built. According to the size of the group involved in discussion and to the intensity of interaction, online communication can evolve in different ways. Smaller groups can promote higher levels of self-disclosure, the formation of strong ties, and can lead to a more
powerful sense of trust (Kavada, 2010). Larger groups favour the development of abstract and “affiliative” ties, when, rather than personal interaction, it is common that affiliation creates a sense of belonging (Flanagin, Stohl, & Bimber, 2006).

The concepts of site and surface, developed by Taylor and Van Every, help us to understand how SNM act both as virtual representations of movements and as loci for interaction (Taylor & Van Every, 2009).

The surface dimension relates to the image of the organization. In this dimension, the presence of the organization on the platform is treated as an imprint of the organization’s activity and as a “text” that represents its identity. This is produced both by its official representatives and by its supporters and peers. Studies focusing on the presentation of self in social networking sites have invariably stressed the “network aspect” of the profile, where the display of connections is as crucial as the users’ self-descriptions (Boyd, 2006; Donath, 2008; Livingstone, 2008; Papacharissi, 2009) (Kavada, 2012: 33).

Some authors express concern in relation to the potential of SNM to promote collective identity building. The individualistic nature of SNSs provides an advantage to the individual agency promoting personal frames at the expense of collective creativity (Fenton & Barassi, 2011). Personalization suffocates the organizational effort, whereby SMOs struggle to maintain control over their image, falling into a paradoxical situation, trapped between a desire to maintain control over messages and resources and the generally decentralizing dynamic of Web-based communication (Foot and Schneider, 2006: 6, quoted in Kavada, 2012: 52).

What is more, while Castells and Juris see contemporary social movements as spontaneous forms of protest, Laclau sees a proliferation of points of rupture that require “political forms of social aggregation” (Laclau, 2005: 230). With regard to this point, Gerbaudo affirms that we should distance ourselves from traditional interpretations which see pre-existing dense networks and strong shared beliefs as the preconditions for collective action (Tilly, 1978), and considers networks and beliefs as elements which “need to be created pro-actively and ad-hoc in the course of the process of mobilization” (Gerbaudo, 2012: 36). In order to shape networks and collective identity, it is necessary to create a sense of unity which is neglected in
the networked movements’ perspective. Similarly, Juris, in his account of the Occupy movement, acknowledges the rise of ‘logics of aggregation’, “which involves the assembling of masses of individuals from diverse backgrounds within physical spaces” (Juris, 2012: 260). Such logics seem to contradict the decentralized and horizontal view of society that was suggested by Castells. In fact:

the protest camps of the indignados, of the Egyptian revolution, of Occupy Wall Street, are marked by a striving for the construction of a sense of centrality and spatial fixity which is in effect precisely the reverse of the constitutive diffuseness of networks (Gerbaudo, 2012: 37).

Moreover, Castells’ accounts of networked movements imply a disembodied discourse, where the physical environment is neglected (McDonald, 2006). That said, as we have seen already, collective identity is also strongly based on bodily aggregations involving activists’ senses (Gerbaudo, 2012). Following a Debordian discourse and a hyper-realistic notion of society (Baudrillard & Poster, 1988), Castells emphasizes the Internet-based “space of flows” as replacing the local and physical communications and identities typical of the “space of places” (Castells, 1996: 429). Such interpretations, according to Gerbaudo:

accept this condition of multiplicity as also automatically defining collective action, rather than as the point of departure for a complex process of social re-composition and symbolic articulation, facilitating the ‘fusion’ of individuals into a new collective agent (Gerbaudo, 2012: 29).

In order to underline this issue, Gerbaudo relies on Bauman and his pessimistic notions of contemporary society, where:

the dispersion of dissent, the impossibility of condensing it and anchoring it in a common cause and unloading it against a common culprit only makes the pain yet more bitter (Bauman, 2000: 54, quoted in Gerbaudo, 2012: 31).

What is more, social movements are not immune to issues about information overload, fragmentation and polarization of discourse, and other negative effects deriving from the individualistic nature of communication on SNM (Sunstein, 2001, 2011; Benkler, 2006). Firstly, in spite of the possibility of spreading information on a global level, there is no evidence that access to more information coincides with
more participation. Bimber (2000) had stated this some years previously and it was later confirmed by other studies (Gentzkow, 2006; George & Waldfogel, 2006, 2008; Prior, 2005, 2007). Furthermore, as some scholars point out, individuals possess a limited capability to hold information, and the incredible amount of information available on the Internet could lead to opposite outcomes, such as the fragmentation and polarization of discourse (Sunstein, 2001, 2009; Benkler, 2006). These issues deserve extended analysis here.

5.4.1 Fragmentation and Polarization of discourse

According to Cass Sunstein, the Internet and social media fragment discourse and attention (Sunstein, 2009). ‘The Daily Me’, coined by Negroponte, is interpreted by Sunstein as being detrimental to the democratic potential of the Internet. When users are exposed to personalised information which only follows their interests and attitudes, they are presented with a very narrow portrayal of society. This is what Pariser calls a “filter bubble”, the drift created by social media towards a personalised world which reinforces pre-existing partialities (Pariser, 2012). A lack of opposing points hinders the interpretive process towards a fuller understanding of phenomena. Firstly, users should be exposed to ‘unplanned and unanticipated’ content. Secondly, they should acquire a range of shared experiences in order to address social problems. According to Sunstein “there are serious dangers in a system in which individuals bypass general-interest intermediaries and restrict themselves to opinions and topics of their own choosing” (Sunstein, 2009: 13). Specifically, Sunstein underlines “the risks posed by any situation in which thousands or perhaps millions or even tens of millions of people are mainly listening to louder echoes of their own voices. A situation of this kind is likely to produce far worse than mere fragmentation” (ibid, 2009: 13).

One of the main factors that have led to the fragmentation of discourse is information overload. A huge amount of information leads the user into confusion and could compel him to move away from discussions that are too demanding. Eventually, the user veers off towards discussions that are more familiar to him, accessing news and information that are aligned with his points of view (Mutz &
Martin, 2001; Bimber & Davis, 2003; Best & Krueger, 2005). The unparalleled control over information that the Internet provides is offering users the ability to create homogeneous information environments (Garrett, 2006). Virtual communities, uniform in relation to values and viewpoints, spring up (Dahlberg, 2001).

Several empirical studies have recorded high levels of the polarization of discourse among online discussion (Sunstein, 2001, 2009; Benkler, 2006; Kavada, 2010). As Davis found out, users tend to take part in discussions with likeminded persons, reinforcing their pre-existing ideas and excluding those who differ (Davis, 1999). The exclusion process favours the presence of flaming, i.e., personal attacks on other users’ ideas. Eventually “the polite and respectful become discouraged from participation and the discussion becomes controlled exclusively by the belligerent” (Kushin & Kitchener, 2009).

This process on the way to fragmentation and the polarization of discourse is eased by the absence of mass media as an agenda setter and by the ubiquity of information (Sunstein, 2009). As Hacker and Pierson state, “political polarization and violence are related to the social processes by which the “other” side becomes rhetorically associated with moral issues and thereby mobilizes social and political action” (Hacker & Pierson, 2006: 34). Communication on SNM brings issues of fragmentation and the polarization of discourse to a whole new level, where only liking the page of a politician with opposing views that may represent an indelible stain on users’ profiles and a blow to their online self-representation efforts.

The Internet also seems to promote phatic forms of communication over instrumental ones (Kramsch & Thorne, 2002). Phatic communication is apparently ‘purposeless’ (Malinowski, 1923). It aims at establishing a social presence rather than at transmitting meaningful information (ibid, 1923). On the other hand, instrumental communication is “purpose-oriented” (Schneider, 1988). What is more, the Internet allows users to adopt ad-hoc identities. Anonymity plays a two-fold role within computer-mediated communication. It has the potential to “overcome identity boundaries and communicate more freely and openly, thus promoting a more enlightened exchange of ideas” (Papacharissi, 2002: 16, quoted in Kavada,
2010: 358). On the other hand, several studies have proved how anonymity can promote flaming, trolling, and abusive behaviour online (Spencer-Oatey, 2005).

What are the repercussions of such phenomena on social movement activity? Firstly, guaranteeing a smooth flow of discussion in large communities is a task that is often too demanding for the limited resources of SMOs, fragmenting discussion, especially when movements attract a large number of participants (Fenton & Barassi, 2011). Moreover, it is disputed whether the architecture of social media can promote collective identity. According to Fenton and Barassi, the creativity of a social movement can be stifled by the stress that is focused by the design of SNM on individual agency (Fenton & Barassi, 2011). The self-centred communication enabled by SNM “can challenge rather than reinforce the collective creativity of social movements” (ibid, 2011: 180). The decentralization of communicative dynamics could, in fact, provide too much space for individual expression at the expense of movements’ control over their image and messages (Foot & Schneider, 2006; Gueorguieva, 2008).

What is more, users tend to communicate with contacts who share similar views. Similarly to the concerns that were developed by Sunstein (2001, 2009), Gitlin argues that online communication tends to:

reproduce the dynamics of secession, exclusion and segmentation of post-industrial society and exacerbated the separation between the ‘information-rich’ and the ‘information-poor’ (Gitlin, 1998: 172, quoted in Gerbaudo, 2012: 34).

Moreover, any user affords to social media the ability to switch from one social network to another in order to seek the necessary information to solve a datum problem. Such a phenomenon has been defined by Wellman as “networked individualism” (Wellman, 2003). In order to solve tasks, individuals seek connections with distant others, with “the risk of taking energy and time away from interactions based on physical proximity” (Gerbaudo, 2012: 34-35).

Furthermore, the cheapness of tools and the ease of integration with other platforms leads movements to be active in different spaces at the same time, “creating a shared but distributed group identity” (Baym, 2010: 91) in order to reach
different audiences. This is what Baym calls “networked collectivism” (ibid, 2010). Being active on a wide range of platforms can fragment the membership base and make the communicative process more difficult (Kavada, 2012). Polarization also, through conflict, flaming, and trolls, can disrupt the flow of communication and thaw relationships of trust.

5.4.2 Moderation as a necessity

Galtung identifies moderation as being the panacea for polarization and the fragmentation of discourse (Galtung, 2002). Lackaff defines moderation as “a structure for guiding individual behaviour and maintaining collective norms” (Lackaff, 2004: 1). Most online communities are provided with a collection of rules, often called ‘terms of use’, or ‘netiquette’, that are deemed to be necessary for a civil development of the conversation, and are often based on common-sense rules. Grimes-Viort enumerates six different types of moderation: Pre-moderation; Post-moderation; Reactive moderation; Distributed moderation; Automated moderation; and finally, Non-moderation (Grimes-Viort, 2010).

Pre-moderation takes place when any content that is submitted is subject to scrutiny by a moderator, who eventually decides whether to publish such content or not. On the one hand, pre-moderation guarantees total control over published material, but, on the other, has two obvious disadvantages: firstly, it is not feasible in large communities, where thousands of comments are posted every day; secondly, even in communities with an average traffic, the running costs are unsustainable.

When post-moderation is in place, all content is visible online straight after submission. Such a method ensures real-time interaction amongst users, but requires very high-costs and entails risks, as the moderator becomes responsible for any content approved.

With reactive moderation, users are responsible for reporting inappropriate content. Any report will alert moderators, who will delete material that does not comply with the terms of use. Often, this method is adopted alongside pre- or post-moderation. Such a method cuts running costs and is suitable as long as there is
harmony between the site owner and the user-base. In the case of attrition between the two subjects, the outcomes for the site-owner could be disastrous in terms of credibility and reputation.

Distributed moderation relies on a user-generated rating system, where community members vote on whether or not content observes the netiquette. Used by the popular platform Slashdot, distributed generation has been deemed “sound” by a study carried out by Lampe and Resnick (2004). That said, “it often takes a long time for especially good comments to be identified. We also found that incorrect moderations were often not reversed” (Lampe and Resnick, 2004: 550).

Automated moderation relies on word-filter software that is based on keywords or IPs. In other words, this kind of moderation either excludes messages that include certain banned words, or it excludes users who have distinguished themselves by not having complied with the terms of use. Instruments are being developed in order to adopt natural language processing, systems that analyse text in order to identify linguistic and conversational patterns.

Finally, certain communities decide to adopt policies of no moderation, guaranteeing freedom of expression to all, but also opening the community to risks of abuse among the users, trolling, and even coordinated attacks, eventually killing deliberation instead of promoting it. Unfortunately, as Tsagarousianou points out, “the line between moderation and censorship is not always clear” (Tsagarousianou, 1998: 139). As Wright and Street point out, “designing the moderation strategy has consequences for the type of deliberation” (Wright & Street, 2007: 857). In other words, deliberation is influenced not only by what kind of moderation is implemented, but also by the nature of the interface. “Website design, and the commissioning of that design, may be crucial to appreciating the democratic potential of the web” (ibid, 2007: 864). While brands and organizations can afford expensive and customised platforms, movements usually rely either on open-source instruments, or, more simply, the free tools available on the market. The social and political network of activists-journalists, Indymedia, has implemented a policy of open publishing, with very little post-moderation (Pickerill, 2003). Facebook, for
example, has provided page administrators with two automated moderation tools since February 2011: a moderation blocklist ("You can add comma-separated keywords to the ‘Moderation Blocklist’. When users include blacklisted keywords in a post and/or a comment on your page, the content will be automatically marked as spam\textsuperscript{15},${}^\text{15}\)\), and a profanity blocklist ("Facebook will block the most commonly reported words and phrases marked as offensive by the broader community\textsuperscript{6}). In addition to these instruments, any administrator is obviously able to add human-powered moderation policies.

Whatever moderation policy is implemented, it is clear that the moderator plays a crucial role, described as ‘democratic intermediary’ by Edwards (2002): here, the filter acts as a facilitator of deliberative democracy, with great responsibility and risks being at stake.

5.5 The affordances of the Internet and Social Media for Organizational Levels

In their book Digitally Enabled Social Change, Earl and Kimport emphasize how lowering costs for action and an improved capability in terms of engagement promote thinner structures of organization (Earl & Kimport, 2011). That said, such an assumption does not determine specific organizational forms, and recent literature argues that even structures that are perceived to be horizontal hide internal power distribution laws which provide control for small circles of activists (Gerbaudo, 2012; Juris, 2012). Most studies about organizational and decision-making processes utilize the framework of the public sphere, which I deem not to be useful for the empirical nature of this research. After all, issues about polarization and fragmentation have proved how the Internet may be far from the normative model that the ideal-type public sphere suggests. Moreover, Mouffe underlines the impossibility of solving problems of deliberation on a rational level where consensus is mostly based on exclusions (Mouffe, 2005). Conflicts and divisions inside movements constitute the rule rather than the exception. As the anti-globalization movement was divided between ‘horizontals’ and ‘verticals’, often movements see strong internal conflict

\textsuperscript{15} More information can be found here: http://www.facebook.com/help/?faq=19793
according to how their constituents favour different forms of internal democracy (Kavada, 2007). The social and cultural context of where a protest takes place is central in understanding the shaping of diverse organizational structures.

5.5.1 The Structure of Online Movements

As anticipated in the initial paragraphs of this chapter, Bennett and Segerberg’s account of collective and connective action heavily focuses on the structure of social movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, 2013). Moreover, I have also discussed how social movements may vary significantly in terms of how they are structured and organized. Here, I will focus on how collective and connective action differ and how we can often find hybrid cases that fall between the two.

Collective action reflects more traditional patterns of organization that are characterized by centralization and formal membership. Online collective action sees a strong presence of formal institutions that act as brokers between SMOs and groups, imposing collective frames and an agenda of protest. Personal frames and self-organized action will here be kept at bay in the name of collective good and control over the resources of the movement. Collective action is often carried out by established NGOs, unions or even political parties (ibid, 2012, 2013).

On the other hand, connective action relies on more:

individualized and technologically organized sets of processes that result in action without the requirement of collective identity framing or the levels of organizational resources required to respond effectively to opportunities (ibid, 2012: 750).

Established institutions are only marginally involved in such processes, as they are often considered to be enemies, rather than potential allies. Here, the role of conventional institutions is superseded by SNM as organizing agents. The role played by technology here goes way beyond being a simple communication tool, even shaping the organizational structure of such networks. This allows connective action networks to potentially gather larger populations, reach higher scalability, a flexibly target and bridge different problems.
Not all movements have to comply with the two patterns described above, and hybrid forms are often in place. A middle model is typified by the presence of established actors coordinating personally constructed frames in informal networks that have arisen spontaneously on SNM. This type sees established organizations stepping back from official control over protest but still being in charge of coordination and management. These subjects, in terms of mobilization, provide space for personal frames to a certain extent, according to their needs and the contingent situation. They receive benefits from the affordances provided by social technologies in terms of cost reduction and the circulation of information without the use of SNM altering their collective organizing principles (ibid, 2012).

While collective action will rely on more hierarchical and vertical organizational patterns, connective action will be aimed at horizontality and inclusivity. That said, as the same authors admit, such classification has to be considered to be strictly theoretical, as reality may portray different configurations, and often the apparent structure of such networks hides pronounced internal power distribution configurations. Different factions within the same movement can frequently seek different ideals of democracy, with opposing views about leadership, structure, and internal democracy (Juris, 2008; Kavada, 2010).

5.5.2 Leadership in Online Activism

As discussed in Section 4.6.2, leadership is central in collective action in terms of frames, collective identity, opportunities, strategies, and outcomes (Morris & Staggenborg, 2002). In terms of leadership, the different features of the three models appear to be a corollary of their definition, as explained in 5.5.1. We can thus assume that the power in collective action and in the hybrid model is in the hands of the ringleaders of the institutions which organize and coordinate action. The concentration of power will be marked in collective action, whilst in the hybrid model there will still be space for negotiation. For connective action, at least at first sight, not only do the leaders seem to be superfluous, but even undesirable. For example, in the Occupy Network, the effort to avoid formal or informal leaders and spokespersons is conscious and deliberate (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, 2013).
Connective action networks, or networked movements, to use Juris’ language (Juris, 2008) proclaim themselves to be horizontal and leaderless. Such an effort reflects the main principle of a network society. “For the first time in history, the basic unit in economic organization is not a subject, be it individual or collective, (...) the unit is the network” (Castells, 2000: 214). Networks equal a society characterized by “the pre-eminence of social morphology over social action” (ibid, 2000: 469). It would seem, then, that the Internet allows for horizontal and leaderless structures. That said, most recent literature seems to agree that within social movement protest, leadership cannot be sidestepped, and whenever a movement claims to be leaderless, in reality, consciously or unconsciously, it hides vertical structures. Juris states that the logics of networking are unevenly distributed within society as within movements, hiding internal power law distributions.

Network-based forms and practices are more prevalent among certain sectors, while the discourse of open networking can also serve to conceal other forms of domination and exclusion based on unequal access to communication technologies or control of information flows (Juris, 2008: 352).

Within the same movement, internal constituents could attempt to promote different forms of ideology, strategies, repertoire of contention, political culture, and organizational levels (Juris, 2008; Kavada, 2010). Networked movements, as the new social movements of the 1960s which are in many ways their predecessors show, are thus often based upon much more hierarchical structures than their image seems to suggest. As Gerbaudo points out, forms of protest “often come to be dominated by narrow and exclusive cliques formed around friendship networks” (Gerbaudo, 2012: 24). Mansfield-Devine draws an account of the nature of the “Anonymous” collective, concluding that while anyone is free to join the collective and to download software in order to start campaigns of hacktivism, “there is clearly a core group running key Twitter accounts, producing YouTube videos and controlling important channels (some closed to the general public) on IRC servers” (Mansfield-Devine, 2011). Even in connective action “(t)he ideology of structurelessness (...) becomes an astute way of side-stepping the question of leadership, and allows the de facto leaders to remain unaccountable because invisible” (Gerbaudo, 2012: 25).
The leaderless and horizontal structure of connective action may therefore prove to be just an illusion, hiding relatively vertical structures with ‘soft leaders’ who act as choreographers of protest.

(T)he term choreography incorporates the idea of a symbolic mediation of bodily action. It can thus be used to describe how contemporary popular movements, despite their anti-authoritarian stress on improvisation and creative participation, nevertheless rely on a ‘writing of movement’, or in more general terms a ‘writing of action’, mostly hidden to external observers, but nevertheless highly effective in structuring the way in which people come together and act together in public space. (Gerbaudo, 2012: 40).

Leaders shape the collective identity of protest in its initial stage, leading protest from a stage of unrest to a state of excitement. For example, once the Egyptian unrest in 2011 became protest and took to the streets, Facebook leaders such as Wael Ghonim, after having framed the initial message, lost their grip on the development of protest. The contribution of such soft leaders, like Ghonim in Egypt, and Gallego and Gandara among the Indignados, consists mainly in framing the main initial idea. These ideas functioned “as the initial nucleus of a symbolic gathering which would later precipitate into a material gathering, into a protest in public space” (Gerbaudo, 2012: 142).

Gerbaudo draws a parallel between digital leadership and street-level leadership. “Once a movement is out on the streets, there is more room for ordinary participants to shape its action, as the influential individuals and groups are physically submerged ‘in a much bigger crowd’ (ibid, 2012: 142). The names Ghonim and Gallego seldom reached the attention of the mass media. Their identities were anonymous online: as far as Ghonim is concerned, anonymity served as an expedient through which to escape surveillance; for Gallego and the leaders of the Occupy movement, anonymity provided an impression of horizontality.

Social media create the impression that nobody is leading because it is assumed that these media are inherently ‘participatory’, and that by using them people are ‘simply’ communicating, interacting, sharing, ‘participating’. However, enshrined in ‘simple’ communication, there are forms of ‘soft’ leadership, which make use precisely of the interactive and participatory character of the web 2.0 environment (Gerbaudo,
2012: 144-145).

As Chapter Eight will explain, the findings of this project will confirm and even go beyond Gerbaudo’s remark about soft leaderships.

5.5.3 Decision Making in Online Activism

As introduced in Section 4.6.3, deliberative democracy and consensus-based decision-making are essential features of the Internet-supported anti-capitalist movements which monopolised the attention of academic literature in the 2000s. These principles became so important that it is possible to consider them as the meta-values and goals of this category of movements. This form of “networked self-management” (Castells, 2009: 345) seems to be eased considerably by the use of ICTs (Kavada, 2010). As Van de Donk et al. state, the lowering of the costs of communication allows groups and SMOs to decentralize the decisional processes and power in order to reach and involve all of the constituents and to challenge top-down communication (Van de Donk et al., 2004).

Since the commercialization of the Internet, we have seen a plethora of forums of participation growing online: email lists, chat boards, and platforms such as Usenet, still provide (at least as far as email lists) a space where deliberation and rational-critical debate were experimented with. From Minnesota E-Democracy to United Kingdom Citizens Online Democracy (UKCOD), the online realm offers a vast range of innovative local platforms of democracy that seem independent from government control and corporate interests (Dahlberg, 2001).

As Kavada rightly points out, the majority of studies on participatory democracy have focused on face-to-face interaction at the expense of mediated communication (Kavada, 2010). The issues tackled were generally related to locally situated situations, where deliberation was taking place in small and homogeneous groups. However, the rise of ICTs as a space for deliberation requires us to consider different settings and larger groups. In fact, the Internet allows individuals to deliberate in textual form, but it also facilitates face-to-face interaction through video-conferences. Moreover, thanks to the Internet, the discussion can potentially span a global level, attracting larger groups to the deliberation process.
As an interactive process of communication, online deliberation is subject to the same issues that affect the collective identity of social movements, exposing them to risks of information overload, fragmentation and the polarization of discourse (see Section 4.4.1). That said, there is no straightforward difference between online and face-to-face deliberation. Usually the two are complementary, and are adopted by activists according to the contingency of the situation. As Castells points out:

organizing on the Internet relies on prior instances of face-to-face interaction, which, by converging on one eventful locale, create new occasions for broader face-to-face interaction (Castells, 2009: 342-343, quoted in Kavada, 2010: 359).

Hence, the relationship between the Internet and the deliberative process must be tackled while considering ICTs not as the sole object of analysis, but rather as being integral to a wider discourse which also considers offline settings.

Kavada has analysed the role played by email lists within the decision-making process of the ESF (European Social Forum), underlining the centrality of computer-mediated communication in the deliberative process within movements and among their constituents (Kavada, 2010). According to Kavada’s research, the Internet enables social movements to improve deliberation in terms of the achievement of consensus face-to-face, inclusivity, equality, and transparency (ibid, 2010).

In terms of the achievement of consensus face-to-face, the online circulation of material preceding the meetings has proved to be essential for the participants to be well-aware of the themes that will be discussed (ibid, 2010). In this sense, such circulation enables representatives to prepare and consult with their respective groups, speeding up the decision-making process. Secondly, email lists assist the regulation of the deliberation in physical meetings. In fact, the selection of the chairs can be done online ensuring fair rotation and signalling possible abuses (ibid, 2010). Furthermore, when a majority is preferred to a consensus, the Internet can support decision-making through online-voting, with a wide array of tools available for this purpose. Differently from physical assemblies, online voting allows decisions to be taken asynchronously. This means that while, during a meeting, certain issues are
raised, individual activists can take time and vote from home after doing research
and they can engage in further discussion in order to take a more informed decision
(Kavada, 2012).

In terms of inclusivity and equality, it is possible to lower the costs of physical
meetings by organizing transportation and accommodation for the participants on
the Internet, and also even to deliberate online. Furthermore, activists who are
unable to attend meetings can still exercise a degree of influence by getting in
contact online with the attendees and by utilizing them as representatives in order
to take specific decisions or to contest the agenda. Meetings, events, initiatives, can
be scheduled and organized collaboratively online on wiki-pages, while platforms
such as Skype provide the chance for activists to take part in virtual face-to-face
interaction and to plan long-distance group conferences. After all, thanks to the
Internet, physical space does not constitute a barrier to communication anymore,
and protest can be coordinated across national boundaries. Physical interaction is
still an essential form of interaction, but at least the Internet can assist whenever
this is impracticable or too expensive. Finally, the minutes of meetings can be
circulated online, allowing activists to check and make corrections in case of
mistakes. On a negative note, by providing the possibility for activists to be
influential even without a physical presence, email lists may discourage participation
at offline meetings allowing the consolidation of power in the hands of the few who
have the chance to attend on a regular basis.

This informal system of representation may have actually helped not
only to conceal, but also to consolidate, asymmetries of power within the
movement (Kavada, 2010: 365).

In terms of transparency, email lists enhance transparency in different ways.
Allowing activists to publicly spread messages which were intended to be private,
email lists promote ‘leaking’ of information, blurring the distinction between private
and public. Secondly, being written text, emails allow the exposers to circulate
evidence of the exposé. However, factions can always set up secret email lists in
order to promote and consolidate alternative hidden agendas (ibid, 2010).
In terms of accountability, email lists, thanks to the affordance of persistence and searchability, can require constituents to assume responsibility for any duty or initiative which is on record. That said, information overload may hinder such affordance, limiting transparency and consequently accountability as well.

5.5.4 From Membership to Affiliation

In Chapter Three I mentioned the crisis of institutional membership which has occurred in post-industrial society. Social movements have been afflicted by such fragmentation, especially as far as the social basis of workers’ associations is concerned (Della Porta, 2004). In Section 4.6.4 I also mentioned how groups and SMOs tend to adopt very diverse membership patterns, according to their goals. Exclusive groups and SMOs tend to limit membership to the most committed activists only, whereas inclusive groups and SMOs will adopt looser affiliation patterns. That said, even more exclusive groups have adopted less tight barriers to entrance in order to recruit new members (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005). This is why literature agrees that the term ‘affiliation’ is more suitable than the term ‘membership’, since the latter conveys a term of fixity which is not suitable to the actual patterns of attachment to social movements.

This section aims to explore the role played by ICTs within such discourse. This issue is most relevant in the debate about collective and connective action. Bennett and Segerberg noticed how connective networks tend to rely on de-centred and seemingly-horizontal structures whereby affiliation becomes extremely flexible for the dynamism and diversity of their activist base (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). For example, only 13 per cent of the constituents participating to the 15M protest in Spain provided possibilities for membership or affiliation (ibid, 2012).

The Internet allows citizens to become affiliated through very simple acts, for example by oining a mailing list, or liking a Facebook page, facilitating recruitment processes. SNSs such as Facebook and Twitter allow popular movements powerful affordances in terms of recruiting. As Gerbaudo remarks:

(While activists using Indymedia were addressing an already politicised public, contemporary activists using Facebook attempt to ‘recruit’ and
train (prepare for political action on the streets) a following among a largely un-politicised youth (Gerbaudo, 2012: 145).

Facebook represents the largest possible online mobilizing structure, with a potential audience of more than one billion individuals (data 2013).

Whereas affiliation was already flexible in the past, the ease of use of Internet-based applications makes this process even quicker and more informal. However, affiliation alone does not imply a commitment to the movement, as liking a page on Facebook does not mean an automatic engagement with the instances of protest, but rather a mere expression of interest. As Karpf remarks, “the low barrier-to-entry for organizational membership yields a large-but-questionable base of recipients” (Karpf, 2009: 15). The extreme flexibility of affiliation opens social movements to volatility and their constituents to extreme competition among each other, weakening considerably the levels of identification and of collective identity.

### 5.6 Internet and SM Lifecycle

Contemporary literature has so far neglected issues concerning the relationship between the adoption of ICTs and the lifecycle of social movements. That said, drawing on studies about online mobilization I can here sketch certain assumptions.

Firstly, we can assume that the Internet affects the speed of the diffusion of information and the process of mobilization. According to Mayer, the Internet breaks the temporal boundaries of social movements’ life cycle.

Given the characteristics of Internet-mediated communication, (...) cycles of mobilization and response will be more rapid, causing issue support to wax and wane more quickly (Mayer, cited in Garrett, 2006: 9).

That said, social movements generally focus on different campaigns and issues at the same time. It would thus be precipitous to assume that a quicker information flow and mobilization process necessarily implies a faster lifecycle of social movements without any empirical evidence.

A similar process involves the diverse tactics adopted. New forms of contention frequently emerge online. Scholars define cyber-diffusion as the diffusion
of the electronic repertoire of contention. It consists of “the rapid, computer-generated dissemination of information around the world, without concern for geographic location” (Ayers, 1999: 133). Placing the Internet among impersonal or personal channels of diffusion is not trouble-free, for at least two reasons. Firstly, this is because the speed of diffusion of strategies in the Internet lowers the relevance of cultural links and interpersonal networks for the spread of contention. Secondly, because movements on the Internet have less power to contain or constrain protest, with the potential outcome of creating what Ayers calls a “type of global electronic riot” (ibid, 1999: 135). The risk is that SMOs lose control over protest, with detrimental results for their claims.

As previously illustrated, Castells highlights how CMC transcends time displacing institutions, social movements, and individuals in a “timeless time” (Castells, 2000). Castells mentions “breaks in the sequential order of phenomena in networks; time is compressed; things are happening instantaneously and linearity is broken in the discontinuity of hyperlinks, menus etcetera” (Van Dijck, 2001). The attempt to analyse the time-related issues of the development of social movements online is also an attempt to go beyond the “culture of simultaneity” of the disembodied networks, theorized by Castells, and to re-locate them in the physical assemblies they form and promote.

The discussion chapter of this thesis will provide insights based on the relationship between the organizational changes in Popolo Viola and the development of the anti-Berlusconi protest. The correlation aims to fill the analytical gap in terms of how the use of social media may influence the lifecycle of social movements, such as Popolo Viola. However, in the first place it will be necessary to illustrate the methodological framework which sustains the findings of this research.
Chapter Six – Methods

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to elucidate the objectives of the present research and to illustrate the methods adopted in this study. Firstly, the research questions will be explained. Secondly, the research’s general approach will be discussed, with particular attention to its inductive and deductive aspects, and to the exploratory and ethnographic features which characterise the development of its case study. Furthermore, the multi-method approach which combines qualitative and quantitative research will be presented and the rationale behind it will be discussed.

The main objective of the present research is to explore the impact that the use of Social Networking Media, such as Facebook, made by social movements has on their lifecycle, organisational levels, potentials for mobilisation, and their collective identity. To be specific, this study will focus on:

- Whether and how the corporate interests which shape the architecture and the design of a Social Network Medium, such as Facebook, have an influence on the social movements that adopt such platform as their main tool for communication.
- Whether and how the use of Facebook influences the lifecycle of social movements.
- Whether and how the adoption of Facebook as an organizational tool impacts on the structure of social movements.
- Facebook’s potential as a mobilizing structure for participation in social movements.
- How patterns of interaction and discussion on Facebook influence the process of collective identity building in social movements.

6.2 Research Approach

In order to explore these phenomena a mainly inductive approach was necessary. In fact, whereas the main concepts employed in this research draw upon
the traditions of Social Movement Theory and the Critical Theory of Technology, the outcomes discussed here rely strictly on the patterns observed in the analysis of a case study. Before explaining the case study and its relevance it will be necessary to distinguish between deductive and inductive reasoning, and to clarify that, after all, there are elements of the study which also draw upon deduction, and that a straightforward rejection of each reasoning at the expense of the other would be dangerous for the study’s purposes.

In very general terms, deduction is an approach that tests theory, whilst induction generates theory. Deduction is a top-down process which draws upon existing theory, moving from the general to the specific. “It moves from (1) a pattern that might be logically or theoretically expected to (2) observations that test whether the expected pattern actually occurs” (Babbie, 2002: 27). In other words, through the construction of hypotheses, deduction utilises observation in order to identify patterns which confirm or refute statements made in existing theory. Since literature regarding the use of Facebook by movements is scarce or in fieri, this research has little to rely on in terms of patterns already documented. As illustrated in depth in the literature review chapter, academic debate has only very recently started focusing on Social Network Media, while the available literature, in general terms, relates to the relationship between movements and the Internet in other forms, such as websites, mailing lists, forums, and so on. My purpose here will be to analyse the patterns of interaction and communication on Facebook and to assess whether or not there is a correspondence with how academics have interpreted the same patterns in the general online sphere.

Inductive reasoning takes the opposite path. Inductive logic:

moves from the particular to the general, from a set of specific observations to the discovery of a pattern that represents some degree of order among all the given events (Babbie, 2007: 22).

It thus starts with observation, detects patterns, and then elaborates hypotheses which generate new theory. In my research I observed the behaviour of movements’ organisers, activists, and audiences, pointed out patterns and elaborated hypotheses of theory which define how the life cycle, organisational levels, mobilisation, and
collective identity develop when Facebook is chosen as (or ‘unconsciously’ becomes) the main instrument of communication and organisation.

It is then possible to define this research as an exploratory study which relies on both deductive and inductive logic. As is often the case in social studies, it is in fact necessary to rely on both logics, as each process can mutually reinforce the other. To use an example that is close to the object of study of this research project, whereas deductive logic could alone confirm that discussion on Facebook becomes increasingly fragmented, an inductive approach could specify that such fragmentation derives not so much from information overload (see Benkler in 5.4.1), but from the design of the SNM.

6.3 Case study

The methodology of this research is constituted of an ethnographic case study and a triangulation of both qualitative and quantitative methods, namely Facebook data analysis, in-depth interviews, online participant observation, a content analysis, and a survey.

A case study is:

a research strategy that seeks to generate richly detailed, thick and holistic elaborations and understandings of instances or variants of bounded social phenomena through the triangulation of multiple methods (Snow & Trom, 2002: 151-152).

According to Kohn, case studies are ideal in order:

- to explore new areas and issues where little theory is available or measurement is unclear; to describe a process or the effects of an event or an intervention, especially when such events affect many different parties; and to explain a complex phenomenon (Kohn, 1997: 3).

The case study around Popolo Viola specifically aims to provide empirical evidence and to contribute to the debate on the use of Facebook made by social movements. Moreover, it intends to establish clear metrics for the measurement of interaction, participation, and discussion, as indicators of the collective identity of movements. Focusing on a single case study allowed me to focus on the different lifecycle stages.
of protest, highlighting the temporal component of protest. Moreover, a case study provides the researcher with the possibility to adopt a wide array of methods.

Popolo Viola is a complex movement which sprang up around several political opportunity structures (see Chapter Two). As Marwell and Oliver state, “case studies provide important insights into the relations between individual events and complex movements” (Marwell & Oliver, 1984: 7). What is the relation here between the No Berlusconi Day and the birth of a movement like Popolo Viola? The research investigates the process which leads a single demonstration to become both an event and a mobilizing structure in itself, acting as the support for a movement.

The use of a mixed-methods approach is necessary in order to gain a 360 degrees analysis of the phenomena which, when studied with a single-lensed tactic, would be only partial and fragmentary. According to Adami and Kiger, triangulation research is essential in order to confirm the validity of data findings, and to reach “completeness of purpose” (Adami & Kiger, 2006: 19). Triangulation, argues Olsen, “is not only aimed at validation, but at deepening and widening one’s understanding” (Olsen, 2004: 1).

In brief, in the present research, a quantitative analysis of Facebook data relating to trends in membership and interaction provides a picture of ‘what’ happened on the Il Popolo Viola page between December, 2009, and June, 2011. In other words, it enables me to calculate how many users subscribed to the page during the movement’s lifecycle and to assess how the changes implemented by Facebook, in terms of design and management policies, have influenced the activities on its pages. Moreover, it points out how, in numerical terms, users interact through liking content, commenting and uploading new information. A quantitative content analysis provides an insight into the nature, the tone and the quality of the conversation between organisers and activists, and among activists themselves, on the aforementioned page. Qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews with organisers and activists and participant observation of online interaction among the same subjects, offer a link between the online and offline aspects of activism in Popolo Viola, and a specific insight into the relationship
between the use of Facebook and the structure and organisational levels of the movement. Finally, a survey further developed my understanding as to how the three different categories of users of the page (organisers, activists, and audience) relate to Facebook (in terms of its potential for protest) and the movement.

### 6.4 Facebook data analysis

The main source of data about the Facebook page of il Popolo Viola came from Insights\(^{16}\), a tool that is provided by Facebook to page administrators. It gathers anonymous aggregate data about the users’ traffic, their activity and their engagement on the page.

Facebook Insights is a tool designed primarily for brands, but also for organisations, groups, and communities, and it is utilised by them in order to measure the success of social media campaigns through metrics called Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) (Hemmesch, 2011). Such data can also be vital for movements. At the time of writing, in August, 2012, Popolo Viola is still one of the most popular movement pages on Facebook, with 450,519 likes, against the 386,981 of Occupy Wall Street’s official page, 243,205 for the Egyptian, We Are All Khaled Said, 206,742 for We Are All Syria, and 40,876 for the Spanish Indignados.

At the time of the data collection\(^{17}\) (June, 2011) the main features were: key metrics; users’ countries; gender and age; city of provenance; language; internal and external references. Here, I will illustrate the key metrics only, since these are the features that have been analysed for the purpose of this research. I analysed likes, unlikes, visits to the page, news feed interaction, the uploading of content, and, finally, the likes and comments that related to content uploaded on the page. Likes relate to the number of users subscribing to the page, and thus, its levels of membership. Since the page il Popolo Viola is an open page, its content is thus accessible to any Facebook user, any ‘like’ constitutes a sort of affiliation to the page, or at least a demonstration of interest in its cause. Dislikes relate to the number of users who, after having ‘liked’ the page, cancel their subscription.


\(^{17}\) In November, 2011, Facebook added more feature to the Insights tool.
Interaction with the page takes place on Facebook in two different places: either straight on the page wall (visits to the page), or on the individual users’ newsfeed. “News Feed — the center column of your home page — is a constantly updating list of stories from people and pages that you follow on Facebook”\(^\text{18}\). As we will see in the analysis chapter, the relationship between visits and news feed interaction is essential for several reasons. First of all, it is an efficient tool with which to assess Facebook’s potential for circulating information. Information uploaded on a page by its administrators starts circulating in the newsfeed of the page’s likers, where it can potentially attract likes and comments. The more popular the information is, the longer it will appear on users’ news feed and the more visible it will be, creating a sort of virtuous circle where interaction on the popular posts increases exponentially. Moreover, data about visits and news feed interaction can help us to distinguish how many, among the likers, are effectively using the page, and thus to create categories of users according to their level of engagement with the page. As we will see later, the fact that it is virtually only the information uploaded by page administrators that circulates among likers’ news feeds, creates a gap between this and the information uploaded by users, who are being increasingly marginalised by the design of Facebook.\(^\text{19}\)

If knowing where interaction takes place helps to assess the level of users’ attachment to the page\(^\text{20}\), establishing different forms of interaction helps to point out the nature of engagement. Participation and discussion take place through uploading content, ‘liking’ content, or by commenting on any content posted. It is necessary to define what is meant here by online interaction and participation. As Kavada notes:

conceiving social movements as ‘networks of informal interactions’ (...) implicitly recognizes the centrality of communication and interaction for the existence itself of a social movement (Kavada, 2007: 41).

\(^{19}\) This is even more significant since the introduction of Timeline, a new look for pages and profiles, which took place in the first half of 2012 (thus at the end of the fieldwork of this research). With Timeline, users can scroll back to find old content and thus have access to information more quickly. On pages’ Timeline, the content uploaded by other users is marginalised in a box titled ‘recent posts by others on’.
\(^{20}\) We can expect a more devoted activist to interact on the page rather than on her own newsfeed.
I define participation as an umbrella-term which encompasses any form of activity that is related to the page, from the mere reading of content and the access to links, including simple gestures, such as clicking ‘like’ on content (passive participation), to active participation, which encompasses (relatively) more demanding actions such as writing comments and uploading content on the page. Interaction is here public and asynchronous; public in terms of being accessible by anyone navigating the page and aiming to reach large audiences; asynchronous in terms of being accessible from multiple points at different moments. According to Flanagin et al.: personal interaction involves repeated, organized interaction with known others over time and the development of interpersonal relations, in which interaction is centered on sustained relationships with others whose specific identities or personal attributes matter (Flanagin et al., 2007: 33).

The time period considered in the data analysis ranges from the 7th December, 2009, the day on which the Facebook page Il Popolo Viola was set up, to 30th June, 2011, the day which represents the end of my fieldwork. The choice of this date was for three reasons. Firstly, I wanted to include as much data as possible during the last stage of Popolo Viola’s lifecycle when I noticed a transformation of the page from a social movement medium to a protest mobilisation structure. As I will explain in depth in the final chapter, the page evolved from a mobilizing tool specifically related to the movement, into an arena for discussion where users’ participation was now detached from any form of affiliation to the movement itself. Moreover, the page evolved into a mobilizing structure that was also available to external campaigns. Furthermore, I deemed it necessary to include data that related to the local elections, which took place in May, 2011, and the referenda in June, which, as we will see later, were charged with a strong anti-Berlusconi connotations. Finally, I could not have gone further due to time restrictions that related to the PhD’s submission.

The Facebook data analysis proved to be particularly useful for the following research objectives: firstly, to determine the relationship between the use of Facebook and the life cycles of Popolo Viola and, moreover, to assess the impact of shifts between different stages of its life cycle on patterns of interaction and the
membership of the Popolo Viola Facebook page. Finally, to assess how patterns of membership and interaction on Popolo Viola’s Facebook page can constitute an indicator of changes in the collective identity of the movement.

Clearly, this method can on its own provide only a very descriptive account with regard to the scope of the project. While Facebook Insights constitutes an excellent tool that will point to data about demographics, traffic, and frequency of use, it does not provide an understanding of the motivations behind such use. Moreover, it does not offer a qualitative insight into the content of interaction. Hence, the need to integrate it with other methods, firstly, a content analysis that explores what the users are saying, and thus investigates the nature of discussion beyond its quantitative features.

6.5 Content analysis

While the data analysis enabled me to provide a quantitative overview of patterns of membership and interaction, content analysis allowed me to provide a qualitative insight into the nature of this interaction.

As Lewis-Beck states, content analysis “classifies textual material, reducing it to more relevant, manageable bits of data” (in Weber, 1990: 5). Under the umbrella-term ‘content analysis’, which includes qualitative and quantitative approaches, this method comprises different tactics according to the object and the purpose of analysis, “ranging from impressionistic, intuitive, interpretive analyses to systematic, strict textual analyses” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2007: 61). Holsti enumerates 15 types of content analysis, belonging to three main categories with regard to the purpose of making inferences about the antecedent causes of communication, characteristics, or the effects of communication. The object of analysis potentially concerns the source, the encoding process, the channel, the message, the recipient, or, finally, the decoding process (Holsti, 1969).

My content analysis specifically focused on the characteristics of communication, thus on the message. Drawing upon the limits of the so-called “networked public sphere” (Benkler, 2006), illustrated in the literature review
chapter, I analysed the content of comments to “status updates” that were made by
the page’s administrators. This analysis allowed me to explore how the nature of
interaction and discussion on Popolo Viola’s page evolved in the course of the
different stages of the social movement’s life cycle.

Four sample periods have been analysed: the first considers the week 7-13
December, 2009, when the page was opened, during the excitement stage of Popolo
Viola. The second considers the week 22-28 March, 2010, when the popularity of the
movement was at its highest peak, during its formalisation stage. The third considers
the week 27-3 September-October, 2011, when, during the institutionalization stage
of the movement, the demonstration “No Berlusconi Day 2” took place. The fourth
sample period focuses on the week 28-3 March-April, 2011, when, during its
transformation stage, the popularity of the movement was slowly recovering after
the impasse suffered in February caused by the expulsion of several administrators.\footnote{See Chapter Seven for more insight about the chronological development of Popolo Viola.}

The first main obstacle I met concerned the immense amount of content that
was uploaded every day on the Facebook page. The number of comments uploaded
every day was incredible. During the week 7\textsuperscript{th}-13\textsuperscript{th} December, 2009, users uploaded
7,882 comments, with a peak of 1,932 comments on the 9th December, and a daily
average of 1,126. During the 22\textsuperscript{nd}-28\textsuperscript{th} March, 2010, the page received 9,624
comments, with a maximum of 2,051 on the 25th and an average of 1,375 daily
comments. On the week of the No-Berlusconi Day 2, between the 27\textsuperscript{th} September
and the 3\textsuperscript{rd} October, 2010, the exchange of information reached its maximum level
with 20,192 comments, an average of 2,885 and a peak of 3,581 on the 29th. Almost
on the same level was interaction in the week between the 28\textsuperscript{th} March and the 3\textsuperscript{rd}
April, 2011, with 19,238 comments, an average of 2,748 per day and a staggering
5,210 comments uploaded on the 30\textsuperscript{th} March. In order to make sense of this
discussion, I decided to consider only status updates uploaded by the page
administrators and the relative feedback, and to exclude posts uploaded by activists.
As will be clear in Chapter Ten, this choice was motivated mainly by the fact that
posts uploaded by users never attracted comments, for reasons that are related to
the design of Facebook pages. Moreover, I decided to utilise a sample of one in every ten comments, significantly reducing the amount of material to be analysed.

These four sampling periods focus, in the first place, on whether communication was characterised by a dialogic nature, i.e., between the administrators of the Facebook page and the activists, or by a triologic nature, thus including also communication among the activists themselves. In other words, what I intended to find out is whether users were merely responding or commenting on the administrators’ updates, or whether there was an actual conversation among them which could promote meaningful discussion. Comments were thus coded as ‘status-related’, when they were commenting on the updates, or ‘discussion-related’, when they referred to other comments uploaded by other users. This dialectic is important, because dialogic and triologic communication affect the collective identity building process of social movements in a significantly different way. As stated before in this thesis, the collective identity building process takes place through interaction between the administrators of social movements and activists, and through interaction among activists themselves. A triologic form of interaction will thus promote a collective identity building process which is based more on strong ties, rather than affiliative ties (see Flanagin et al, 2007, for a more specific insight on this), which characterise a merely dialogic nature of interaction and top-down interactional dynamics. It can be argued that communication amongst activists can take place elsewhere too, e.g., on other groups and pages on Facebook. That said, the overwhelming popularity of the page ‘il Popolo Viola’ (if compared to any other platform adopted by the movement) makes it the only place where communication involves a sufficient number of individuals to influence the collective identity of the movement.

Secondly, this analysis records how levels of approval towards the administrators of the page changed during the life cycle of Popolo Viola. Levels of approval would then constitute a barometer of unity and cohesion inside the movement and provide an assessment of the polarisation of discourse inside the movement’s arena of discussion. In order to accomplish this, I relied on the

---

22 Further explanation of design-related issues is available in Chapter Ten.
principles of sentiment analysis. Often referred to as opinion mining or subjectivity analysis, sentiment analysis:

focuses on determining whether a language unit (such as a word, sentence or document) expresses a private state, opinion or attitude and, if so, what polarity is expressed, i.e. a positive or negative attitude (Su & Markert, 2008: 825).

Here, I coded comments as ‘favourable, ‘neutral’, and ‘unfavourable’. The connotations of the language used by the users in the comments analysed represents a methodological and interpretive issue. Texts can, in fact, be ambiguous, since, as Krippendorff states, they “do not have single meaning” (Krippendorff, 2004, p.22). This is especially true of political discussions, which are, as noted by Gamon et al., “fraught with quotations, sarcasm, and complex references to persons, organizations, and ideas” (Gamon et al., 2008, cited in Mejova, 2009: 6). Furthermore, while on the market there are algorithms dedicated to such issues, these are mainly intended for commercial purposes, and are in the English language, while the content analysed here is in Italian. Due to these factors I preferred to manually interpret the content of comments and to avoid further problems deriving from the presence of dialects, especially in the sarcastic comments.

Moreover, the adherence of comments to the topic of the updates will provide information about the levels of fragmentation of discussion. I distinguished ‘on-topic’ from ‘off-topic’ codes in order to find out whether users tended to remain on the topic suggested by the organisers or were trying to impose a different narrative.

Furthermore, I attempted to assess the quality of contribution to the discourse within the comments. In conceptual terms, this has been far from being an easy task. This issue concerns both nature, scope and effects of communication. Too easily an assessment of quality can plummet in the pitfall of arbitrariness. Drawing upon Malinowski (1925) and Schneider (1989) I explained the difference between ‘phatic’ and ‘instrumental’ communication. However, I argue that even phatic communication can have a scope and certain effects. A message can lack information but carry emotional meanings and have effects in terms of solidarity
within a group; therefore, even phatic content can be purpose-oriented. This is why I limited my assessment of quality in terms of the cognitive aspect of the movement’s collective identity. Further research will be needed in terms of evaluating the role of phatic information in terms of bonding and solidarity.

Eventually, I categorized content in two categories, phatic and instrumental. Yet, my definition of instrumental concerns content that can contribute to an informed discussion and to define the goals of the movement. Moreover, I assumed that qualitative information can hardly be encapsulated in very short messages, such as the 140 characters texts typical of tweets and SMSs. I intended thus to use length as a factor in assessing quality in comments, pointing out two categories of comments, those counting more and those counting less than 140 characters.

Initially, I attempted to measure levels of flaming too, but moderation of the comments made my effort futile. In fact, data about the presence of flaming would have been merely indicative, since comments were being constantly removed, sometimes because they were not respectful of the netiquette, at other times because they were deemed dangerous for the integrity of the movement.

The fact that the Popolo Viola page has always been moderated by the administrators constituted a limit to the content analysis, as it is not known how consistently the moderation was perpetrated, but it also provided excellent insights in terms of evaluating the issues of freedom of speech inside the movement’s collective identity building process. Popolo Viola’s netiquette was published in a note on 14th January, 2010, and consists of nine points (See netiquette in appendix I). In brief, the administrators reserved the right to delete defiant, offensive and abusive content. The continuous posting of the same content, also known as spamming, would not have been tolerated, especially when it contained advertising communication. The same applied to behaviour that was not respectful of other people’s privacy. Every user, before being banned (excluded) from the page, would

---

23 See Chapter Ten for more information about online participation.
have been warned twice; afterwards, the reason for the banning would be explained.

As we will see later in the Tenth Chapter, the decision to moderate the conversation on the page had catastrophic outcomes for the page and the movement. On the one hand, it antagonised a part of the movement’s base. On the other, it created further acts of ‘trollism’, encouraging excluded users to come back under fake names and to ask more disruptive questions. The presence of moderation required me to carry out more qualitative work, in particular participant observation and in-depth interviews.

6.6 In-depth semi-structured interviews

Twenty interviews were carried out with past and present administrators of the page, and with some of the most involved activists in the movement. In-depth interviews:

are purposeful interactions in which an investigator attempts to learn what another person knows about a topic, to discover and record what that person has experienced, what he or she feels about it, and what significance or meaning it might have (Mears, 2012: 170).

In-depth interviews, along with participant observation, are the qualitative landmarks of the methodology of this research.

Burgess describes in-depth interviews as a form of conversation (Burgess, 1982). That said, an in-depth interview carries very different characteristics from an everyday conversation, apart from their naturalistic appearance (Legard et al., 2003). Such a method is used “to elicit information in order to achieve a holistic understanding of the interviewee’s point of view or situation” (Barry, 1999: 1). The peculiarity of in-depth interviews lies in the relative freedom given to the interviewee who, thanks to the semi-structured characteristics of this method, can raise new issues and add her cognitive and emotional interpretation (Blee & Taylor, 2002).

---

Overall, interviews were essential in every aspect of my research. I carried out more than one interview per interviewee, in order to ‘update’ questions according to the development of the project. Interviews helped particularly in providing qualitative insight to phenomena that the survey and the trend analysis could provide only in quantitative terms. Initially, the main topics addressed in the interviews regarded the background of the interviewee and her/his relation to Popolo Viola; the coordination of the No Berlusconi Day; the organisation of the Facebook page ‘Il Popolo Viola’; the coordination of the No Berlusconi Day 2; the decision-making process inside the movement; and, finally, the relationship between Popolo Viola and mainstream media. With time, my research increasingly shifted its focus towards the ways in which technology’s design influenced the relationship between the movement and Facebook. I thus included questions relating to this issue, asking how the design of Facebook assisted or thwarted the activities of the page administrators.

Boyce and Neale describe the pitfalls of in-depth interviews as being that they could promote bias, be very time-intensive, and not generalizable (Boyce & Neal, 2006). The main limitation of the interviews I carried out lay in the strong effort that had to be made in terms of addressing the interviewees in order to avoid a too specific focus on personal dynamics. I noticed, in fact, a strong tendency among interviewees to focus too much on individualism and personal relationships, often in terms of one-to-one disputes. This tendency slowed down my job as an interviewer and forced me to discard a significant amount of content in order to protect the anonymity of interviewees. At least ten interviews have been greatly shortened in order to avoid possible future personal clashes which could exacerbate relationships among activists. I relied, then, on a framework suggested by Johnson, according to whom:

while transcription of all interviews is the ideal, a more parsimonious strategy is to first summarize and code them (...) and choose the more informative and representative narratives for verbatim transcription and close analysis (Johnston, 1995: 222).

Criteria for the selection of interviewees included their level of participation in the movement, their affiliation, and decisional power. Some of the interviewees
had contributed both to the birth of the movement and the opening of the Facebook page ‘il Popolo Viola’. Some of them have managed, or are still managing, the page. Some others were involved with Rete Viola and they provided insights into the different characteristics of this sub-movement and the reasons for the internal schism. Some interviewees have operated at a more local level and so contributed to an understanding of the relationships between the ‘national group’ and local groups. Some interviewees had a more offline-focused commitment; others have operated almost exclusively online on Facebook; finally, some interviewees were involved in the various coordinating committees of the movement (See Chapter Eight for an elucidating overview on the movement’s structure).

Since the first contacts, I have developed significant ties with the interviewees. My role was seen as being beneficial to the movement, and a rapport of trust developed very quickly. I was even put in contact with other researchers analysing the same movement from a different perspective. My role as an activist in London favoured this relationship of trust and never constituted a limit in terms of access to the interviewees. Actually, no interviewee ever asked for anonymity. The resolution of keeping sources anonymous was my personal choice exclusively. This decision concerned the ethics of the relationships I established with the interviewees. I felt that the disclosure of names and affiliations might be taken as an excuse for further attrition inside the movement. Tension between the various movement’s constituents had been present since the first fracture with Resistenza Viola and increased with the creation of Rete Viola, reaching a peak with the ‘purge’ of February 2011. My task as a researcher included protecting the privacy of my interviewees and focusing on the ‘big picture’ without feeding personal feuds. Moreover, I deem that the protection of personal details helped the interviewees disclose details which have been relevant for the aim of the study. However, the appendices III and IV will help the reader understand the role played by the interviewees within the movement and how the interviews were carried out with a useful sample interview guide.

25 Details in Chapter Eight.
6.7 Online Participant Observation

Ethnography:

in its most characteristic form it involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995: 1).

Kemp points out six key-stages of this research process, these are: “selecting a site for observation; observing; detailed recording; formulating hypotheses; repeating observations; and establishing saturation point” (Kemp, 2001: 528).

Drawing on the principles of virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), the study was initially conceived as a multi-sited ethnography but ended up as a strategically situated (single-site) ethnography after a necessary preliminary “systematic observation” (Androutsopoulos and Beissvenger, 2008) of different Facebook pages and groups, websites, forums, Twitter profiles, all combined with interaction with organisers, activists, and simple users via interviews on Skype.

Researching the use of new technologies has generally demanded ethnographic approaches (Harvey & Ginsberg, 1995; Lee, 1991; Davis, 1992; Pettigrew, 1985; Wynn, 1991). In particular, virtual ethnography is the reshaping of the principles of ethnography as they are applied to the Internet and all the relationships mediated by the Internet.

Christine Hine points out three areas in which virtual ethnography reshapes methodologically traditional approaches: the role of travel and face-to-face interaction in ethnography, the relationship between text, technology and reflexivity, and, finally, the making of ethnographic objects (Hine, 2000). For the first point, physical travel is not necessarily needed anymore. The relationship between ethnographer and readers is still there, though, because it is not important how the ethnographer reaches the site, but rather how she negotiates her access, observes interactions and communicates with the participants. That said, should the interactions in electronic space be considered as authentic as those in the offline realm? According to Stanley, the answer is “yes”, since the authenticity of
ethnography is produced and evaluated always in an academic setting (Stanley, 1990). Not all content on the Internet is apt for ethnographic inquiry. Part of online text resides in the static pages of the World Wide Web, where the ethnographer cannot play a part. It is rather in SNM, newsrooms, forums and chat-rooms that ethnographic interaction takes place (Hine, 2000). Moreover, competence in using the technology of the Internet is strategic for many purposes:

as a ground for reflexive exploration of what it is to use the Internet; as a means to deeper engagement and conversations with other users of the Internet; as a way to developing an enriched reading of the practices which lead to the production and consumption of Internet artefacts (ibid, 2000: 55).

Finally, reflexivity is used as a method for questioning the field, as a manner of describing in a deeper way what it is to be a cultural member.

By including and focusing upon the ways people perceive and define the cultural space within which they exist and their own place in it, there studies therefore view distinction between external and internal points of view as processes of life that are contingent upon the particular context in which they are made (Hastrup & Olwig, 1997: 11).

Objects researched and analysed in ethnography are conceived in spatial terms (Clifford, 1992). Where is the fieldwork of the ethnographer? Where is the place where culture is created and produced? Physical space has always been essential for ethnographic practice, since its dawn when long journeys had to be undertaken to reach isolated communities. This generated the impression of separate cultural sites, ‘ours’ and ‘theirs’ (Ferguson, 1997). The Internet transforms the context of interactivity, creating a new environment that, for the ethnographer, would become a “field flow, which is organised around tracing connections rather than about location in a singular bounded site” (Hine, 2000: 61).

That said, tracing connections could lead the researcher to a seemingly endless labyrinth of interactions. Initial systematic observation was thus necessary, mostly as a preliminary analysis in order to narrow down such an interminable flow of information. The incredible amount of data available on the Internet about Popolo Viola, the case study of this doctoral project, constitutes both an opportunity for and a limit to my research. On the one hand, a huge amount of data was
available at a one-click distance. This was an incredible advantage for my content analysis and my participant observation. On the other hand, Facebook initially appeared just as one of the many places where communication was taking place. Nancy Baym describes how online communities are on the Internet:

> taking a new form somewhere between the site-based online group and the egocentric network, distributing themselves throughout a variety of sites in a quasi-coherent networked fashion (Baym, 2007: 1).

“Networked collectivism” refers, then, to such communities, which spread through different websites and social networks.

Network collectivists perceive an organisation as an arbitrary boundary around a collection of individuals with whom they have strong, weak or no particularistic relationships (White & Nakamura, 2002: 2).

In other words, the Internet, in its latest Web 2.0 incarnation, facilitates a switch from closed communities to dislocated spaces of interaction around the World Wide Web (Baym, 2007; Boyd, 2008). Popolo Viola is not an exception: during the rise of the movement, many platforms were being used, such as websites and blogs; online forums; mailing lists; SNM, such as Twitter and Ning; Google-groups, and so on. Popolo Viola activists have used virtually every aggregation space online. At the risk of myself becoming a victim of information overload, I initially thought that a multi-sited ethnography was necessary. As Marcus states, multi-sited ethnography:

> is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of ethnography (Marcus, 1995: 105).

That said, such an approach would have been unfeasible for individual research, and, at best, it would have produced a very superficial outcome.

As is typical of the ethnographic method, my approach required me to improvise, adapt, and be responsive to any change in the environment surrounding the movement (Leander & McKim, 2003).

When it comes to methods, ethnography has always been characterised by eclecticism and bricolage: the ethnographer thinks and develops
methods in response to the features of the object of inquiry (Blommaert, 2008: 13).

For example, the changes in the design and in the policies of Facebook helped in reshaping my research questions, since the data were showing how new policies in page management were affecting the organisation of the movement and how new design was affecting the levels of participation.

According to Amit, in a dispersed field such as the Internet, the fieldwork becomes constructed by the ethnographer (Amit, 2000), hence the need for a reflexive approach. Part of the ethnographer’s job is to create relations on a spectrum of different and often conflicting parties, thus entering controversial personal relationships. According to Marcus:

these conflicts are resolved, perhaps ambivalently, not by refuge in being a detached anthropological scholar, but in being a sort of ethnographer-activist, renegotiating identities in different sites as one learns more about a slice of the world system (Marcus, 1995: 113).

Thankfully, this seemingly endless dissemination of information presented a problem not only to me as a researcher, but also to the movement’s activists, who, after an initial moment of experimentation with different platforms, ended up converging and focusing on Facebook almost as an exclusive tool for interaction, information and networking. This is proved by the straightforward results of the survey presented here, which are available in the next chapter. This is the reason for focusing on Facebook and excluding other online platforms of communication. In fact, these were disappearing very quickly, or at least, struggling to grow in numbers among the activists’ community. Such platforms were being experimented with and abandoned very quickly. For example, while the Facebook page was growing at a phenomenal pace, the Twitter profile had only thirteen thousand followers (data June, 2012) the Ning page attracted only a few activists, and websites and other platforms were being continuously discarded for their lack of reach and participation.

The concentration of operations on Facebook represents both a solution to a methodological issue and a finding in itself. However, such a phenomenon is strictly
linked to the Italian online landscape and to a specific historical moment, when Facebook had an overwhelming monopoly amongst other SNM, counting 21million\textsuperscript{26} users in December, 2011, against 2.4million\textsuperscript{27} Twitter subscribers in the same period.

The epistemological process takes place through “modes of construction”, or:

practices of construction through (pre-planned or opportunistic) movement and of tracing within different settings of a complex cultural phenomenon given an initial, baseline conceptual identity that turns out to be contingent and malleable as one traces it (Marcus, 1995: 105-106) specifically follow the people; follow the thing; follow the metaphor; follow the plot, story, or allegory; follow the life or biography; and, follow the conflict (Marcus, 1995).

The technique of ‘following people’ draws on the studies of Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski and the migration studies’ tradition, and becomes materialised in “a new object of study, a sense of a diasporic world independent of the mere movement of subjects from one place to another” (Marcus, 1995: 106). The act of moving from one group to another, sometimes back and forth, materializes itself through simple clicks and likes on Facebook pages and groups. The material object of study (‘follow the thing’) of the present research is made of information traveling both top-down and bottom-up through the galaxy around the Il Popolo Viola Facebook page. Being information immaterial, “the circulation of signs, symbols, and metaphors” (ibid, 1995: 108) and their narrative complements the material resources following an analogue path. It is in the last two features, though, that this research found its raison d’être.

Life histories reveal juxtapositions of social contexts through a succession of narrated individual experiences that may be obscured in the structural study of processes as such (ibid, 1995: 110).

The concept of the social movements’ life cycles, which constitutes a theoretical landmark in this study, deals with the object of study almost as a biological entity. Furthermore, the analysis of data showed how following the conflict between currents in the movement revealed an underlying conflict between meta-values: the

\textsuperscript{26}http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/
\textsuperscript{27}http://www.telecompaper.com/news/twitter-surpasses-2-million-users-in-italy
ideology and the interest behind a copy-right (commercial) platform such as Facebook, and the values of transparency and democracy in a copy-left movement, such as Popolo Viola. The quasi-totality of the circulation of information, be it people, things, metaphor, or story, took place on Facebook, thus the need to switch to a ‘strategically situated’ (single-site) ethnography.

People and information concerning Popolo Viola are not in physical movement, but they are still set in a multi-sited environment.

Indeed, what goes on within a particular locale in which research is conducted is often calibrated with its implication for what goes on in another related locale, or other locales, even though the other locales may not be within the frame of the research design or resulting ethnography (Marcus, 1995: 110).

The link between different locales is given in my research by the contribution of the interviewees, which bridges not only the different online realities, but also the online and the offline realms.

Nonetheless, as we will see in detail in the analysis chapter, Facebook alone still constitutes an immense source of information; the activities of Popolo Viola are visible not only on the Facebook page ‘il Popolo Viola’, but also on the pages of its sub-movements Rete Viola and Resistenza Viola, which has changed its name to Resistenza Continua; on countless (thousands of) Facebook groups and pages related to local groups in Italy and around the world. This still constituted a huge source of distress for a single researcher and it forced me to analyse hundreds of posts, notes, comments, events; basically, any form of content creation.

The analysis of the data coming from the Facebook page allowed me to have a picture of the levels of membership, engagement, and participation, providing an idea of ‘what’ was happening inside and around the movement. The content analysis contributed to an understanding of ‘how’ engagement and participation were evolving, while the interviews and the participant observation answered the question about ‘why’ those levels were changing and what was affecting them. The survey, although based on a non-representative sample, helped me to portray the
media habits of the activists and, as already stated, to narrow down the site of my research.

I also carried out participant observation of the London group, but I eventually decided to discard this material due to my increasing personal involvement with the group, which would have turned my academic effort into action research. Material included notes from meetings, events and demonstrations, and discussions taking place respectively on the Facebook profile and the group Popolo Viola London, the Popolo Viola London Google Group and the website/forum www.popoloviolalondon.org. The decisional power I gained inside the group would have compromised the rigor required by my study. Rigor here is intended not only as “strict precision and exactness” (Davison et al., 2004: 66), but also as “the correct use of methods and analyses appropriate to the tasks at hand” (Benbasat & Zmud, 1999: 5, quoted in ibid: 66). In fact, if, on the one hand my personal contribution had impacted on decision-making process, on the other hand, personal relationships with other activists could have biased my findings in a consistent manner. Moreover, whereas my contribution was well appreciated by the Italian-based movement, my double role as activist-researcher was not always welcome among group-members in London. One activist accused me twice of using the movement ‘as a guinea-pig’ for my personal academic purposes only, as if I were experimenting with it. In spite of my good faith, which was apparent to the other activists, I decided to announce that my research would focus on the Italian (as in ‘based in Italy’) Popolo Viola only. I decided on this as a form of respect to my fellow activists. In spite of these issues, the participant observation of the events and activities of Popolo Viola London helped me to develop an understanding of the relationships between the different groups constituting the movement, from the national page to the countless local groups inside and outside Italy.

Participant observation was essential in this project, both at a preliminary level, as explained in the first section of the chapter, and as a tool with which to capture the discourse features surrounding the movement. As Johnston and Klandermans state, “it is typically through immersion in group activities that key narratives and texts can be identified” (Johnston & Klandermas, 1995: 18).
As a member of the Popolo Viola London, I had the chance to interact not only with members of the movement in the United Kingdom, but also with those activists who sought to create a strong link with all the activists of PV who were based around the world and who were involved with the diasporic communities and the groups that organised the No Berlusconi Day in the major capitals around the globe. Popolo Viola in Italy had an individual responsible for contacts and relationships with the groups in Europe and around the world. The purpose was to create a “Purple International”, which would have gathered all of the groups and would lobby supranational institutions. Unfortunately, the project never saw the light of day.

The participant observation I carried out was initially intended to be both offline and online. Offline, I participated in all the meetings and demonstrations organised in London. Online, I was involved in discussions, and took note of any material in and outside Facebook which concerned the movement and the dialogue between its most influential activists. Such material was fundamental to drawing a chronology of the movement and to refining questions and themes which surfaced in the in-depth interviews.

It is necessary to state that the participative aspects of the observation were kept to a minimum in order not to influence in any way whatsoever the patterns of communication analysed. I rarely participated in online conversations through likes and comments, but my presence was well known to the participants, since some of them were taking part in my interviews. That said, my presence was welcome by all of the activists involved and I had access to all the data I needed. Moreover, activists saw my research as a potential contribution to the wellbeing of the movement and as a potential resource for improving strategies and operations. After all, much of the conversation was taking place in closed groups on Facebook, such as ‘Costituente Viola’\(^\text{28}\), and the fact that I was accepted as part of the groups signalled the general approval of my presence.

\(^{28}\)‘Costituente Viola’ (‘Purple Constituency’) is a group of 41 members (December, 2012) which was founded by two former administrators of the Facebook page ‘il Popolo Viola’ who were excluded by
Many of the conflicts between the organisers, the activists from the local groups, the supporters of Rete Viola and the other currents inside the movement, were just one-click-away and this work constituted the most ethnographic aspect of the research. At a second stage, as explained before, I excluded from my research any detail coming from my offline participation and from my involvement with the group based in London. This was due not only to ethical reasons, but also to the manifest distance between the London group and the rest of the movement. It is not a coincidence that during the first internal struggles the group in the UK released a manifesto and declared its total independence from the movement in Italy. I had the impression that the only advantage I might have had from the inclusion of participation in the London group would have come from a “comparing and contrasting” approach that related to the transnational and diaspora movements. Such an approach, though, would not have been beneficial for the research questions I had in mind for this project and it was quickly discarded, while, at the same time, it allowed me to be active in the initiatives organised in the UK.

6.8 Survey

An online-based survey with 216 respondents was undertaken in Spring-Summer, 2010, during the shift between the formalisation and the institutionalisation stages of Popolo Viola.

Online surveys are an instrument which is increasingly popular in social studies (Andrews, Nonnecke & Preece, 2003; Bachmann & Elfrink, 1996; Stanton, 1998; Witmer, Colman & Katzman, 1999; Yun & Trumbo, 2000, referenced in Wright, 2006). The main advantages of this technique relate to the low costs and the relative speed of conducting the research, and the better accuracy in data entry (Medi, Roy & Ann, 1999). Views that relate to lower response rates for internet surveys, rather than mail surveys (Cooper, Blair & Triplett, 1999), have been disproved by Crawford et al. (2001), who argue that the problem was not in the nature of online surveys but, rather, in a lack of expertise in disseminating them when the Internet was still in its Web 1.0 incarnation (Crawford, Couper & Lamias, 2001). Another disadvantage in its management in February, 2011. At the moment of writing, the group is still in place, although it is inactive.
regard to online-based surveys is that they obviously exclude those who do not own an Internet connection, be it by choice or due to cultural and economic disadvantage (Kaye & Johnson, 1999). That said, this shortcoming does not concern my research, considering the nature of Popolo Viola as an online-based movement.

The subset of individuals from the overall population of present and past subscribers to the Facebook page ‘Il Popolo Viola’ was chosen on a voluntary basis. Past subscribers were reached on the page of the sub-movement “Rete Viola – Gruppi Locali”. The choice of the two groups was made in order to include the views of the activists who had decided to abandon Popolo Viola. Consequently, this can be considered to be convenience (or opportunity) sampling (Miller and Salkind, 2002). The findings of the survey are useful for three different reasons: firstly, in order to provide an understanding of the online repertoire of contention used by Popolo Viola; secondly, to analyse the relationship that the different categories of users had with the potential of Facebook for activism and the movement; finally, to assess whether or not such an attitude differed according to the affiliation (Popolo Viola or Rete Viola) of the users.

Concerning the general traits of the sample surveyed, the majority of the users consist of females, 61.1%, against 38.9% males. In terms of age, the female sample population seems to be evenly distributed among the age range 18-60+. Female respondents are predominantly situated in the age range 18-30, with 33.3% of the overall female sample (18-24 13.6% and 25-30 19.7%). We can then find the age group 31-40, with 22.9% (31-35 12.1% and 36-40 9.8%). Just behind them are the groups 41-50 (21%) and 51-60 (21.2%). Users in the 60+ group count only for 2.3% of the female sample. The male population is more concentrated around the age range 31-40, with 32.1% of the overall male sample (31-35 22.6% and 36-40 9.5%), followed by the 18-30 group with 28.6% (18-24 13.1% and 25-30 15.5). We then find the 50-60 group, with 17.9%, the 40-50 group with 16.7% and the 60+ group with only 4.8%. Overall, the survey sample sees the age group 18-30 as being predominant, with 31.5% (18-24 13.4% and 25-30%), followed by the 31-40 group

29 For more information about the offline and online repertoires of contention, please refer to literature review chapter.
with 25.9% (31-35 16.2% and 36-40 9.7%). Behind them, we find the 50-60 group with 19.9%, the 40-50 group with 19.4% and, finally, 3.2% of the total sample who are part of the 60+ group.

**Table 6.1. Sample Demographics: Age**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total: 216</td>
<td>61.10%</td>
<td>38.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>13.60%</td>
<td>13.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>19.70%</td>
<td>15.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-35</td>
<td>12.10%</td>
<td><strong>22.60%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>9.80%</td>
<td>9.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td><strong>21%</strong></td>
<td>16.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>21.20%</td>
<td>17.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>2.30%</td>
<td>4.80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In regard to instruction level, the sample surveyed seems to be characterised by a high level of education. More than half of the respondents hold at least a university degree (61.6%); among these users, 27 had obtained a Master’s degree (12.5% of the total), 20 a PhD (9.3%). 34.3% of the sample hold a secondary school diploma, and only 4.2% hold a primary school diploma. Female users prevail among the users holding a degree (61 against 25 males), master’s, with 14 female respondents against 13 males, and PhD’s also, with 11 female doctors against 9 males.
Table 6.2. Sample Demographics: Education Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary School Diploma</td>
<td>4.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School Diploma</td>
<td>34.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Degree</td>
<td>39.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master's Degree</td>
<td>12.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>9.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total: 216</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6.2. Sample Demographics: Education Level

Three different categories of users were established: organisers (Facebook users who were involved in organising protest); activists (users who were not involved in organising but who regularly attended demonstrations); and audience (users who were participating online but were not interested in organising or participating in offline protest). These three groups were then sub-divided into six groups: organisers, activists, and the audience of Popolo Viola; organisers, activists, and the audience of Rete Viola. It could be argued here that audiences are passive subjects who only access information, and even when considered active they are not participating in a conversation but, rather, they reconstruct meaning according to their own cultural and social background. That said, here, the term ‘audience’ is
intended as an active subject who is not only a recipient of information but also an active participant in the exchange of information. The role played by the ‘audience’ here is very similar to that played by the prosumers, as described by Don Tapscott in his book *Wikinomics* (Tapscott, 2006). Prosumers take part in the production and recombination of information as well as in the configuration of the tools enabling such activities. (Toffler, 1980; Tapscott, 2006; Jenkins, 2006). The audience is, then, conceptualised as being an active player, but only in terms of online information contribution, thus not enough to be labelled as ‘activist’ because of its lack of offline engagement.

The main questions of the questionnaire regarded: the demographics of surveyed individuals (gender, age, education level, income); the type of involvement in the movement (online and offline); the repertoire of contention employed (online and offline means of protests); the tools used for information (Facebook, Twitter, Indymedia, etc., etc.); Popolo Viola’s tools used for information (Facebook page ‘Il Popolo Viola, etc., etc.); finally, through five-point Likert scale questions, the respondents’ attitudes to Popolo Viola’s strategies were assessed. I decided to focus on closed questions with both ordered and unordered answer choices, which guarantee a much quicker analysis of data.

The main limitation of the survey lies in its sampling method. In order to reach activists, I posted a link to the website [http://freeonlinesurveys.com/](http://freeonlinesurveys.com/), where the questionnaire was[^30], on the Facebook pages ‘Il Popolo Viola’ and Rete Viola’s ‘Popolo Viola – rete gruppi locali’. I was interested both in the users of the National page and in those supporting the ethical charter. The inability to predict who would participate in my survey meant that the sample was based on convenience, self-selection, and non-probability, and was thus not representative. However, no Internet sample collected in Italy in 2011 could be representative because more than 40% of the National population lacked an Internet connection. Moreover, a large number of studies has shown that there is little difference between scientific and unscientific Internet samples as (and when) self-selected samples attract larger

numbers of respondents (Bishop, 2001; Parker, 2001). The survey I carried out provided further insight into the different characteristics of the sub-groups making up Popolo Viola, categorised in terms of their affiliation and commitment to the cause of the movement. Moreover, the survey helped to interpret data coming from the data and content analyses, providing information which led me to focus on Facebook and to discard other platforms, and it reinforced findings from the other methods employed.

The overall richness of the data constituted both an opportunity and a limit. The digital nature of data and the ease of access to people and content through the Internet facilitated enormously the collection of information. On the other hand, it required a considerable effort to organize data into intelligible patterns for each of the dynamics analysed. Consequently, the findings sections are comprised of four extensive chapters, relating to the lifecycle, organization, mobilization, and collective identity, respectively.
Chapter Seven: The Life Cycle of Popolo Viola

7.1 Introduction

As explained in the initial chapters of this thesis, social movements rise, evolve, and eventually decline. The achievement or failure of the aims of protest can sanction the decline of social movements. The development of protest could take different and unexpected directions, according to contingencies related to the specific social and political environment where protest takes place. That said, scholars point out a series of common patterns that allow a classification to be in place under the term “social movement lifecycle” (Dawson & Gettys, 1929; Blumer, 1969; Tilly, 1978; Della Porta & Diani, 2006). Different terms have been adopted in order to name the different stages of the lifecycle. In this research, I decided to utilize the terms of unrest, excitement, formalization, institutionalization, and decline (Dawson & Gettys, 1929).

In this chapter I will follow this framework in order to assess the growth and deterioration of Popolo Viola. Facebook acted as the prevalent tool of organization and mobilization in the anti-Berlusconi protest. As briefly anticipated in the methods chapter, Popolo Viola was a “Facebook movement”, rather than a more general “online” movement, because Facebook was central to every social movement activity, from recruitment to the circulation of information. This peculiarity provides this case with the status of uniqueness, but it also represents an exemplary starting point for the analysis of the movements which followed Popolo Viola. As SNM are becoming more present in people’s everyday life, they also become central to the concerns of protest-related communication flows. Without overlooking offline interaction, it is on Facebook, then, that the analysis must focus.

As to the development of Popolo Viola, the agents involved include the movement Popolo Viola as a whole; the Catania\textsuperscript{31} group, which refers to the group of individuals who, through time, firstly managed and controlled the page “Una

\textsuperscript{31} Catania is the city in Sicily from which San Precario and other activists involved with the management of the il Popolo Viola Facebook page come.
manifestazione nazionale per chiedere le dimissioni di Silvio Berlusconi\textsuperscript{32} (UMN) and later the page “il Popolo Viola” (IPV); this group was led by the anonymous activist, blogger, and CGIL union member San Precario, who personally opened the two pages; furthermore, the activists who gained online visibility inside the movement after they created local groups and Facebook pages; these subjects increasingly claimed a voice within the movement; furthermore, the Non-Profit Organization Il Popolo Viola, which was launched in July 2010, acted formally as the main Social Movement Organization inside the movement and sanctioned its institutionalization; finally, those activists who challenged the supremacy of San Precario by leaving the movement and founding the sub-movements Resistenza Viola (Purple Resistance), in February, 2010, and Rete Viola (Purple Network), in September, 2010. This chapter will provide a temporal overview of facts and patterns on the Il Popolo Viola page which, combined, characterize the evolution of Popolo Viola through its lifecycle stages. This chapter also acts as the foundation to the analysis of the issues of organization, mobilization, and collective identity, which will be elaborated on further in the following chapters.

Differently from the theoretical outline provided by Dawson and Gettys (1929), I point out a final stage, which I will call transformation. This stage constitutes one of the main peculiarities of this analysis. The transformation stage sanctions the conversion of the Facebook page il Popolo Viola from a social movement medium into a mobilizing structure and a platform of interaction that is available for both activism and discussion in spite of the decline of the eponymous movement. This process took place in spite of the decline of the movement itself. During the transformation stage the social movement itself degenerated, but the Facebook page still held the potential to thrive as a vehicle for exchange of information among like-minded citizens.

In the present chapter I illustrate the history of Popolo Viola through four different stages: excitement, formalization, institutionalization, and transformation. Changes in the organizational configuration of the movement sanctioned the shifts from one stage to another. The excitement stage took place between 9\textsuperscript{th} October,
2009, when the first Facebook page relating to the No Berlusconi Day was opened, and 9th January, 2010, when in Naples, during the first national movement meeting, a first coordination group was announced. The formalization ended with the launch of the formal Non-Profit organization “Il Popolo Viola” on the 1st July, 2010. Popolo Viola was now an institutionalized movement. A few months later, in February, 2011, an intense internal division took place that weakened the credibility of Popolo Viola irreparably. However, rather than simply declining, the movement underwent a radical transformation due to the presence of its popular Facebook page, which served efficiently as a mobilization hub at least as far as the campaigns for the administrative elections in May, 2011, and the National referenda in June.

**Table 7.1. Demonstrations and Campaigns Organized by Popolo Viola: An Overview**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demonstration/Campaign</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Lifecycle Stage</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Berlusconi Day</td>
<td>05-Dec-09</td>
<td>Excitement</td>
<td>Rome and other cities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libera rete in libero stato</td>
<td>23-Dec-09</td>
<td>Excitement</td>
<td>Rome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sit-in in difesa della Costituzione</td>
<td>30-Jan-10</td>
<td>Formalization</td>
<td>Rome and other cities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La legge è uguale per tutti</td>
<td>27-Feb-10</td>
<td>Formalization</td>
<td>Rome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agorà per l’Emergenza democratica</td>
<td>07-Mar-10</td>
<td>Formalization</td>
<td>Rome and other cities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legittimo impedimento</td>
<td>10-Mar-10</td>
<td>Formalization</td>
<td>Rome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Mafia Day</td>
<td>13-Mar-10</td>
<td>Formalization</td>
<td>Reggio Calabria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L’Aquila Day</td>
<td>31-Jul-10</td>
<td>Institutionalization</td>
<td>L’Aquila</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Berlusconi Day 2</td>
<td>02-Oct-10</td>
<td>Institutionalization</td>
<td>Rome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ViolaConvention</td>
<td>05-Dec-10</td>
<td>Institutionalization</td>
<td>Rome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adesso Basta. Berlusconi dimetiti!</td>
<td>12-Feb-11</td>
<td>Institutionalization</td>
<td>Rome and other cities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petition Legittimo Impedimento</td>
<td>13-Apr-11</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign Administrative Elections</td>
<td>01-May-11</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battiquorum</td>
<td>May-Jun-11</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piazza Pulita!</td>
<td>11-Sep-11</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>Rome</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The power struggles taking place between the various constituents of the movement that characterized the development of a quasi-bureaucratic structure which failed to reach a stable formation due to internal struggles between the holders of technical power and the under-represented constituents, contributing eventually to a loss of credibility in the movement and its instances. Within this dialectical development, an important role was played by Facebook. The design of the SNM platform, devised according to corporate principles of connectivity, contributed to the quick rise of the movement, but also to its decline.
Since Facebook is a relatively young medium, the analysis proposed here relies on an original methodological framework. It will be helpful therefore to list the data which shape the present chapter here. Firstly, I carried out a historical analysis of the movement. Secondly, I associated data about affiliation levels to the movement Facebook page and participation in the events which occurred during the evolution of Popolo Viola.

This chapter also serves as an introduction to the analysis of the organizational issues which takes place in Chapter Eight. The concept of an SM lifecycle is related to the issues of structure, leadership, and decision-making, which I will assess in the next chapter. However, I argue that collective identity issues are too often overlooked in literature. A deeper understanding of how a movement gradually defines itself through solidarity and mutual recognition can provide a more comprehensive account of the “history” of a movement. Collective identity deserves a separate analysis in Chapter Ten because of the complexity of its development. Nevertheless, the discussion chapter will bring together findings in order to construct a complete argumentation. This is essential in order to overcome reductive cause/effect accounts of the relationship between technology and social movements and to highlight the human components within such a process. What is more, focusing on an SM lifecycle has enabled me to apply this framework to the other dynamics which will be analysed in the findings’ chapters of this thesis. The aim is to establish a crucial principle. This differs from most of the literature discussed in the initial chapters, this thesis does not consider social movements to be unified actors, but rather considers them as fluid networks which undergo constant mutations and regeneration. While technology does indeed play a role in this process, the protagonists are the human actors involved in a continuous power struggle, which evolves both online and offline.

7.2 The Excitement Stage of Popolo Viola (9th October, 2009, – 9th January, 2010)

Popolo Viola, the movement that emerged from the No Berlusconi Day, the demonstration of the 5th December, 2009, was initially born as a reaction to one of
the most controversial reforms proposed by Berlusconi’s government: the Lodo Alfano, a law that aimed to grant immunity to the four highest political offices in Italy. Like the Cirami law before it, this law was seen by part of the population as the umpteenth attempt by Berlusconi to avoid the many judicial trials in which he was involved. When the Corte Costituzionale, the Italian Constitutional Court, rejected the law and labelled it “unconstitutional” on the 6th October, 2009 (Hooper, 2009), a group of bloggers believed that this was the right moment to mobilize as many citizens as possible in order to demonstrate against Berlusconi and his government. On Facebook, they opened the UMN page and immediately reached an unexpected consensus among Facebook users. After only two weeks, the page reached more than 170,000 likers. Countless local groups sprang up all round the country and all round the world, in particular in London, where, according to the last census in 2001, 39,000 Italians live (data from Rapporto Italiani nel Mondo 2009). The first demonstration, the No Berlusconi Day, took place in Rome on the 5th December, 2009. According to the newspapers, between 300,000 and 500,000 (even 1 million according to the organizers) protesters took to the streets of Rome to ask for Berlusconi’s resignation. Parallel demonstrations took place in major cities across the world: London, Berlin, Madrid, New York, Paris, and Sydney, among many others. A single-issue protest rapidly evolved into a social movement, called, as we have seen already, Popolo Viola, ‘purple people’. The colour purple was chosen because it was, at least in Italy, not previously associated with any political movement, as a word to the wise that the movement was not linked to any political party. That said, many left-wing parties directly and/or indirectly endorsed the demonstration in order to exploit its potential. This involvement, as will be analysed in the next chapter, will create several problems for the movement. In spite of this, new groups and pages sprang up on Facebook: apart from the page ‘Il Popolo Viola’, which at the time of writing has more than 460,000 members (data August, 2013), more than 300 pages and 400 groups that are connected or related to the movement have been opened at a local level, in and outside Italy (data Facebook).

On the 8th December, an update on the page said: “We’ve just started”. A series of ‘viol@zioni’ (‘purple actions’) was scheduled: among others, a
demonstration in Calabria against the construction of a bridge over the Messina Strait was planned for the 19th December. Afterwards, a sit-in called ‘Libera Rete in Libero Stato’ (‘A Free Internet in A Free Country’) was scheduled for the 23rd December. The last initiative aimed to contrast the ‘gagging law’, the never-implemented decree that had intended to put the Internet under government control. For both events the strategy was spontaneous and unplanned, reflecting the process of the birth of the movement on a micro-level. In fact, in just a few days, extemporaneous groups, pages and events that were related to the initiative were opened on Facebook.

As will be explained in depth in the next chapter, in spite of the great mobilizing power, the movement was already afflicted by internal struggles coming from its highly centralised organisational configuration and difficulties in distributing internal power among the constituents of the movement. The Catania group called for a national meeting to be held in Naples and to find an agreement on a shared set of rules. However, at this stage these issues were known only to the most involved activists and did not undermine Popolo Viola’s levels of participation, both offline and online.

Facebook allowed the excitement stage to be incredibly short. At midnight on the 7th December, thus on the first day of the page il Popolo Viola, 44,315 people had already subscribed to it. The following day 28,600 more users joined Popolo Viola. The growth was as astonishing as it was short; these astounding numbers could not last long and subscription levels dropped very quickly. In Figure 7.1 it is possible to see the subscription trend, where there is a decreasing curve between the initial flood of subscribers in the first days and a more stabilised number of new subscribers in the beginning of January is shown. On the 8th January, only 494 users subscribed to the page, 1.1% of the number of users subscribing on 7th December, and less than the average recorded during the formalisation stage. Overall, comparing the first and last week of the excitement period33, a decrease in new

33 As far as the il Popolo Viola Facebook page is concerned, the first week is the week 7th -13th December, 2009.
subscriptions of 96.5% is shown. In terms of affiliation, then, the excitement stage finished way before the attempt to construct a formalised structure.

**Figure 7.1. New Daily Subscriptions – Excitement stage**

![Graph showing new daily subscriptions](image)

A second occurrence relates to how Facebook promoted group formation, broadening the mobilized activists’ base on a global level. Previously, I have explained how the activists who had opened the first pages helped other people open new spaces for mobilization and discussion on Facebook, promoting the proliferation of the Popolo Viola groups and pages both in Italy and abroad. With the No Berlusconi Day and the birth of Popolo Viola’s page on the 7th December, 2009, countless ‘viola’ groups and pages sprang up on Facebook, both on a local and international level, and also among different social groups, for example, with the page ‘Studenti Viola’\(^\text{34}\), ('Purple Students’), or ‘DonneViola’\(^\text{35}\), ('Purple Women’). As an Rete Viola activist says,

> Facebook was so overwhelmed with pages and groups with the name ‘viola’, that after only a few days it was necessary to send Facebook a request in order to open a page containing that word. In your request you had to prove you already owned a page or a profile with the same term in it (Interviewee no.1).

> Facebook allowed Popolo Viola to spread contemporaneously at a national, local, and international level. Facebook and the openness of the organisers enabled such groups to form at lightning speed; as an activist from London explains,

\(^{34}\) The ‘Studenti Viola’ page has more than 6,000 subscribers (update December, 2012).

\(^{35}\) The ‘DonneViola’ page has 2,600 subscribers circa (update December, 2012).
We came to know about the No Berlusconi Day on Facebook and through the information posted there it was very easy to reach the organisers. We asked them if we could open a group here and we were given absolute freedom about content and editorial line. As far as informative material is concerned, we didn’t even have to ask as everything was available online from the UMN page and on the website www.noberlusconiday.org. More than fifty people asked to be an active part of the movement and more than six hundred activists participated in the No Berlusconi Day London. It was unprecedented to see so many people taking part in an Italian demonstration on foreign soil. The London Metropolitan Police struggled to find a place that could host so many people at one time, as they totally underestimated the reach of the event (Interviewee no.10).

A third aspect that characterizes Popolo Viola’s page growth in its early stages is the positive correlation between the organization of initiatives and the patterns of affiliation on the Facebook page. In spite of a modest offline participation in events, such as Libera rete in Libero Stato and other viol@zioni, the online calls for mobilisation related to such events helped the page increase its levels of affiliation in the week between the 16th and 23rd December, with peaks of more than 7,000 daily affiliates on the 17th.

Finally, it is necessary to report that, on top of the effort made by activists, relevant support for the page growth also came from outside the movement, specifically from the press and political parties, and this was especially true in relation to the UMN page before the No Berlusconi Day. As an activist points out:

before the newspaper La Repubblica had published an article about the No Berlusconi Day, the UMN page wasn’t very popular. Only then the influx of new contacts exploded, as to witness how mainstream mass media were still necessary (Interviewee no.3).

The support of the political parties IDV (Italia dei Valori) and PRC (Partito Rifondazione Comunista) also contributed (problematically, as we will see later) to its growth. When on the 27th October, 2009, La Repubblica published an article titled “Di Pietro36 and Ferrero37 will participate at the Facebook demonstration ‘No

36 Antonio Di Pietro, leader of the IDV party.
37 Paolo Ferrero, leader of the PRC party.
"Berlusconi Day' on the 5th December”\(^{38}\), subscriptions to the page increased exponentially. When, on the 12th November, *La Repubblica* published another article about the demonstration\(^{39}\), the UMN page already had almost 250,000 fans.

After the demonstration, in spite of the page still being in place\(^{40}\), traffic was driven to the page ‘Il Popolo Viola’, which saw the light of day on 7th December, 2009. After the protest, links leading to the new page were shared on a daily basis, usually followed by articles published by foreign press, such as *The New York Times* and *Le Monde’s* reports of the demonstration. On top of the tools utilised by the movement, Facebook in particular, external help was thus essential to aggregate resources, in the form of provisions by political parties and mass media outlets which supported the cause of the movement. While Facebook allowed the group to circulate information material at no cost, organising an event that was so huge was a task which would be successful only with the support of organisations such as political parties that, as we will see in the next chapter, were also the source of internal struggles. Moreover, the mobilizing potential of Facebook was strongly helped by the mainstream mass media, which publicised the page, thus contributing to the boom of new subscriptions. As a Rete Viola activist says:

> the power of the web had been overstated. The page Il Popolo Viola wouldn’t have had the same success without the intervention of mass media and the contribution of politicians (Interviewee no.1).

In regard to the visits and to participation in Popolo Viola’s Facebook page, we can state that the excitement stage was characterized by an initially huge influx of visitors to the page (35,279 average daily visitors in the first week), which significantly decreased (-87.23%) throughout the course of the life of the stage (4,505 in the last week). During the excitement stage of Popolo Viola, an average of 13,939 users visited the Facebook page on a daily basis. On the 7th December, 2009, 59,792 single users visited the page, against 3,273 on the 8th January, 2010, with a


\(^{40}\) The page ‘Una Manifestazione Nazionale per chiedere le dimissioni di Berlusconi’ was still in place in July, 2012, and has 423,936 likers (data 13\(^{th}\) July, 2012). It is updated less frequently than the ‘page Il Popolo Viola’ with content copied from it.
decrease of 94.52%. Comparing the first and last week of this first stage of the life cycle, the research shows a decrease in visits of 85.7% (Figure 8.6). The same can be said of participation (-70.3%). Participation was made prominently through likes (78.49%), and a high production of wall posts (13.89%), while comments (7.63%) constituted a secondary way of being part of the exchange of information.

Overall then, five dynamics characterized the patterns of affiliation and participation in the excitement stage of Popolo Viola. Firstly, patterns of affiliation on Facebook speeded up the excitement stage to a level that was previously unthinkable, compressing into a very narrow time-lapse the influx of new subscribers and visitors. Secondly, Facebook promoted group-formation that extended the reach of the movement. Thirdly, a positive correlation took place between the organization of events and the page’s affiliation levels. Fourthly, external help from political parties and media coverage provided a vital backing for the building of a vast audience of users and activists. Finally, the state of excitement which surrounded the cause of the movement translated itself into a predominance of symbolic approval of the content uploaded by the organizers and the sharing of informational content that motivated the protest.

7.3 The Formalization Stage of Popolo Viola (10th January, 2010 – 1st July, 2010)

The formalization stage of Popolo Viola started on 10th January, 2010, in the aftermath of the national meeting in Naples, where an organizational form was set up and the first internal struggles that led to the eventual split with resistenza viola on 5th February began. It ended on 2nd July, 2010, with the establishment of the Popolo Viola Non-Profit organization.

This period was dense with events organized by the movement. Initially, a Sit-in for the Italian constitution took place on the 30th January, 2010; the demonstration ‘La Legge e’ Uguale Per Tutti’ (‘Law is Equal to Everyone’), on 27th February, drew thousands of protesters to Piazza del Popolo in Rome. The event ‘Agora per l’Emergenza Democratica’ (‘An Agora for the Democratic Emergency’) occurred on the 7th March, it was a sit-in against the Legittimo Impedimento’s
decree and was held in front of the Senate House in Rome on 10th March while the High Chamber was discussing it. Moreover, the No Mafia Day on 13th March, initially intended to take place in Reggio Calabria only, eventually was joined by tens of different demonstrations around Italy and the rest of Europe. A demonstration against the privatisation of water took place in Rome on 19th March. On the 17th April, thousands of PV followers marched in Rome in solidarity with the NGO Emergency, which was the object of attacks by supporters and members of Berlusconi’s government. Finally, the months of May and June saw a series of initiatives against the gagging law, which had been approved by the Senate and was still under discussion in the Lower Chamber.

The “goal transformation” within Popolo Viola is here evident. Whilst, during the excitement stage, Berlusconi and his attempts to control the Internet were monopolising the activities of Popolo Viola, during the formalization stage, issues about the Mafia, the privatization of water, and about war, joined the purple agenda. Zald and Ash would call this process the “diffusion of goals” (Zald & Ash, 1966).

The sit-in in defence of the Italian constitution in January saw 89 different concomitant demonstrations taking place, not only in Italy but also in London and Paris. As with the NBD, support was coming from political parties and organizations from civil society. 18 different organizations contributed to the event. The event was deemed a success both by the organisers and the activist base. On the 27th February, 2010, the demonstration ‘La Legge è uguale per Tutti’ attempted to repeat the success of the No Berlusconi Day, but it attracted ‘only’ thirty thousand people to the streets of Rome. As we will see in the next chapter, the cause of the relative failure consisted in the ways in which the internal struggles and internal divisions had influenced the organizing process. It was now that the movement went through its first internal split, with the birth of ‘Resistenza Viola’ (Purple Resistance).

During this stage the page ‘Il Popolo Viola’ grew quickly, even though far fewer than the incredible rates that were recorded during the excitement stage. In fact, it grew with an average of 728 new ‘likers’ per day, against the 5,845 of the
excitement stage. During the first week of the formalization stage (10th – 16th Jan) the average growth was of 495 new likers per day, against 519 during the last week (25th Jun – 1st Jul). According to the data shown in Figure 7.2 the subscription rate was stable throughout this stage, apart from the period February-March, where a significant growth in subscriptions took place, with an average of 1,297 new ‘likers’ per day and a peak of 5,154 new members on the 7th March.

*Figure 7.2. New Daily Subscriptions – Formalization stage*

The positive correlation between peaks of subscription and the organisation of events was still in place but, if compared to the previous stage, was minor. Two peaks of affiliation took place. The first is connected to the event of the 27th February, with 2,216 new likers. The second, and most effective, is the two day event ‘Agora per l’Emergenza Democratica’, with a demonstration in Rome on the 6th March and simultaneous initiatives taking place in various cities at the same time on the 7th. On the 7th March, 5,514 users became affiliates. On the other hand, there is no sign of a relationship between the organizational struggles and affiliations.

During the formalization stage the Facebook page ‘il Popolo Viola’ was visited by an average of 5,421 single users on a daily basis, against 13,939 during the excitement stage. The first week was characterized by an average of 3,873 users viewing the page, against 4,346 during the last week, and 8,103 average visitors during the
period February – March, with a peak of 21,391 on 20th March, when demonstrations against the Mafia and the TAV project took place in Milan and Turin.

While visits declined, participation grew exponentially, especially with regard to comments (+132% more than in the excitement stage), while likes increased with lower intensity (+16%), and wall posts significantly decreased (-51%). The growth of comments was due to a discussion about the nature of the movement and its rising internal divisions. In fact, whereas during the excitement stage internal struggles were known only to a small circle of activists, now the activist base became aware of the first symptoms of fragmentation. As analysed in more depth in Chapter Ten, the nature of participation changed significantly, becoming increasingly polarized, mirroring the movement’s break-up.

To summarize, the formalization stage was characterized by a normalization of the patterns of affiliation and the number of visits to the page. The page evolved from a mere instrument for mobilization into a platform of discussion. The fragility of the movement reflected itself in the nature of discussion, which became increasingly polarized. The search for a more stabilized structure sanctions the passage to the institutionalization stage.

7.4 The Institutionalization Stage of Popolo Viola (2nd July, 2010, – 14th February, 2011)

The institutionalization stage took place during the period between 2nd July, 2010, when the Non-Profit organization il Popolo Viola was born, and 14th February, 2011, when another internal struggle resulted in the exclusion of most of the administrators, apart from two, of the group’s founders. The establishment of the new organization was announced just one day previously in Piazza Navona, Rome, during a demonstration organized by the FNSI41, and was held once again to protest against the gagging law. The event saw Popolo Viola among its organisers.

Instead of guaranteeing more stability, the creation of the non-profit organisation “Il Popolo Viola” created more turmoil, alienating those activists who

41 Federazione Nazionale Stampa Italiana, FNSI (National Federation Italian Press).
were against the institutionalisation of the movement. The Catania group announced a long-awaited national meeting would take place in Montecatini (Tuscany) in October, 2010, in order to create that shared set of rules that had failed to materialize at the Naples meeting. In spite of the effort of many activists, the internal struggles became so intense that the meeting had to be cancelled. Disappointment among the local groups was so strong that they left Popolo Viola in September and merged with resistenza viola, the group of ‘rebels’ who had abandoned the movement in February, in order to create another sub-movement called ‘Rete Viola’ (‘Purple Network’).

The diffusion of goals increased during this stage. Various initiatives were planned, even though with less frequency than during the formalization stage. In July the protest against the gagging law continued with more initiatives in place. Apart from the event where the birth of the organisation was announced, it is worth mentioning an online petition which gathered 340,000 signatures. On the website Avaaz, where the petition was placed, the organisers announced the withdrawal of the decree in the Italian parliament: “We made it! The ‘gagging law’ is defeated (...). This constitutes a historical victory for the Italian population: for the first time popular mobilisation has changed the Parliament’s agenda. We have overpowered Berlusconi and his policy based on private interests”. However, as far asthis campaign, Popolo Viola, was concerned, this was just one of the subjects involved, with the newspaper La Repubblica, the Democratic Party (PD), and the Association of Journalists at the forefront of the initiative.

On 31th July, 2010, the L’Aquila Day took place, in order to demonstrate solidarity with the victims of the earthquake that had shaken the Abruzzo region on 6th April, 2009. During the summer, the second No Berlusconi Day was planned for the 2nd October, 2010, and was announced through a note on 17th August. Various

42 More about this in the next chapter.
43 Original text: “Ce l’abbiamo fatta: la "legge bavaglio" per ora è stata affossata, e alcuni osservatori dicono che sia stata definitivamente stralcata! Si tratta di una vittoria storica per il potere delle persone in Italia: è la prima volta che la mobilitazione popolare è riuscita a cambiare l'agenda parlamentare. Più di 340.000 italiani hanno firmato contro la "legge bavaglio". Insieme siamo riusciti a mettere alle strette Berlusconi e la sua politica fondata sull'interesse privato. Ora dobbiamo cogliere l'occasione di questa vittoria per moltiplicare i nostri sforzi per leggi efficaci contro la corruzione, in difesa della libertà di stampa e per una giustizia giusta”.

163
organisations attended the event, from Agende Rosse to Partigiani del Terzo Millennio; the party SEL (Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà) and the union FIOM (Federazione Impiegati Operai Metallurgici) also joined the event. As Chapter Seven will explain later, Rete Viola firmly opposed the event. In spite of the defections, expectations from the demonstration were extremely high. Assessing the attendance at the No Berlusconi Day 2 is a problematic task. According to the organizers, half a million protesters took to the streets, but only 10,000 according to the police. The turnout data provided by the organisers seems incredibly over-optimistic, even for the activists in the movement. Rete Viola imputes the involvement of the parties as the main reason for the poor outcome. That said, the reasons which led to the failure of the No Berlusconi Day 2 go beyond interference by political institutions; after all, parties were involved with the first No Berlusconi Day too. Here, it is the defection of the mainstream press that contributed to ruining the event. Whereas the support of the press provided a strong acceleration to the movement in its excitement stage, the defection of the press contributed to the isolation of the movement during its institutionalisation stage.

A convention planned on 5th December, 2010, the first anniversary of the movement, constitutes an emblematic case. Il Fatto Quotidiano, at first extremely favourable towards the movement’s aims, described the event as a failure, a catwalk for the same politicians who were not allowed to speak at the No Berlusconi Day (Mello, 2010). That evening, in front of roughly one hundred activists, representatives of the PD, the Green Party, and other left wing parties shared and discussed a political project that was defined by Mello as ‘pure mush’, the result of blind faith in a networked and horizontal instrument, as thought this alone would be enough to create alternative and credible politics.

44 Agende Rosse is an anti-mafia movement created by Salvatore Borsellino, brother of Paolo, the magistrate killed by Cosa Nostra in 1992. The name Agende Rosse, Red Notebooks in English, comes from the red notebook that disappeared from Paolo Borsellino’s car after the fatal attack on him, as a symbol of a denied truth about Mafia and its attacks against Borsellino and Falcone in 1992.

45 Partigiani del Terzo Millennio (Third Millennium’s Partisans) is a movement born on Facebook that was inspired by the Italian Resistance against the Nazi occupation during the Second World War.

46 http://tv.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2010/10/03/no-b-day-2-piazza-san-giovanni-si-colora-di-viola/67239/
In spite of the convention’s blunder, organizers continued with mobilization attempts. Other initiatives took place between 12th and 14th December, 2010, specifically against a vote of confidence in Berlusconi’s government under discussion in parliament. Berlusconi’s government would eventually obtain the confidence of the parliament thanks also to the vote of the Radical Party, whose main representative, Marco Pannella, was present at the Viola Convention. This contradiction increased internal discussion within the movement. Particularly noteworthy was the demonstration on the 14th, when temporary workers, social centres, and students, mobilized by the movement and by other organizations, marched towards Montecitorio, where the Italian Parliament sits. The march was stopped by the police in Via del Corso, and incidents took place there and in front of Palazzo Grazioli, the Senate House. The press pointed the finger at Popolo Viola, with La Repubblica, which had once supported the aims of the movement, was now accusing it of promoting violent behaviour.47

In February, 2011, a weekend of Anti-Berlusconi demonstrations was planned, with the protest “Adesso Basti!” (“Enough!”) on Saturday, 12th February, directly organised by Popolo Viola, and “Se Non Ora Quando?” (“If Not Now, When?”) on Sunday, 13th February, where Popolo Viola participated in the organization together with other groups and organizations. The second demonstration saw a far larger involvement from the population, with hundreds of thousands of protesters filling Piazza del Popolo in Rome.

In terms of affiliation levels, a small influx of new users characterized the institutionalization age. The movement was more engaged in a search for its own identity, and all the dynamics related to protest were affected by this situation. At this stage, initiatives organised by Popolo Viola did not have any impact on the page in terms of subscription levels, as any initiative created by the movement seemed to ‘preach to the converted’, unable to reach beyond the already existing Facebook fan-base. The scarce or negative attention provided by the media contributed to this stagnation. The flow was mostly affected by the attention given by the mass media, rather than by the organization of events which, at this stage, influenced

47 http://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2010/12/14/news/la_protesta-10159010/
subscription levels only slightly. Although the movement was now fragmented into different sub-movements, Popolo Viola’s page seemed to benefit from the events that were organized by the ‘rival’ movement, Rete Viola. The scant success of No-Berlusconi Day 2 was a signal of the diminishing mobilizing power of Popolo Viola. The page seemed to transform itself into a platform for information and interaction, subject to a new influx of affiliates whenever an anti-government protest took place, disregarding who had organized that protest. In terms of online participation, this stage showed levels equal to those of the previous stage, though the nature of the engagement changed significantly. Likes and wall posts decreased (-18.4% and -9.9%) while comments increased massively (+89.6%). The levels of polarization also increased, making the discussion increasingly confrontational.

It is worth mentioning that the page was unavailable for more than three hours during the afternoon of the 13th. In an interview with the newspaper La Repubblica, the activist Gianfranco Mascia accused Berlusconi’s government of being responsible for what, only apparently, seemed to be a technical hiccup.

It’s not a coincidence that this happened exactly when Popolo Viola was working for tomorrow’s big demonstration. Berlusconi’s prayers about more control of the web, which have been intercepted and published by Wikileaks in the past few days, have been effective. It’s not over here though (Mascia, in Brogi, 2010).

The closure of the Facebook page, which will later be explained as a technical problem by Facebook had unexpectedly a positive effect on levels of affiliation, as it attracts attention from the mass media.

During the institutionalization stage, an average of 401 new members subscribed to the page, against 5,845 during the excitement stage and 728 in the formalization. The decrease in subscriptions is evident, -93% if compared to the excitement stage as against -45% in the formalization stage. At first sight it could be

48 In November, 2010, just a few weeks before the demonstration, Wikileaks published a number of cables reporting the concerns of the American government regarding the gagging law, specifically the “Decreto Romani”. In these cables, the American Ambassador in Rome, David Thorne, reveals a plan by Berlusconi to limit online freedom of speech.
49 Original text: “Non è un caso che questo sia capitato proprio quando il Popolo Viola stava lavorando per la grande mobilitazione di domani. Le preghiere di Berlusconi - intercettate e pubblicate da Wikileaks nei giorni scorsi - sul controllo della Rete hanno sortito il loro effetto. Ma non finisce qui”.
argued that the page had now reached its maturity, but such an assumption was discredited by a new upsurge that was reported during the transformation stage. After all, there were five significant episodes of increase in the number of affiliations during the institutionalization stage as well. The first took place on the 7th July, on the occasion of the first protest by the citizens of L’Aquila, who protested against Berlusconi’s government’s lack on regard for the reconstruction attempts after the earthquake. The police attacked demonstrators in Rome and the incidents were highlighted by the mass media. On that day, 1,704 new users subscribed to the page (+325% over the average in this stage), when the administrators of the page published the status update: “We support the citizens of L’Aquila and their protest today in Rome”. The second took place on the 16th August, when the organisers of Popolo Viola announced the New Berlusconi Day 2; on this day, 1,125 new users joined the page (+181%). The third peak happened on 14th September, when the administrators published a note about the coaches that had been organized from around Italy to Rome for the NBD2, with 1,085 new subscribers (+171%). The most significant peak was recorded on December 14th, due to two different factors; on the one hand, the incidents in Via del Corso during the students’ protest; on the other one hand, and more meaningfully, the attention given by the mass media to the Facebook black-out of the 13th. Before and during the protest, the page underwent an unusual influx of new affiliations, with 1,344 new likes on 13th December, +235.1% above the average, and 1,952 on 14th December, +386.7%. All the major Italian newspapers, in fact, mentioned the event. The last peak took place on the 27th January on the occasion of the Notti contro le Mafie, (Nights against the Mafia), an event taking place in Palermo, Sicily, when 1,210 new fans subscribed (+202%). This event was very peculiar because it was organized by the Popolo Viola Palermo and Rete Viola, whilst on the Popolo Viola page it was not even mentioned. The reason behind this growth is that Popolo Viola and Rete Viola, although officially different subjects and often confrontational with each other, were perceived and portrayed as only one movement by the media and by those users who were only

50 See next section.
51 “Siamo solidali con i cittadini de L’Aquila che oggi protestano a Roma”.
casually involved. The events organized by the movement did not seem to have such a strong influence on affiliation as they had before. For example, the week of the No Berlusconi Day 2 saw an average of 505 new daily subscribers, just +20% higher than the average of October (406 daily new users), and +21% higher than the whole stage’s average.

Figure 7.3. New Daily Subscriptions – Institutionalization Stage

To sum up, a small influx of new users characterized the institutionalization stage in terms of new membership levels. The flow was influenced mostly by the now sporadic attention given by the mass media, rather than by the organization of events which, at this stage, influenced subscription levels only slightly. Although the movement was now fragmented into different sub-movements, the IPV page seemed to benefit from the events organized by the ‘rival’ movement, Rete Viola. That said, the mobilizing power of the movement was fading, and the scant success of the No-Berlusconi Day 2 was a strong signal. The page seemed to transform itself into a platform for information and interaction which was subject to a new influx of members whenever an anti-government protest took place, no matter who organized these protests.
7.5 The Transformation Stage of Popolo Viola (15th February, 2011, – Present)

The transformation stage took place from 15th February, 2011, in the aftermath of the expulsion of some of the Facebook page’s administrators, and it is still in place at the time of writing, although the fieldwork for this research considers data until 30th June, 2011. The initiatives that characterized the transformation stage include the campaign on 13th April, 2011, for the online petition to the Italian President, Napolitano, to contest the “fast trial” decree about justice proposed by Berlusconi’s government; the demonstration against youth unemployment ‘Il Nostro Tempo è Adesso’ (‘Our Time Is Now’) on 9th April; the campaign for the administrative elections in Naples and Milan in May; a new demonstration against the gagging law in various Italian cities on 29th May; and, finally, the referendum campaigns in the first half of June.

The online petition against the fast trial decree stood out in terms of originality and performance speed. The page managers released a note on the 13th April asking users to comment with a ‘No’ in order to show their disapproval of the decree. At midnight, more than 15,000 responded to the appeal. Two weeks later, the comments were 23,286. The decree would have been discarded by Berlusconi’s government later in September. According to La Repubblica:

> after three months of parliamentary struggles, Berlusconi surrenders and announces the pull back of the fast trial decree. “A very just law” he said, “that has been portrayed as a scandal by the Left and their newspapers”52

The administrative elections in May, with the appointment of new mayors in Milan and Naples, and the referenda of June clearly represent the most important events in the Italian political agenda at this stage. With the referenda, three important themes were put under the scrutiny of the Italian population: the privatization of public water, nuclear energy, and the ‘legittimo impedimento’

decree\textsuperscript{53}. This last question is especially relevant for the activists of Popolo Viola, as it was the chance for the Italian population to reject Berlusconi’s attempt to defy the judicial pressure on him.

As far as the elections were concerned, the IPV page was committed to an intense campaign in order to support the left-wing candidates all over the country. Regarding the referenda, the page was active with the initiative ‘Battiquorum’\textsuperscript{54}. The main point of the campaign was to reach the quorum of 50\% necessary for the validity of the referenda. The challenge was deemed very difficult, considering that television, under the government’s influence, did not provide appropriate coverage of the event. All sorts of initiatives were planned around the country. Firstly, the ‘Referendum Day’ took place, on 16th April, with stands, petitions, and awareness campaigns. Then, a page and an event, both called ‘Battiquorum’, were set up on Facebook. The event was set up on Facebook on the 20\textsuperscript{th} April. After 24 hours, 70,000 users joined the event. The invitation to the event reached one million users after only one week.

With the referenda campaign, Popolo Viola and Rete Viola acted, united for a common purpose: to defeat Berlusconi’s government. As an activist says:

that was not simply a campaign against Berlusconi, it was also a battle between television and the Internet. If at that time you were watching the news, both on RAI and Mediaset channels, there was rarely a hint of the referendum. Once, RAInews even got the date wrong. Whereas we couldn’t reach the Italian population via TV, we could via Internet, with a campaign that saw the movement, for one last time, united (Interviewee no.11).

The referendum was a success: The quorum was reached and surpassed for all four questions (both questions 1 and 2 related to the privatisation of water): 54.81\% and 54.82\% of the Italian population voted in relation to water privatisation, 54.79\% about nuclear energy, and 54.78\% about ‘legittimo impedimento’. The victory was overwhelming: 95.35\% and 95.80\% voted against the two articles relating to the privatization of public water; 94.05\% against the reintroduction of

\textsuperscript{53}The “Legittimo Impedimento” decree was supposed to allow the Prime Minister and the Ministers to refuse to appear in court because of their political commitments.

\textsuperscript{54}The term ‘battiquorum’ is a portmanteau of the words ‘batticuore’ (‘heartbeat’) and ‘quorum’.
nuclear plants in Italy, and, finally, 94.62% of the voters expected the Prime Minister to appear in front of the courts in spite of being occupied by institutional commitments. It would be preposterous to credit such an outcome to the page only. That said, the numbers relating to the online engagement of the activists provide evidence of the group’s contribution.

While the other stages of Popolo Viola’s lifecycle saw the constant creation of initiatives, the referenda constituted a case where mobilization took place in the occurrence of an institutional event. Here, the divisions inside the movement were absolutely irrelevant. In fact, this was the last campaign which was successfully implemented by the page. Whereas the movement was in an irremediable impasse, the page still seemed to be an excellent alternative medium for both information and discussion about such political events.

Besides elections and referenda, ‘Il Nostro Tempo E’ Adesso’, a demonstration that took place in April in Rome and other Italian cities against youth unemployment, was absolutely worthy of mention. That said, PV was a minor actor in the organisation of the event, which was monopolised by the union CGIL and the left-wing parties.

The transformation stage saw a new growth in terms of affiliation and it shows features closer to the formalization stage rather than to the institutionalization stage, which had recorded a drop in the influx of new users. As far as levels of new affiliation on the ‘il Popolo Viola’ Facebook page are concerned, the transformation stage counted an average of 604 new likers, against 401 during the institutionalization stage, with a growth of +50.6%. Online petitions proved to have a positive influence on levels of affiliation. During the campaigns for the administrative elections and the referenda, in spite of the fragmentation of the movement and its loss of appeal, the page thrived in terms of visits and online participation, even though levels of polarization increased significantly. Popolo Viola had now become a two-headed movement, with a Facebook page run by two activists and an SMO managed by activists who, mostly, were now banned from the

---

55 See Chapter Ten for issues related to the polarization of discourse.
As the next chapter will explain, such a paradoxical, almost schizophrenic configuration whereby the SMO Popolo Viola and the Facebook page were ‘at war’, proved that the institutionalisation of the movement was only ostensible. The institutionalisation of Popolo Viola had, rather, accelerated the decline and the transformation of the movement. The page was still growing in terms of numbers, having reached 430,000 members in June, 2011, and the discussion there was becoming more vibrant and intense. That said, the potential of the movement had disappeared. The intense internal struggles inside the movement had weakened it in terms of efficiency and credibility, transforming the page from a social movement tool into a mobilizing structure available to external campaigns, as long as the administrators endorsed them.

Figure 7.4. New Daily Subscriptions – Transformation Stage

In terms of affiliation levels, the transformation stage was focused on three specific events: an online petition to ask the President of the Republic, Napolitano, not to sign Berlusconi’s Justice decree; the administrative elections in May; and, finally, the referenda of June. The transformation stage counted an average of 604 new likers, against 401 during the institutionalization stage, with a growth of +50.6%. During the first week, an average of 450 daily likers joined the page, against 208 during the last one, with a decrease of -53.7%. In Figure 7.4 it is possible to notice

---

56 Chapter Eight will analyse in depth the organizational levels of Popolo Viola.
how the peaks of new affiliation included the 13th April, concomitant with the petition about ‘fast trials’ and the referendum day, with 5,334 new likes (+783.1% higher than the average), and the period 15th May – 15th June with the local elections in Milan and Naples and the referendum campaigns.

On the 23rd May, 3,360 new users joined the page (+456%) in order to commemorate the 19th anniversary of the strage di Capaci (literally ‘Capaci’s bloodshed’), a 1992 terrorist attack perpetrated by the mafia which had killed the prosecuting magistrate Giovanni Falcone, his wife Francesca Morvillo, and three bodyguards, with a time-bomb placed along the motorway in Capaci, just outside Palermo. The administrators posted a picture of Falcone, achieving 2,417 likes, and this sparked a sort of virtuous circle whereby the image started circulating through individual newsfeeds and their relative networks of friends, thus attracting new fans. The approaching ballot for the administrative elections and the referenda contributed to a general rise in subscriptions.

Significantly, new subscribers joined on the 26th May just to rant against the singer Gigi D’Alessio, who had attacked Facebook for threats received on social media. To mock the singer, culpable of having performed for Berlusconi on various occasions, 4,092 new users subscribed to the page (+577%). Here, also, the administrators of the page posted a picture of D’Alessio which triggered a similar mechanism as had Falcone’s.

In terms of participation, the transformation stage saw once again forms of passive participation decreasing, from 6,489 daily likes to 6,461 (-0.4% compared to the institutionalization stage). On the other hand, active engagement grew significantly. Similarly to what had happened during the institutionalization stage, comments rose and posts uploaded to the page diminished. In fact, comments increased from an average of 2,946 to 3,219 (+9.2%), and wall posts decreased from 532 to 341 (-35.9%).

To sum up, the transformation stage saw a revived interest in the page, an increase in the number of new affiliations and visits showed features closer to the formalization stage than to the institutionalization stage, which had recorded a drop
in new users’ influx. Online petitions proved to have a positive influence on levels of affiliation, as well as two-step communication flows, as in the cases of Falcone and D’Alessio, where liked pictures started circulating on users’ and their friends’ newsfeeds, thus attracting new affiliates. That said, the growth of affiliation was here due to external factors, such as the administrative elections and the referenda. The page stopped being the voice of a social movement, but rather became a powerful alternative medium, suited to the discussion and circulation of information. The failure of Popolo Viola as a social movement did not compromise the social capital provided by the page and its over 400 thousand users. Moreover, the page administrators stopped acting as leaders and organizers, evolving into alternative media managers, having kept the supervision of the page and its daily activities in terms of circulation of information. To understand in more depth the lifecycle of a Facebook movement such as Popolo Viola it is necessary to also analyse its patterns of organization, mobilization, and collective identity. These are the topics on which the next chapters will focus.
Chapter Eight – The Structure of Popolo Viola

8.1 Introduction

This chapter assesses the organizational patterns of Popolo Viola, pointing out the factors that influenced the structure of the anti-Berlusconi social movement and its decisional organs, taking into account issues of leadership and internal democracy. As previously explained in this thesis, it is necessary to distinguish the social movement Popolo Viola from the Catania group, who framed and controlled the movement’s agenda. It is then essential to consider these two objects in a different manner, pointing out their peculiarities in organizational terms. Moreover, only the acknowledgement of a vast and complex galaxy of more or less organized groups allows a balanced assessment of Popolo Viola’s configuration. In order to achieve such an aim, this analysis will consider the roles, values, and contributions of other constituents, such as the coordination groups who were supposed to bridge the Catania group and the whole movement; Resistenza Viola and later Rete Viola, the sub-movements who were born as a consequence of internal disputes; finally, the Non-Profit Organization Popolo Viola as the formal Popolo Viola SMO. As the reader knows, in July 2010 the Non Profit Organization/Social Movement Organization Popolo Viola was launched. However, its role was extremely limited from its launch. In fact, the main aim of the Social Movement Organization was to act as a legal subject for the authorities in order to book spaces for demonstrations without having to rely on other organizations or, worse, on political parties. While its launch was perceived to be a form of co-optation by part of the activist base, the SMO guaranteed a higher level of independence for the movement.

8.2 Structure of the Catania Group

As will become clear in this chapter, decisional power in Popolo Viola was highly centralised. Hence, it is necessary to begin the analysis of the movement’s organizational configuration with an account of the Catania group, the fulcrum on which frames and decisions were articulated. All the demonstrations and campaigns by Popolo Viola were either directly organized by the Catania group or were strongly influenced by it. As a Rete Viola activist points out:
the approval and the support of the activists from Catania was necessary whenever a local group wanted to organize a really successful demonstration. Only the capabilities of a half-million strong page could help a small local group to be visible on Facebook reaching a vast audience (Interviewee no.17).

The Catania group was constituted of a group of bloggers/activists who included San Precario, the anonymous Facebook account from Catania who had opened both the UMN (“Una Manifestazione Nazionale per Chiedere le Dimissioni di Berlusconi”) and the IPV (“Il Popolo Viola”) pages. San Precario, whose profile is described in depth in the section on leadership, acted as ‘deus ex machina’ and as de facto leader of the movement. The configuration of the group was strictly vertical and hierarchical. Even though the group declared the equality of its members, San Precario held total control over the Facebook pages, acting as the unchallenged leader of Popolo Viola. The role as founder and super-administrator of the pages allowed him to include or exclude any other administrator without having to be accountable to the other activists. Of course, such a configuration could last only on a short-term basis. As long as there was harmony among the group members, San Precario’s leadership was unchallenged. When the first divergences took place, the group lacked a shared set of rules to use to solve the internal differences. When, in fact, the first disagreements arose, fragmentation became inevitable.

Setting aside issues of leadership which will be assessed further in a separate section, it is worth noticing the three main changes in the configuration of the Catania group. The first followed the controversial decision to accept the contribution from some political parties to the organization of the No Berlusconi Day in December, 2009. The second and the third changes saw a strict correlation between the changes in Facebook pages’ management policies and the changes within the group. This happened as a result of two distinct episodes, the first in June, 2010, the second in February, 2011.

8.2.1 December 2009: The Involvement of Political Parties in the No Berlusconi Day

The initial outline of the group consisted of five bloggers and activists who helped San Precario to circulate information, write text, moderate discussion, and draw leaflets in order to mobilize the Facebook community on the UMN page.
According to a criterion of the division of skills, each member of this group had responsibilities for different issues: San Precario was the leader, decision-maker, founder of the UMN page, and contributed to the moderation of the discussion on the page; another member was the official graphic designer and also a moderator; yet another was coordinating the distribution of information by the website www.noberlusconiday.org to the other platforms of communication utilized by the campaign, with the aim of involving the press; a fourth was dedicated to online “marketing” strategies; a fifth dealt with external relationships, especially with other bloggers, activists, and organizations outside the campaign and also gathered material from external resources in order that this can be repackaged within the campaign; finally, one member helped with issues of general coordination and mobilization (Interviewee no. 12).

With the creation of the ‘Il Popolo Viola’ page on 7th December, 2009, during the excitement stage of Popolo Viola, new administrators joined the old ones to help the management of the new page. San Precario maintained his leadership. Gradually though, with the formalization of the movement, the configuration of the administration team became more liquid, with administrators coming and going according to their personal commitment but also due to the increasing number of internal struggles, with some members leaving or even being expelled for divergences from San Precario.

Before the No Berlusconi Day the narrative of the page aimed to gather the highest number of people to join the demonstration against Berlusconi’s government. This demonstration was planned for the 5th December in Rome. The NBD was supposed to be an expression of civil society, detached from political parties and unions, which were, in the eyes of the activists, interested more in protecting the particular interests of the ‘caste’ than in the public good. 174,370 users joined the page in the first two weeks. On the 25th October, San Precario announced his intention to launch an awareness campaign through the setting up of gazebo structures in Italian cities in order to mobilize citizens. The initiative was planned for the 31st October. Here the first conflicts arose around the feasibility of

57 See background chapter, 2.2.3
the idea with such a short deadline. The same night, a note was released on Facebook with a what-to-do list in order that activists could set up a gazebo in their own locality. That said, in some cities the council would have needed 30 days advance notice. Warned about this issue, one administrator deleted the note. San Precario’s reaction was immediate, and the administrator was excluded from the management of the page for taking a decision without consulting the other administrators.

This decision, though, was allegedly connected to a parallel conflict regarding the involvement of political parties in the organization of the No Berlusconi Day. Before the exclusion of that administrator, banners regarding the demonstration included the caption “manifestazione aparatitica”, to state how the demonstration would be free from any political influence. Moreover, any content uploaded on the page with references in favour of any political party was being moderated. With the exclusion of that member, who was strongly against any association to political parties, the involvement of political parties in the organization of the No Berlusconi Day became apparent.

Content praising parties, such as IDV (Italia dei Valori) and PRC (Partito Rifondazione Comunista), started flooding the page, and the caption on the No Berlusconi Day banners disappeared. On 27th October, 2009, the newspaper La Repubblica published an article with the title: “Di Pietro and Ferrero will participate in the Facebook demonstration ‘No Berlusconi Day’ on 5th December”. The IDV party contributed to the demonstration financially, funding the setting up of a stage where artists and intellectuals could speak to the attendees. IDV’s leader, Antonio Di Pietro, insisted on participating on stage, but in the light of this debate the decision was to avoid forms of direct involvement. As one activist points out:

IDV gave money for the stage of the NBD while FDS (Federazione Della Sinistra, my note) contributed with human resources. FDS and CI

58 Antonio Di Pietro, leader of the IDV party.
59 Paolo Ferrero, leader of the PRC party.
Despite the strong anti-Berlusconi stance of these parties and their involvement, which was only indirect, the participation of IDV, PRC, FDS, and CI changed the nature of the demonstration in terms of its spontaneity and the contribution from civil society. That said:

both parties never imposed any theme on the demonstration. They knew that it would have been more efficient and convenient if the organisation were left to the movement without any attempt to exploit it directly. For the NBD, we gathered 13,000 euros on a Paypal account, coming only from individual voluntary contributions, usually between 1 and 50 Euros (Interviewee no.3).

Whereas the contribution from political parties was useful in terms of material resources, on the other hand, it was going against the main values of the movement. It was now that the first ‘rebels’ surfaced and accused the No Berlusconi Day campaign of serving the interests of established political parties, rather than the general interest. Moreover, it was here that the first complaints about the anonymity of San Precario took place. The acceptance of any form of support from political parties was deemed unacceptable by many sympathisers. In spite of the rising conflicts, the No Berlusconi Day took place and was considered by most to be an extraordinary success, way beyond the expectations of the same organizers. After all, at this stage the internal debate was the domain of a small group of activists, and the activist base was not aware of these issues.

8.2.2 June, 2010: Facebook Page Policy Changes and their impact on the Catania Group

In June, 2010, Facebook implemented a substantial change in its pages’ management policy that would have huge consequences for the stability of the movement: the change consisted in the fact that, at this stage, the creator of the page could be removed by any other administrator. According to business analysts, this decision was made by Facebook in order to let corporations appropriate brand pages which were previously created by fans. This was a serious issue for a number of companies who were looking to shift control of their pages from a third-party company to someone internal (O’Neill, 2010).
While the shift was clearly an advantage for companies, who could gain control of the brand-pages created by advocate-customers, it created a very awkward situation inside the group. As San Precario says:

The decision to establish administrators who could exclude each other, including the page creator as well, had created a climate of distrust and suspicion, and consequently the first action to take was to select the administrators very carefully, and the second was to exclude the ones whom we did not trust completely. After all, we knew of many episodes of administrators excluding creators and sometimes killing the page too (Interview no.7).

The organisers excluded were those who had less face-to-face interaction with the group, and thus those who were less trusted. As, in the conclusion, we will discuss in more depth, while Facebook was promoting relations based on ideals and affinity, facilitating collaboration among strangers, it could not replace face-to-face interaction and the levels of bonding and trust that real-world interpersonal relations can create. Moreover, at this stage Facebook still allowed a high degree of anonymity to its users, contributing to complicated relationships based on trust. As a page administrator puts it:

how possible would it have been to trust an anonymous account insomuch as to give him the keys of the page and an absolute power over its management? (Interviewee no.2).

Within this question lies a manifest contradiction, as the same question would be valid both for the excluded administrators and for San Precario.

Some of the excluded reacted by deleting or excluding everybody else from the administration of the pages that they had created themselves. This phenomenon was strictly linked to the initial process of creation of new local groups and pages. Through a note released on 21st December, 2009⁶¹, the creators of the PV page had published a guide that explained how to create groups and pages. On that occasion they actively helped with the creation process. If this collaboration on the one hand consistently helped new pages to spring up, on the other, it gave even more power to the IPV page administrators, who found themselves, even against their own wills,

---
as super-managers of several local groups’ pages. Despite not contributing actively to the creation of the content on such pages, they were, in fact, as creators, still able to control the other administrators. Now the excluded administrators sought revenge by deleting all the pages of which they were founders. This forced the excluded local groups to create new pages and new groups, some related to Popolo Viola, others to Resistenza Viola\(^{62}\), adding even more fragmentation to an already confusing constellation of Popolo Viola pages and groups on Facebook.

**8.2.3 February, 2011: The “Final Purge”**

The second episode took place in February, 2011. Just two days after the ‘Se Non Ora Quando’ demonstration another internal clash broke out between the group members, with one administrator being excluded and other influential activists being banned from accessing the page. According to the interviewees behind the exclusion there were different views about the nature of the movement, but, as we will see, the launch of an automated moderation system for Facebook pages may have influenced the exclusion process. According to some interviewees, the exclusion of the administrators, which happened in February, 2011, took place because of a new divergence of views between San Precario and other activists. “San Precario wanted Popolo Viola to become a political party”, says an activist (interviewee no.14). “The exclusion in February was aimed at everybody who didn’t share such a perspective” (interviewee no. 14).

According to others, a factor that influenced this exclusion came from a technical change in Facebook, which made moderators less of a necessity for the pages’ management. Only a few days before, Facebook had launched an automatic system of moderation for its pages. Moderation had thus far been a big issue for the page administrators, as the next chapters will explain. As anticipated in paragraph 3.3.4, Facebook now provided page administrators with two automated moderation tools: a moderation blocklist\(^{63}\) and a profanity blocklist\(^{64}\). Thanks to these sophisticated

---

\(^{62}\) See Section 8.2.4.

\(^{63}\) “You can add comma-separated keywords to the ‘Moderation Blocklist’. When users include blacklisted keywords in a post and or a comment on your page, the content will be automatically marked as spam. More information can be found here: [http://www.facebook.com/help/?faq=19793](http://www.facebook.com/help/?faq=19793)
tools of pre-moderation, the page could be managed efficiently without the need for a large group of administrators. As an interviewee points out,

any time Facebook policies were changed, there was havoc within the movement. When I read Facebook had implemented the new moderation systems, I thought straightaway that now San Precario would find another good excuse to get rid of those administrators who were increasingly questioning his leadership (Interviewee no.18).

This decision seemed to be the coup de grace to the movement, not only in terms of credibility, but also on a public relations’ level, as the press office managers were among the excluded. The process of the spill-over from the other organisations was so far essential for the success of Popolo Viola’s initiatives. The two officers, who were in turn very close to the activists responsible for the non-profit organisation, kept these contacts. Their exclusion also spoiled the relationships with those external organizations and groups that had thus far supported the movement’s initiatives. The struggles of February sanctioned the end of the movement, which could not bear the weight of another schism. This situation was grotesquely epitomized by the fact that the President of the Social Movement Organization Il Popolo Viola was now banned by the Facebook page.

The Social Movement Organization’s role in the decision-making processes of Popolo Viola was derisory. The Catania group, in fact, had always acted as a de-facto leadership group inside the movement, facilitated by its power over the technical tools utilised by the movement. The unaccountability provided by such power intensified the tensions within the movement. This time the disputes did not create another sub-movement, as both parties were claiming authority over the movement. ‘We are Popolo Viola’ was the claim made both by the Catania group and by the activists closer to the Social Movement Organization launched in July, 2010. The problem was that there was no longer any Popolo Viola at all. The organisation’s president tried reconciliation with a note released on 17th February, 2011, on Facebook.

64 (“Facebook will block the most commonly reported words and phrases marked as offensive by the broader community”. More information can be found here: http://www.facebook.com/help/?faq=19793
Let’s restore XXX (names are hidden, editor’s note) as admin and XXX and XXX as press office managers. (...) The team of people who took to the stage of the No Berlusconi Day has to present itself as united in front of the whole movement, saying: ‘We got to this point. What should we do from now on? What instruments, what leadership-team, and what methods will we adopt from now on?’

While the claims made by the Social Movement Organization Il Popolo Viola’s president would have been worthy of consideration, the Organization was too weak to have any influence over the movement. Moreover, being spread from the president’s personal profile and not from the page, the reach of the message was minimal, and most of the affiliates did not even have the chance to read it. The Social Movement Organization Il Popolo Viola did not hold any popular Facebook page, so it could not reach a sufficient number of users. The Catania group, on the other hand, although it was discredited in the eyes of the other organizers, still had a reach to more than 400,000 users.

To sum up, once again, a change in Facebook policies influenced choices made by the administrators of the page. With the first instance, the relationship was straightforward. Even though the causes of this second episode did not relate to Facebook directly, the code of this platform enabled those in charge to implement decisions which would have been difficult to make otherwise.

8.3 Structure of the Social Movement Popolo Viola

At first sight, Popolo Viola seemed to comply perfectly with the features of segmentation, polycentrism, and integration that are typical of social movements’ structure (Gerlach, 2001). In fact, as a social movement, Popolo Viola constituted an immensely variegated galaxy that was comprised of hundreds of formal organizations, informal groups, and opinion leaders’ cliques. Among the organizations it is noteworthy to mention the anti-mafia Agende Rosse, the pro-

---

65 Original text: “XXX, XXX, ripristiniamo XXX come admin e ridiamo ruolo all’ufficio stampa con XXX e XXX. Se si decide di dare strumenti e metodi per garantire i livelli di democrazia interni al movimento, dobbiamo avere tutti il coraggio di fare un passo indietro. La squadra, la nostra squadra, quella che è salita sui palchi del NoBday, deve avere il coraggio di presentarsi davanti al movimento unita e dire: “Siamo giunti fino a questo punto. Cosa dobbiamo fare da ora in poi? Quali strumenti, squadra, metodi utilizzeremo d’ora in poi?” Posted on 17th February, 2011.
freedom of speech Articolo 21, and the free-housing rights’ group Action. In terms of non-governmental organizations, the most prominent was surely Libera, an anti-mafia network founded by Luigi Ciotti, a Presbyterian activist. Libera was itself a network that consisted of more than 1,500 associations. Moreover, many artists and intellectuals had endorsed the movement and participated in its initiatives: among them, the Nobel Prize winner Dario Fo, the director Nanni Moretti, already involved in the Girotondi, and the musician Ludovico Einaudi. What is more, Popolo Viola consisted of hundreds of groups that had sprung up on Facebook, constituting the local branches of the movement, both in Italy and outside. The more these Facebook groups grew, the more they claimed their voice inside the movement by challenging the decisions taken by the Catania group and asking for more inclusivity. In fact, while the nature of Popolo Viola was multifarious, as we will analyse further later, the leadership and most of the decisions were in the hands of the Catania group. On top of this, the strong pressure coming from left-wing parties is already known to the reader. Six parties endorsed the No Berlusconi Day, and one of them, IDV, even provided funds for the setting up of a stage for the demonstration.

The participation of all these actors in the activities of the movement was informal and flexible. Most of the organizational work which involved these groups was mainly about logistics, i.e., organizing transport for the activists from all around Italy to the No Berlusconi Day and to the other major demonstrations which took place in Rome; providing spaces for meetings; offering help and support for a large series of issues, from IT skills to the interpretation of laws and decrees.

In terms of structure, the findings of this study highlight two different patterns: firstly, the affordances for circulation of information that were provided by Facebook promoted the multiplicity of Popolo Viola, easing organizational patterns across the wide plethora of local Popolo Viola groups. On the other hand, such multiplicity soon turned into fragmentation because of the centralizing power gained by the Catania group. This power was, in turn, influenced by Facebook pages’ management policies, as we have seen in the previous paragraph. Fragmentation nurtured factionalism inside Popolo Viola, which underwent two schisms before its decline.
8.3.1 The Initial Multiplicity of Popolo Viola

Initially, Popolo Viola seemed to thrive on the diversity of its constituents. Setting aside issues of collective identity, which will be assessed in a separate section, the polycentric nature of the movement helped mobilization processes and facilitated its organizational processes. The first pattern recorded concerns the decision to organize demonstrations across Italy and the world, instead of centralizing the protests only in Rome. This tendency was sometimes explicit, as with the sit-In in defence of the Italian Constitution in January, 2009. At other times they were implicit, as with the same No Berlusconi Day and other demonstrations which initially were supposed to take place only in Rome. The interest professed abroad and in other localities in Italy by activists unable to make it to Rome compelled them to organize parallel demonstrations in their own cities and towns.

Facebook contributed to easing group formation at a very quick pace. Due to the increasing levels of diaspora among young jobless people, word of mouth crossed the Italian borders very quickly and groups began to see the light in prominent cities of the world, such as Paris, New York, Sydney, Madrid, and so on. Virtually every major capital around the globe saw a specific Popolo Viola group appear. Facebook and the openness of the organisers enabled such groups to form at lightning speed, as an activist from London explains:

We came to know about the No Berlusconi Day on Facebook. Thanks to the information posted on the page it was very easy to reach the organisers. We asked them if we could open a group here and we had been given absolute freedom about content and editorial line. For what concerns informative material we didn’t even have to ask as everything was available online from the page and on the website www.noberlusconiday.org. More than fifty people asked to be an active part of the movement and more than one thousand activists participated in the No Berlusconi Day London. It was unprecedented to see so many people taking part in an Italian demonstration in foreign soil. We struggled to find places who could host so many people at one time (Interviewee no.10).

Enabling citizens to be active wherever they reside, the decentralised nature of demonstrations, such as the No Berlusconi Day, empowered activists to embrace the organisational features of activism. In other words, it promoted the
transformation of citizens into activists, and activists into organisers. The Internet facilitated this process by reducing costs and time. The same material that was available for free on the page for the No Berlusconi Day in Rome was accessible to those local organisers who were organizing parallel demonstrations abroad. These activists had only to adapt such material to their specific demonstration. The page acted here also as an instructive source of to-do-lists on how to obtain a concession for a demonstration from the authorities. Hence, it facilitated the creation of a collective intelligence that empowered, simplified, and accelerated organisational processes that contributed to an increase in the multiplicity of Popolo Viola. As we will see later, once the movement gained visibility and power, local leaders claimed a voice in the decision-making processes of Popolo Viola. Such claims though, due to the reluctance of San Precario and the proprietary nature of the communication tools which did not allow for democratic management, would not be accomplished.

8.3.2 The First Schism with Resistenza Viola

The first schism within Popolo Viola coincided with the end of the excitement stage and the beginning of the movement’s formalization stage. The division followed the unfulfilled need to establish an organ which would bridge the leadership group from Catania with the whole social movement. In January, 2010, only one month after the No Berlusconi Day, the movement was at its peak of popularity, but it was already at risk of fragmentation. The Naples meeting came after the majority of the movement’s constituents agreed that the creation of a formal structure was a necessity for the survival of the anti-Berlusconi protest. Now that the idea of a few people had evolved, absorbing considerable human capital and involving thousands of people, a small group of obscure leaders could not adequately sustain the huge amount of work necessary. An increasing number of individuals wanted to be involved in the decision-making process. At the Naples’ assembly, which was supposed to provide the movement with a shared set of rules, the order of business included:

1. Introduction by the meeting’s organisers;

2. Reports by representatives of local groups;
3. Proposals on a national and local level;

4. Discussion about Popolo Viola’s manifesto;

5. Setting up of a national committee;

6. Proposal for creating workgroups;

7. Self-financing;

8. Legal aspects;


In terms of the establishment of a manifesto, a slight majority agreed that there was no need for statutes.

The decision of not adopting a written manifesto came more out of past experience rather than principles. Many of us have been involved with previous forms of protest. We all remember how much the work of campaigns in the past had been hindered by the fruitless search of a written set of rules, and how such statute slowed down our efforts bureaucratizing every process (Interviewee no.19).

That said, the opposing views were forecasting what might actually have happened only a few weeks later.

Without rules, without a guideline of our principles, who is going to decide what is pro or against our values? Who decides when the line between common interest and individual discretion is crossed? (Interviewee no.17).

Such polarization would increase and would constitute one of the main issues that lead to fragmentation.

No mention of Facebook and its management was made on the list. That said, as one of the attendees reveals:

the main issues raised by the audience regarded, in the first place, who was supposed to manage the national page; secondly, who decides what content has to be distributed (Interviewee no.3).

As far as these two points are concerned, the meeting did not seem to offer any space for discussion. San Precario, present as a member of the group from Catania, intended to maintain the administration of the page. After all, he had contributed to the birth of the movement and had created both pages. Moreover, he had allowed the use of the name Popolo Viola and any material to anyone who had shown a genuine interest in creating sub-groups or sub-pages. Thirdly, sharing the password with anybody else would have opened the page to the risk of defacement by infiltrators, or to other thoughtless acts. These reasons were not enough for some local groups, who threatened to leave the movement in the case that shared management of the page was not implemented. According to one of the participants:

the lack of foresight by the administrators from Catania, who did not accept to share the management of the page, had created the first fracture. This led some activists to come out and afterwards set Resistenza Viola (Interviewee no.3).

The main outcome of the meeting was the constitution of a pro-tempore coordinating institution. Following a ballot that saw 25 votes in favour, 7 against, and 2 abstentions, a committee of seven members was established. In spite of the numbers, the purpose of establishing a shared organisational structure by a vote did not seem to satisfy the different views inside the movement. The meeting saw, in fact, two general trends in opinion, which would also characterise, as we will see later, a second schism with ‘Rete Viola’ (‘Purple Network’). A part of the movement, which included the national page administrators, supported a structure that lacked formal organisational levels, free from bureaucracy, “fluid and molecular” (San Precario, 2010), as its organisers repeated very often in their posts on Facebook. Another current promoted the creation of a manifesto, the establishment of shared rules, and, most of all, shared management of the page. These views were the basis of the sub-movement, Resistenza Viola, and, as we will see later, also constituted the principal values of Rete Viola.
Some attendees contested the outcome of the vote. Among them, there were even some members of the newly elected committee. As a participant points out:

the committee was not representative, because in Naples we voted too late, when many participants had left already; eventually the people unhappy about the committee were more than the people agreeing. Many had even left before the vote because their expectations were let down (Interviewee no.9).

According to some interviewees the vote had gone through only because of the concrete lack of alternative instruments of deliberation. Facebook did not provide any instrument for voting at this stage, and, despite a few activists proposing the creation of a website where they could experiment with new forms of deliberation, there was no agreement around the specific instruments to adopt.

The idea of not seeking an established and bureaucratised structure worked perfectly only as long as personal relationships were fine. Popolo Viola didn’t split on issues regarding political opinions. Of course nobody inside the movement with time became a Berlusconi supporter, unless he wasn’t one already. It rather split up for reasons regarding what we wanted the movement to be and how it should have worked (Interviewee no.4).

The irrelevant role of the committee proved formalization was only ostensible, as the reins of Popolo Viola remained in the same hands, strong because of the power given to them by their control of the technical tools.

The power of the committee seemed crippled from birth. Its role was limited to the conception of new ideas; no control was exercised on page management. One of its members describes how it functioned:

Decisions by the committee are usually taken on an informal level, through meetings, Skype conferences, basically through any form of discussion. Usually, we have a weekly Skype conference, since the fact that we live in different places makes face-to-face relationships difficult. Generally, there is no need to vote, we reach consensus through discussion. Disagreement comes more from personal disputes rather than from different political views (Interviewee no.3).

The committee had very little power in influencing the dynamics which led to the split with Resistenza Viola. On the 5th February, 2010, the schism with this sub-
movement was implemented, and the committee could do nothing to stop it. The factors that led to the first schism in Popolo Viola consisted mainly of the poor outcome of the Naples meeting, which provided no space to those who had a more ‘structured’ view of the movement, and the controversial call for mobilization to a new demonstration to take place in Rome on the 27th February. The local group in Rome proposed a day of protest called ‘La Legge è uguale per tutti’ (‘The law is equal for everybody’). The strong involvement by left-wing parties created discontent among many local groups, insomuch as some members left the committee. Many activists, mostly from Resistenza Viola, contested this decision because they felt excluded from the decision-making process and the outcome was to cause further break-ups in many local groups. As an interviewee explains:

When the demonstration of 27th February was planned, we felt like the decision was imposed by Mascia67, who was involved with IDV. It created problems, because we felt totally excluded by the organisation. Some activists complained because, on the same day, there was another event planned. Our local group and its founder didn’t want to join the demonstration for these reasons, but other activists, me included, thought it was important to be part of it and organised a coach and went anyway. This was the first schism in our local page, and preceded the creation of another group on Facebook as well (interviewee no.5).

In other words, the schism that took place at a macro-level was reflected in the micro-dynamics of the local groups, creating a chain-reaction of many micro-schisms. The committee here had no unitary voice and was weakened further, being deprived of any credibility when the administrators of the page released the following note on the 9th February:

The members of the committee have different opinions about the demonstration of the 27th of February. The page instead promotes and supports it because it was planned by one of our groups in Rome and by other subjects. In fact, if you read the text of this note there is no signature by the national committee of Popolo Viola68.

---

67 Gianfranco Mascia, mentioned already in the background chapter of the present research, is an author and activist, who organized the Bo.Bi. protests in 1993 and soon became a prominent figure inside Popolo Viola as well. His contribution is often deemed controversial because of his involvement as digital media director in the IDV party.

68 Original text: “nel coordinamento non tutti hanno la stessa opinione sul 27 febbraio. La pagina invece, la sostiene e promuove perché iniziativa promossa da una parte di noi ossia il Popolo Viola Roma e altri soggetti. Se leggi il testo dell’appello non c’è la firma del coordinamento nazionale del
The organizing struggles of Popolo Viola were now not just a matter between a few organizers, but also involved the activist base. The reply of one of the page users efficiently explains the discontent of the movement’s base:

The main problem lies in the fact that when an event is promoted by the page we expect that the movement as a whole will launch it, and not just a fragment of it. The misunderstandings and the disagreements among its activists start for this reason. If the page of Popolo Viola is not the voice of its committee, an awkward process that generates discontent/disagreements/breakups/schisms takes place.

Despite an increasing traffic on the page, increasing levels of membership, and a still intact reputation in the Italian political sphere, the movement was already on the brink of fragmentation.

On the 1st March, 2010, a press release, signed by nine activists, announced the birth of the new sub-movement. According to the ‘rebels’:

Resistenza Viola is an answer to the despotic behaviour adopted by the leaders of Popolo Viola. The horizontal structure is only the façade of the movement; behind this disguise, there is a highly centralised organisation where decisions are taken from above, with no possibility of discussion for the local groups and the single activists.

Resistenza Viola would change its name in April to ‘Resistenza Continua’ (‘Continuous Resistance’). Dropping the colour purple here signified complete detachment from the movement. The new sub-movement would gradually flow into Rete Viola and, at the moment of writing, its Facebook page has approximately 16,000 ‘likers’.  

---


69 Original text: “Il problema è che quando si promuove qualcosa su questa bacheca lo si fa col clamore e la visibilità che fa pensare alle persone che sia il Popolo Viola nella sua interezza a lanciare queste iniziative e no...n pezzetti di esso... e probabilmente è qui che nasce l’equivoco e i dissapori tra i vari aderenti al movimento. Se la pagina del Popolo Viola non è voce del suo coordinamento si crea uno strano meccanismo di equivoci/dissapori/rotture/scissioni”. Comment posted by (name hidden) user on 9th February at 16:42. Available at https://www.facebook.com/notes/il-popolo-viola/perch%C3%A9-abbiamo-chiuso-la-bacheca/289969433243.

70 Text of the press release is available in Italian at http://resistenzaviola.wordpress.com/2010/03/01/comunicato-stampa/ (last accesses on 3rd October 2012).
To summarize, the creation of a committee failed to fulfil the promise to redistribute power inside the movement. On the contrary, it contributed to fragmenting the structure of the movement and to polarizing opposing views on how the movement should be organized and directed. The formalization process was, then, only ostensible, camouflage that hid an oligarchic system of power which persisted in spite of pressure coming from the constituents of the movement, compelling those who disagreed to seek other organizational forms of protest.

8.3.2 The Second Schism with Rete Viola

The schism with Resistenza Viola paved the way to further fragmentation within the movement. Resistenza Viola had a very brief life. After only a few months it had virtually disappeared. Part of its membership completely abandoned the movement, whilst others started working on the idea of a new movement. That same minority who had supported a structured movement in Naples, started working on an alternative view and a manifesto, which would be called the ‘ethical charter’. This minority was constituted of part of Resistenza Viola and, gradually, by local groups that saw their request for more decisional power ignored by San Precario and the other Il Popolo Viola page administrators.

Initially colloquially described as ‘the ethics’, these activists started laying down the foundations of Rete Viola, which would see the light in September. 2010. These groups began a discussion that related to the whole nature of Popolo Viola, from its identity to its internal democracy. Instead of promoting a productive debate, the conversation soon became an argument which contributed to the spiral of fragmentation. An activist describes the situation in his local group:

Some of us kept in touch with the Catania group, others started communicating with other local groups that would have later been part of Rete Viola. We came across the ethical charter, to which I later contributed in terms of writing. The majority agreed to adhere to the charter, even though we were only six during the meeting. We were very naïve at that time. In fact, when we tried to organise a ‘purple night’ we still had this idyllic vision of the movement. San Precario wrote a note asking why I ‘imposed’ such an event without consulting his group. Moreover, he asked a few of our group members why we had approved the ethics charter. I was deemed responsible for the approval and I was
consequently banned from the national page. The struggle led to another internal schism inside our local group, with some of us following the charter, thus joining the other local groups, and others going back to San Precario (Interviewee no.6).

The schism with Rete Viola thus replicated the dynamics that were in place at the first schism: firstly, division on a macro-level, and then, consequently, a series of micro-splits that were internal to the local groups. The galaxy of Popolo Viola on Facebook seemed to disintegrate into countless small flyweight groups. The organisers of the movement agreed that this was the moment when it was most necessary to find an identity outside Facebook and proposed a national meeting and the establishment of a formal SMO, in the guise of a Non-Profit Organization, as pre-announced in Naples.

Facebook was now perceived to be a too centralising force by some international groups also. As witnessed by an activist from the UK:

the problems of Popolo Viola in Italy soon reached London. Some activists here proposed increasing our independence from Rome. Some others even asked to change our name and discard the colour purple, but that was a tiny majority. After a vote, the decision taken was to remain independent from the Italian movement, keeping up a constant dialogue with them (Interviewee no.10).

During autumn 2010, Rete Viola saw the light. Its foundations relied on the ethical charter and on a principle of autonomy. As one of the founders explains:

Rete Viola was born in Emilia Romagna from the groups in Bologna and Modena, with the creation of the ethical charter. Popolo Viola seemed to follow a line that was dictated by the group from Catania and those activists who seemed to be affiliates of political parties, rather than by the movement itself. An activist from Modena contacted me during spring, 2010, and told me about the ethical charter and the fact that he was trying to propose that to the local groups. We had a meeting in Rome and decided to adhere to the charter. Rete Viola was officially born on the 1st October, 2010, the day before No Berlusconi Day 2 (Interviewee no.1).

The birth of Rete Viola coincided with the organization of the No Berlusconi Day 2, which was now at the centre of the agenda for mobilization. On the 11th September, Popolo Viola and the future Rete Viola activists met at two different assemblies. The Catania group and their followers met to coordinate the No
Berlusconi Day 2 with the local groups who were still loyal. Rete Viola met to decide whether there was still space for dialogue with Popolo Viola. The occurrence of both events on the same day, according to a Rete Viola activist:

ruined the meeting as many were trying to participate in both meetings and some deserted to join the other meeting organized by the Catania group. In spite of this, our decision was taken already. The charter was proposed to the Catania Group who firmly rejected it. We thus decided not to adhere to the NBD2 and we undertook a different path (Interviewee no.1).

In order to assess similarities and differences between Popolo Viola and Rete Viola it is necessary to illustrate the main points of the latter’s ethical charter. The text of the ethical charter is divided into themes, principles, and internal regulations. The themes concern issues of labour, education, health, culture, environment, and peace. The principles at the heart of the charter relate to freedom of speech and information, defence of the Italian constitution, the refusal of violence and any form of fascism, and the safeguard of minorities’ rights. Basically, the themes and principles of the charter coincide with those proposed by Popolo Viola, although these were never put on paper. No difference in terms of identity was thus in place. The same could not be said in terms of internal regulations. While autonomy from political parties in Popolo Viola is only nominal, in Rete Viola it is formally sanctioned. Moreover, within the charter the roles of the administrators on Facebook are temporary and are limited to technical issues.

The main differences between Popolo Viola and Rete Viola thus lie in their different organisational processes and structures, rather than in the different backgrounds or different principles of their affiliates. While Popolo Viola labels itself as a “fluid and molecular” movement, where everybody is free to contribute to the Anti-Berlusconi cause in the name of the movement, Rete Viola is based around a constituency of local assemblies, a shared manifesto, and elected representatives. Popolo Viola seems to be in an unrecoverable impasse, and Rete Viola has here the chance to compete for the same resources in terms of mobilization in order to carry out anti-Berlusconi protests with more efficacy. Not surprisingly, Rete Viola made an impressive effort to manage its Facebook account democratically, whereas other
Platforms were disregarded as being accessories. For example, the Rete Viola Twitter account was managed by only one person, with no discussion on its administration. However, instead of providing new resources to Rete Viola, the crisis of Popolo Viola was also reflected on its counter-movement, especially as far as acquiring consensus and an efficient structure. The ethical charter provided a well-defined identity to the Rete Viola movement, but, not unexpectedly, greatly slowed down its functioning. As a Rete Viola founder reports, bureaucracy hindered the formation of the new actor.

We created the page ‘Popolo Viola – rete gruppi locali’ and the administrators were the same people who were part of that web-group at the meeting71. After two/three weeks Facebook accepted our request and in October the page was online. Initially, we were seven administrators, then we proposed a committee where every group was represented by two delegates, since the initial committee was unorganised and was ‘too’ open. In other words, it didn’t reflect the local realities equally. There was a very slow bureaucratic process in the creation of the Facebook group of the committee. I held the list of the members, who were sending me an email so I could add them to the group. Then we increased the number from 2 to 4 representatives per group, since some activists were often busy with work. Eventually, we decided every activist was free to be part of the group (Interviewee no.1).

The inclusivity of Rete Viola is not only a value, but also a necessity. In fact, the crisis of Popolo Viola is reflected in the whole anti-Berlusconi protest. After months of protest, activists were tired of not achieving any change, and were discouraged by the impossibility of reaching a unity of intentions. Rete Viola even struggled with recruiting activists interested in administrating their page.

Initially, there were 57 groups, but soon they started to disappear and eventually there were only 30 left. On the page, we decided to rotate the various administrators. Every three months any activist was free to propose himself as administrator. To simplify, anyone who was administrator of the page was administrator of the FB group as well. Initially, we thought that anyone who was administrator already couldn’t propose taking another turn, then we changed our minds, because only a few activists put themselves forward. I was administrator 4 times in a

71 “During the meeting in September we split in two groups: one was taking care of the web, considering that Mascia had promised to give us a website for the local groups without actually doing it. The other group was supposed to focus on the next initiatives to organise. We still considered ourselves part of Popolo Viola, we didn’t want to show any form of antagonism because we hoped to reconcile” (Interviewee no.1).
row, because I was the only one with enough time to deal with it (Interviewee no.1).

From this excerpt the intricacy of the Rete Viola organising structure is apparent. As another activist points out:

The problem with the ethical charter was in the extreme bureaucratisation that made the movement very slow and inefficient, we were just talking and talking without ever reaching any conclusion. We were many in our local group, about 200, and created many events, participating in every demonstration. But apart from the most active, the majority didn’t care about the struggles... if you weren’t personally involved, you couldn’t care less. Many people were just asking what was the next anti-Berlusconi demonstration, but we were obliged to slow down, we were spokesmen, not representatives, so we always had to stop any decision in order not to exacerbate the struggles inside the movement and to reach consensus. I became very critical, both of the ethical charter and the national group. We were forced to take decisions in an oligarchic group because we couldn’t spend the whole night explaining these internal struggles, people wanted action and lost interest, considering that some of them weren’t even on Facebook and couldn’t understand all those boring struggles. I lost interest myself. We were only talking about these problems and never faced real issues about the type of action to be undertaken (Interviewee no.6).

To summarize, the division between Popolo Viola and Rete Viola reflected the clash between two opposing views on the management of the movement. It would be reductive to call the page administrators ‘verticals’ and Rete Viola supporters ‘horizontals’ (see Kavada, 2005, 2006). As far as the general conformation of the movement is concerned, both groups could claim they promoted a horizontal structure in the movement, with open affiliation and freedom to organize events using the purple ‘trademark’. That said, the page administrators intended to retain control of the IPV page, as the main medium of the movement. This was unacceptable for Rete Viola. If Popolo Viola really was an open-source movement, the same should have applied to its means of communication. Unfortunately, the will of its administrators would not allow this and the management policies of Facebook did not facilitate distributed control.
8.4 Leadership and Decision-Making

While a superficial analysis of the decision-making processes inside Popolo Viola would seem to show deliberative democracy as being central, the pursuit of consensus would only be deceptive. In reality, inside the Catania group, most of the decisions were taken by San Precario. Organization and decision-making took place through offline meetings, through Skype conferences, and on secret Facebook groups where the six (initially) members of the Catania group coordinated step-by-step the planning of the campaigns, alongside the owners of other anti-Berlusconi Facebook groups who offered their platforms in order to mobilize their subscribers. Decision-making was implemented through negotiation, even though San Precario always took the final decisions. As a member of the group reports:

we have never voted on any issue, we had very long discussions; at the end of each discussion, San Precario was the one communicating the decision taken (Interviewee no.12).

Initially, this process was smooth as the enthusiasm around the movement was high.

At that stage we found ourselves agreeing on all issues, almost silently. Of course there were divergences of views, but such discrepancies were solved straightaway: everyone was ready to go beyond their personal opinions in the name of the goals of the event and for the good of the group (Interviewee no. 12).

With time, misunderstandings and different views of the movement’s nature led to exclusions, as with the “final purge” that took place in February, 2011. In terms of decision-making, deliberative democracy did not seem to be at the top of the movement’s agenda.

In principle, we all agreed that there was a need to overcome the crisis of representative democracy in Italy. We were all tired of political parties just pretending to represent citizens, while they were only working in order to perpetuate power in their own hands. However, there was no real effort in terms of translating such discontent within Popolo Viola’s internal democratic processes (interviewee no.16).

---

72 San Precario often participates in the meetings as a mere activist.
73 See 8.2.3
Rather than seeing inclusivity as a genuine value and goal together, the Catania group showed an actual interest in adopting forms of deliberative democracy only when the movement was compromised.

Facebook was the ever-present form of communication. After all, we all lived in different locations and face-to-face communication was limited to the main demonstrations and very sporadic meetings, such as the one in Naples in January, 2010 (Interviewee no.16).

Facebook itself did not provide instruments which facilitate decision-making in terms of majority voting, but did provide space for deliberation.

Of course, we could spend hours talking on Facebook Chat, or virtually face-to-face on Skype\textsuperscript{74}, but when we were having ‘official video conferences’ the main object was action. Issues about leadership and how we should have taken more informed decisions were left to one-to-one conversations. I knew already who shared my view of the movement; I contacted those people, saying that we should have raised those issues all together to San Precario and the Catania group, but eventually it was too late, the movement had imploded already, it wasn’t worth polarizing discussion even more (Interviewee no.17).

Many interviewees denounced the lack of instruments for online deliberation. However, there were few attempts to overcome such an impasse. Firstly, some activists from Popolo Viola Milan had opened a network called Open DCN (Deliberative Community Networks), where they experimented with forms of online participation and deliberation.

The idea of Open DCN came before Popolo Viola. The project was interesting, but not many people were eager to join and we thought that involving Popolo Viola activists would be the perfect chance to improve the platform and, at the same time, to help Popolo Viola overcome their issues in terms of internal democracy. Unfortunately, the interest manifested by the most influential activists was only nominal. Open DCN worked quite well inside Popolo Viola Milan, while, on a National level, we were always ending up communicating on Facebook (Interviewee no.20).

The Catania group also acknowledged the problem. As one of the founders of the page claims:

\textsuperscript{74} The Facebook Chat feature includes the possibility to have face-to-face interaction through the integration with Skype.
as long as we had to say no to Berlusconi, communication was focused on organizational issues where decisions were easy to take. When we thought we should have ‘upgraded’ the movement from a protest instance to a space for proposal, the problems arose. We worked for a long time trying to establish an online platform for deliberation and we got close to the experimentation stage of such a platform. That said, too few people were interested, and the activists with the right skills were no longer interested in Popolo Viola as a project (Interviewee no.19).

The attempts to experiment with forms of online deliberation failed for various reasons. Firstly, such attempts took place when the enthusiasm for the movement had already faded. Secondly, the activists who were deeply involved in the organization of the movement privileged Facebook over other platforms, and privileged action over deliberation. Thirdly, the movement as a whole never overcame the issues of protest in favour of proposing alternative forms of democracy.

8.4.1 Popolo Viola as an ‘Open-source’ Movement: A Deceptive View

According to the interviewees, ‘openness’ was one of the constituent values of Popolo Viola. The movement was supposed to be as inclusive as possible, offering a ‘shelter’ to all those citizens who felt under-represented by political parties. Moreover, all interviewees claimed Popolo Viola was, or at least should have been, a leaderless subject. However, the values of openness and inclusivity were interpreted in very different ways by the various groups inside Popolo Viola. As a member of the Catania group affirms:

We do not claim any ownership over the movement. Popolo Viola has no leader; it is just the sum of all its supporters. We own the Facebook page Il Popolo Viola and we protect it from any attacks in the name of the movement’s principles. Anybody is free to open more pages and groups on Facebook using the name ‘Popolo Viola’. We are very happy to support new activists and to provide them with visibility through our page (Interviewee no.20).

This point is absolutely central. The Catania group’s position was clear: they claimed ownership over the Facebook page, not over the whole movement. That said, those who had control over the page controlled the whole movement, having the power to reach almost half a million users. The Catania group held a communication power
that no other constituent had. De facto, Popolo Viola was both a Facebook page and a social movement. Whereas the Catania group justified its power by claiming the page was just a tool, all the other activists identified the page as a communication space which should have been free and democratically managed. As a Rete Viola supporter states:

the horizontality hailed by many voices inside Popolo Viola was fake. As long as the page was controlled by very few individuals without any space for accountability and external control, there would have been no space for democracy and a real distribution of power (Interviewee no.18).

Another issue, which impacted on issues of leadership and decision-making, was the anonymity of the founder of the page and the de facto leader of the movement, San Precario. Initially, the anonymity of San Precario did not seem to be a problem for the majority of the activists involved. On the contrary, many praised this choice, deeming it as essential in order to protect the movement from co-optation, individualism, and personal interests. As an influential activist says:

Initially I had no idea who San Precario was and I was very happy we could have a creator with an anonymous identity. We could consider this person not for who he was, but for his deeds and his opinions. Anonymity defended the movement from any form of ‘protagonismo’. As long as we had San Precario nobody could boast about the paternity of the movement. The presence of an anonymous head of the movement was in harmony with our principles (Interviewee no.4).

Many activists shared this view. As another interviewee adds:

The fact that San Precario was anonymous wasn’t really a problem. The real sense of the movement was given by its members and not by the founder of the page (Interviewee no.3).

Moreover, as the same creator of the page adds:

The decision to set up the anonymous persona of San Precario protected the movement from any form of individualism and narcissism. Without this iconic figure the No Berlusconi Day and Popolo Viola wouldn’t even have existed (Interviewee no.7).
As one of the former administrators of the page states, in spite of suspects pointing at the Catania group, the identity of San Precario was still unknown to his own collaborators:

I started working in the moderators’ group even though I didn’t know who the organisers were. San Precario appointed me as an administrator and I started organizing the other moderators, defending the page from attacks from Berlusconi’s supporters and also from internal arguments (Interviewee no.4).

The anonymity of San Precario worked as long as there was harmony among the Popolo Viola constituents.

I knew San Precario from the beginning as we collaborated together in the creation of the movement. Anonymity helped enormously when we organized the No Berlusconi Day. Our followers were enthusiastic about the idea of a common citizen having the power to summon such a big demonstration, thanks to Facebook. That said, at that time, the No Berlusconi Day was perceived as a singular campaign. When Popolo Viola was born, people took the movement very seriously and this anonymous figure was inadequate (Interviewee no.20).

In fact, just a few days after the No Berlusconi Day users on Facebook started questioning San Precario’s persona and wondering whether San Precario was covering a hidden agenda. As an interviewee states:

Some claimed left-wing parties were behind San Precario. Some others even suspected Berlusconi was behind him as an attempt to fragment the left (Interviewee no.4).

Another issue regarding the anonymity of San Precario relates to the values that such a persona promoted. One of the prominent features of anti-Berlusconism was the rejection of personal politics.

We created this anonymous nickname as an attempt to depersonalize protest and to portray San Precario as the common man, who struggles to find a permanent occupation. While such an idea was efficient initially, afterwards it backlashed against us. We were against personal politics, and, out of our will, we had created a personal movement (Interviewee no.15).

This last quote captures a relevant contradiction within the implicit mission of the movement. In spite of a constant fight against personal politics, the
movement ended up resembling itself some of the peculiar traits of ‘berlusconism’, mainly with a lumbering leader.

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the social movement Popolo Viola and the leading group from Catania differed enormously in terms of organizational levels. The movement acted as an informal network of informal groups, formal organizations, Facebook groups and pages; it was organized by a group headed by the anonymous account, San Precario, who held the access key to the Facebook page. Moreover, the movement was strongly influenced by external forces, in primis political parties, that attempted to exercise an influence over the movement’s agenda and tried to exploit its following. On the other hand, the Catania group, that held control over the Facebook page and consequently over the whole movement, was characterized by exclusivity and a vertical structure. Every attempt to democratize this structure failed, and such failure is at the basis of the decline of Popolo Viola.

During the movement’s lifecycle the Catania group soon became the object of fierce internal struggles. In fact, whereas Facebook was channelling discontent, facilitating distribution of information and promoting group-formation at an incredible pace, its design was also contributing to compromising the organizational stability of the movement from the very beginning. As an administrator says:

we consider PV to be a copy-left movement: nobody is the real owner; everyone is free to create profiles, pages, and groups. The most active gets visibility and decisional power as well (Interviewee no.2).

That said, Facebook is far from being a copy-left platform, and this was clear to the activists even before the No Berlusconi Day, when the first questions arose. The quoted statement seems rather to describe how any activist was free to use the term “Popolo Viola” in order to set up new pages and groups. However, through the Catania group and its control of the page, leadership and decisions were firmly in the hands of only a few actors.
Every organizational aspect of Popolo Viola was centralized on Facebook. From the excitement to the transformation stage, Facebook acted from the very beginning as a gravitational centre, much beyond the intentions of the actors involved, from San Precario to the activists who organized events and moderated the different pages and groups. That said, the activists and administrators did not seem to be able to grasp the potential for multiplicity given by the platform, falling into a spiral of arguments and factionalism which promoted the fragmentation of the movement.

While Popolo Viola declared itself to be a leaderless movement, such a configuration was only nominal. Through the Catania group, which managed the Facebook page, the decisions were firmly in the hands of a small circle of activists. This group, headed by San Precario, did not claim any leadership of the movement, but, managing a Facebook page with more than 450,000 likers, he held de facto control over the whole movement. Such a configuration hindered the search for an inclusive form of democracy. This aspect is contradictory: personal politics, embodied by the figure of Berlusconi, and the crisis of representative democracy, with the failure of traditional parties, constituted important opportunity structures for the movement. Consequently, it would have been expected that Popolo Viola would act as a laboratory for alternative forms of democracy. Instead, the movement ended up replicating the same form of democracy it rejects, centralizing power instead of distributing it.

To many activists it was not clear who the administrator of the page was, or, in other words, who was behind the movement. San Precario was known to a few only, and his anonymity, which was supposed to guarantee against any form of protagonismo, was in reality providing unaccountability and an unquestionable leadership. The Catania group had always owned the access key to the national page and consequently the role as super-manager of the page. Alongside San Precario, a group of activists helped with the daily practices of management, especially with the circulation and moderation of content.
Facebook design may have influenced the patterns described in this chapter, but eventually the decisions were taken inside the movement, not outside. It was San Precario who decided to accept material and immaterial contributions from political parties, thus alienating a section of the activist base because the presence of political parties was against Popolo Viola’s own values. It was San Precario who decided to exclude administrators whenever there was any risk of his being excluded. Moreover, it was the administrators’ group who decided not to include others in the administration of the page.

The inability to democratically manage the communication platform of Popolo Viola promoted different views about the nature of the movement, which ended up clashing with each other. For example, transparency was an essential meta-value for a movement which fought the corruption embedded in the so-called Berlusconism. The adoption of an instrument that did not allow a distributed and democratic management severely hampered the potential of the movement, which, in spite of continual attempts, never managed to adopt different technologies. Popolo Viola was almost trapped in Facebook.

Almost every struggle was born on Facebook and about Facebook. (...) If you yourself own a page and don’t ‘give’ it to the movement, it becomes a personal page. The problem was all about the management of the page (Interviewee no.6).
Chapter Nine – The Mobilization Processes of Popolo Viola

9.1 Introduction

Participation in social movements, as explained in Chapter Four, is the outcome of a process. A leadership group will frame and distribute a message; activists will gather the necessary information, weighing the pros and cons before joining a protest within a spectrum of possible forms of action, defined as a “repertoire of contention” by Tilly (1986). This chapter will explore the role of Facebook as a mobilizing structure for movements such as Popolo Viola, where social movement messages and calls for mobilization are distributed, assessing how the coverage by mainstream mass media can either promote or hinder participation. Moreover, this chapter will investigate the individual motivations of Popolo Viola activists to join the action, according to their commitment and to their affiliation, either to Popolo Viola or Rete Viola. Finally, it will analyse the repertoire of contention that was adopted by the movement.

9.2 Facebook as a Mobilizing Structure of Popolo Viola

Facebook was not the only platform in Popolo Viola’s web-sphere which was utilised for the purposes of organising, mobilising, and networking, but, rather, it was the one that gradually ended up having the concentration of all of its functions. During the institutionalization stage, I carried out a survey based on a non-probability sample in order to understand the patterns of mobilization of Popolo Viola organizers, activists, and simple page users. In spite of the obvious limitations of a convenience sample, my survey confirmed the tight-knit relationship between Popolo Viola and Facebook. If we pay attention to the following tables, the need to focus this study on Facebook becomes evident. More than three quarters of the survey sample checked Facebook more than once a day, while other platforms did not seem to interest them as much.
Table 9.1. Online platforms used as information source for activism and protest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>More times a day</th>
<th>Once a day</th>
<th>Once a week</th>
<th>Once a month</th>
<th>Less than once a month</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>76.52%</td>
<td>18.26%</td>
<td>1.74%</td>
<td>0.87%</td>
<td>1.74%</td>
<td>0.87%</td>
<td>1.36 / 6 (22.67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>7.83%</td>
<td>8.70%</td>
<td>2.61%</td>
<td>2.61%</td>
<td>6.96%</td>
<td><strong>71.30%</strong></td>
<td>5.06 / 6 (84.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indymedia</td>
<td>0.87%</td>
<td>0.87%</td>
<td>3.48%</td>
<td>6.09%</td>
<td>6.09%</td>
<td><strong>82.61%</strong></td>
<td>5.63 / 6 (93.83%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beppe Grillo’s Blog</td>
<td>3.48%</td>
<td>6.09%</td>
<td>16.52%</td>
<td>13.04%</td>
<td>21.74%</td>
<td><strong>39.13%</strong></td>
<td>4.61 / 6 (76.83%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avaaz.org</td>
<td>2.61%</td>
<td>4.35%</td>
<td>15.65%</td>
<td>3.48%</td>
<td>6.09%</td>
<td><strong>67.83%</strong></td>
<td>5.10 / 6 (85.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other online sources</td>
<td>19.05%</td>
<td>13.33%</td>
<td>14.29%</td>
<td>7.62%</td>
<td>5.71%</td>
<td><strong>40.00%</strong></td>
<td>3.88 / 6 (64.67%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data about the platforms where Popolo Viola was present provide similarly straightforward results. The Popolo Viola and Rete Viola pages were the platforms accessed most often in order to be informed about the movement. That said, these were not the only ‘places’ where Popolo Viola was present on Facebook. As has been explained previously, countless groups and pages sprang up on Facebook after the No Berlusconi Day. The various local groups’ pages were used with moderate frequency, to the same extent as the mailing lists, where activists communicated amongst each other. The movement’s supporters used the blogs and platforms created by the movement, such as Viola Post and popoloviola.org, only rarely.\(^75\)

\(^75\) For a limited time the official page also launched the blog/online newspaper ‘Lettera Viola’ (Purple Letter), which, at the time of writing, was already closed.
Outside Facebook, other ways of communication were utilized. Skype\textsuperscript{76} was widely used in order to create video-conferences among organisers, both on a national and local level. Mailing lists were extremely popular until the institutionalisation stage. They were used both for organising protests and as an additional tool with which to mobilize activists. Mailing lists were then progressively dismissed for their intrusiveness and for a progressive disaffection against the movement. As an activist says:

Initially mailing lists were useful when, at work, I had no access to Facebook. Via email I had constant updates about events and initiatives. Then Facebook released their mobile application and I was gradually accessing mailing lists only occasionally. Eventually, when my trust in the movement faded away, I moved every message to the spam folder of my email address (Interviewee no.13).

Other forms of SNM, such as Twitter, were used with a mobilisation purpose but with a minimal impact. As a Rete Viola activist explains:

I manage the Rete Viola Twitter account alone. We have 3,400 followers against the 14,000 of the National page (data September, 2011, editor’s note). On the occasion of the recent No-Tav demonstrations\textsuperscript{77} we discovered an application that allowed us to connect the Facebook and Twitter accounts, so every post is published on both platforms, including

\textsuperscript{76} Skype was integrated into Facebook chat on 6\textsuperscript{th} July, 2011.

\textsuperscript{77} See Chapter Two for more details.
hashtags. You can’t compare Twitter with Facebook, though. In Italy Facebook is much more popular (Interviewee no.1)

In fact, while in 2012 in Italy Facebook had more than 21 million users (73% of the online population)\textsuperscript{78}, Twitter, in spite of quick growth, had barely 2.4 million users\textsuperscript{79}. This point is echoed by one of the founders of the Popolo Viola page:

Facebook was virtually the only platform we ever used. There were a few blogs but nothing compared to Facebook. We unsuccessfully tried Ning,\textsuperscript{80} and we still utilise a Twitter account, but still, Facebook is too popular if compared to the others (Interviewee no.2).

The popularity of Facebook is crucial here. As an activist points out, the proactive role played by Facebook notifications and information appearing on individuals’ newsfeeds made it a formidable tool for the mobilization and circulation of information.

Facebook is the social network where we keep in touch for everything: to know what our friends are doing; to be updated about politics, music, sports... as soon as I liked Popolo Viola’s pages, the movement entered my private sphere. Notifications and Newsfeed’s posts show me the latest news about the movement. It is Popolo Viola reaching me, much more than myself seeking information about Popolo Viola (Interviewee no. 14).

The blogosphere played a role that was negligible in comparison with Facebook, at least in mobilisation terms. There were several attempts to establish a presence on the Internet outside Facebook, with websites such as www.noberlusconiday.org, www.ilpopoloviola.it, www.popoloviola.org, www.ondaviolatv.wordpress.com, www.letteraviola.it, www.violapost.it. All these websites had a very brief life and, at the moment of writing, they are either offline or out-dated. Rete Viola also has its blog, www.reteviola.org, though it is now updated only on a very sporadic basis. The web-analytics site Alexa describes violapost, the most popular Popolo Viola blog, in July, 2012: “Violapost.it has a three-month global Alexa traffic rank of 40,547. The site has a relatively good traffic rank in the city of Catania (#387). Approximately 93% of visitors to the site come from Italy, where it

\textsuperscript{78} http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/italy (last accessed 1th July, 2012).
\textsuperscript{80} A platform used in order to create a social website (www.ning.com).
has attained a traffic rank of 1,426. Compared to Internet averages, the Violapost.it audience tends to be less affluent”\(^{81}\). It is not surprising to notice how the popularity of the site was limited to Catania, Sicily, where the creators of the Popolo Viola page reside.

The perceived necessity to adopt another platform of communication outside Facebook goes beyond the issues of the centralization of management that were discussed in the previous chapter. As one activist explains: “a blog with considerable traffic can be monetized, providing funds which are essential for the growth of the movement” (Interviewee no.14). Facebook does not provide such a possibility.

A popular blog would have provided the movement with the chance to raise funds without having to ask activists. Financial stability would have provided more independence for the movement from political parties (Interviewee no.14).

As the reader can see in Table 9.3, Popolo Viola and Rete Viola supporters were mobilized in a similar way, confirming a strong homogeneity. In terms of online platforms accessed in order to obtain information about Popolo Viola, we can find strong similarities between the two groups. The two groups deemed both Popolo Viola and Rete Viola pages important sources for information. The Popolo Viola page was accessed at least once a day by 64.2% of its supporters and by 49.12% of Rete Viola supporters. The Rete Viola page was accessed by 54.39% of its sympathisers and 33.24% of Popolo Viola supporters. The majority of activists were thus in touch with the movement via Facebook on a daily basis.

Overall, it seems then that Rete Viola users tended to use more platforms at the same time, while the activity of Popolo Viola users tended to be focused on the official page. In fact, the remaining local pages were visited at least once a day by 24.69% of Popolo Viola users against 42.11% of Rete Viola users. This pattern shows that local groups tended to converge towards Rete Viola against the centralizing tendencies of the ‘Il Popolo Viola’ page. This reinforces issues, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, regarding the internal struggles of the movement. On the other hand, Rete Viola users accessed the official blogs of Popolo Viola, seen even

more as a tool associated with San Precario and those organisers that share a very
different view of the movement, less frequently.

Almost the same number of users accessed the mailing lists associated with
the movement with the same frequency, showing communication between the two
groups. One interviewee confirms this.

After the split between Popolo Viola and Rete Viola, many activists, like
me, were somewhere in the middle. On the one hand, because of having
friends in both factions, on the other, because we knew the movement
was very close to its end and it wasn’t worth fighting anymore. Personally, I was in contact with members of both factions. After all, we
were still all against Berlusconi” (Interviewee no.13).

Table 9.3. Online platforms used specifically with the intent of becoming informed
about Popolo Viola – Popolo Viola vs. Rete Viola

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Popolo Viola</th>
<th>More times a day</th>
<th>Once a day</th>
<th>Once a week</th>
<th>Once a month</th>
<th>Less than once a month</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Popolo Viola's Facebook Page</td>
<td>22.22%</td>
<td>38.95%</td>
<td>19.75%</td>
<td>6.17%</td>
<td>2.47%</td>
<td>7.41%</td>
<td>2.47 / 6 (41.17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rete Viola's Facebook Page</td>
<td>12.35%</td>
<td>30.86%</td>
<td>17.28%</td>
<td>12.35%</td>
<td>8.64%</td>
<td>18.52%</td>
<td>3.30 / 6 (55.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Popolo Viola local pages</td>
<td>9.88%</td>
<td>14.81%</td>
<td>22.22%</td>
<td>19.75%</td>
<td>9.88%</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.75 / 6 (62.50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popolo Viola's Twitter Profile</td>
<td>1.23%</td>
<td>3.70%</td>
<td>6.17%</td>
<td>1.23%</td>
<td>3.70%</td>
<td>83.95%</td>
<td>5.54 / 6 (92.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viola Post</td>
<td>3.70%</td>
<td>12.35%</td>
<td>23.46%</td>
<td>7.41%</td>
<td>4.94%</td>
<td>48.15%</td>
<td>4.42 / 6 (73.67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popolo Viola's mailing lists</td>
<td>12.35%</td>
<td>9.88%</td>
<td>16.05%</td>
<td>11.11%</td>
<td>8.64%</td>
<td>41.98%</td>
<td>4.20 / 6 (70.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lettera Viola</td>
<td>6.94%</td>
<td>2.78%</td>
<td>11.11%</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>4.17%</td>
<td>66.67%</td>
<td>5.00 / 6 (83.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popolo Viola.org</td>
<td>4.17%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>20.83%</td>
<td>13.89%</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>52.78%</td>
<td>4.81 / 6 (80.17%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rete Viola</th>
<th>More times a day</th>
<th>Once a day</th>
<th>Once a week</th>
<th>Once a month</th>
<th>Less than once a month</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Popolo Viola's Facebook Page</td>
<td>12.28%</td>
<td>36.84%</td>
<td>17.54%</td>
<td>7.02%</td>
<td>7.02%</td>
<td>19.30%</td>
<td>3.18 / 6 (53.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rete Viola's Facebook Page</td>
<td>22.81%</td>
<td>31.58%</td>
<td>26.32%</td>
<td>3.51%</td>
<td>7.02%</td>
<td>8.77%</td>
<td>2.67 / 6 (44.50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Popolo Viola local pages</td>
<td>19.30%</td>
<td>22.81%</td>
<td>28.07%</td>
<td>14.04%</td>
<td>7.02%</td>
<td>8.77%</td>
<td>2.93 / 6 (48.83%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popolo Viola's Twitter Profile</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>7.02%</td>
<td>5.26%</td>
<td>3.51%</td>
<td>84.21%</td>
<td>5.65 / 6 (94.17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viola Post</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>19.30%</td>
<td>19.30%</td>
<td>10.53%</td>
<td>10.53%</td>
<td>40.35%</td>
<td>4.33 / 6 (72.17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popolo Viola's mailing lists</td>
<td>10.53%</td>
<td>5.26%</td>
<td>24.56%</td>
<td>12.28%</td>
<td>8.77%</td>
<td>38.60%</td>
<td>4.19 / 6 (69.83%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lettera Viola</td>
<td>1.85%</td>
<td>7.41%</td>
<td>9.26%</td>
<td>18.52%</td>
<td>5.56%</td>
<td>57.41%</td>
<td>4.91 / 6 (81.83%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popolo Viola.org</td>
<td>1.85%</td>
<td>3.70%</td>
<td>22.22%</td>
<td>16.67%</td>
<td>9.26%</td>
<td>46.30%</td>
<td>4.67 / 6 (77.83%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To conclude, in spite of the effort made by many of the constituents of Popolo Viola, Facebook has always been the central gravitational point around which Popolo Viola has risen and declined. On the one hand, this is due to the extreme popularity of Facebook in Italy and the affordances provided by Facebook in terms of the circulation of information and the two-step flow of communication. Despite an overall homogeneity, the data here confirm a more distributed flow of communication in Rete Viola against the centralization of Popolo Viola around the national page. However, distribution does not coincide with penetration. Rete Viola did not have the chance to exploit, in terms of affiliation and the circulation of information, the excitement surrounding the No Berlusconi Day, reaching a limited number of citizens and limited levels of mobilization.

9.3 Popolo Viola and the Mainstream Mass-Media

This section will focus on how external factors, specifically mainstream mass media, influenced the mobilization patterns of Popolo Viola. Two dynamics are highlighted here. Firstly, the coverage of Popolo Viola’s demonstrations and activities, providing visibility to the movement, promoted the building of a vast audience for the page during the excitement stage. Secondly, the increasing neglect by the press during the institutionalisation and transformation stages influenced how citizens perceived the movement and its role within Italian society.

Popolo Viola crafted its flow of information across its networks of influence and its mobilizing structures, notably its official page on Facebook and the galaxy of pages and groups which were related to it, and then various blogs and websites that were created by the numerous local groups. Through these networks, the movement bypassed the mass media and, at the same time, it attracted their attention. The relationship between Popolo Viola and the mainstream mass media was controversial. As an activist puts it:

According to the main television channels we were just the umpteenth useless leftist movement with no real agenda and only a sentiment of hatred towards Berlusconi. They labelled us as anti-politics. Right-wing papers, such as Libero and Il Giornale, owned by Berlusconi’s family, thought we were pure scum. Other newspapers, such as Il Corriere della Sera, La Repubblica, l’Unità, and especially the newly founded Il Fatto
*Quotidiano*, initially endorsed our cause but abandoned us when the decline started (Interviewee no.7).

*Il Fatto Quotidiano*, was founded in September, 2009, and is the only Italian newspaper which is independent from public funding. During the first months of the campaign *Il Fatto Quotidiano* established itself de facto as the voice of the movement. With an article titled ‘L’invasione viola del No Berlusconi Day’82, *Il Fatto Quotidiano* highlighted the values of honesty and morality in the movement and the potential of Facebook for protest.

Whoever, at home or in the square, is told of the No Berlusconi Day by her friends and acquaintances, will be left with a firm belief that change is possible. Without any fanfare or any individualism, it is still possible that civil society can peacefully self-organize to reinvent grassroots politics involving citizens in order to reinforce the importance of values, such as morality and honesty. It all started on the Internet, on Facebook; a tool which become formidable when in the hands of people who want to change things83 (Mello, 2009).

In the United Kingdom, the BBC and newspapers such as *The Times*, *The Guardian*, and the *Daily Telegraph* spoke enthusiastically about the ‘egalitarian’ features of the Popolo Viola. BBC News painted the Popolo Viola movement as egalitarian, but not socialist, noisy but conformist, hailing its lack of a formal structure. “Think of a world of politics without spin doctors, tele-prompters, stage-managed conferences, party headquarters, manifestos, cynicism or even leaders. One does exist. It is the world of the Purple People”, so the BBC article began (Kennedy, 2010).

Gradually, the enthusiasm of the mass media faded away. Exactly one year after the No Berlusconi Day, during the institutionalisation stage, when Popolo Viola organized the Violaconvention to celebrate the anniversary of the demonstration and to elaborate on new political propositions, *Il Fatto Quotidiano* dismissed the

---

82 ‘The Purple Invasion of the No Berlusconi Day’
83 Original text in Italian: “A casa, chi era in piazza, chi si farà raccontare il No Berlusconi Day da amici e conoscenti, si porterà una convinzione. Che si può fare. Senza troppe fanfare, e senza divisimi, in questo paese, può ancora accadere che la società civile si organizzi da sola, pacificamente, riesca a reinventare la politica dal basso coinvolgendo i cittadini per ribadire l’importanza di concetti come moralità e onestà. Il tutto partendo da Internet, da Facebook. Uno strumento, solo uno strumento, che diventa formidabile nelle mani di chi vuole spendersi per cambiare le cose.” Available at http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2009/12/05/linvasione-viola-del-no-berlus/12515/ (last accessed on 3rd April, 2013).
instances of the movement in a harsh manner.

When trolls’ individualism is transferred from websites to theatres; when there are no spaces for democratic discussion without shared rules; when there are no official loci and rituals of debate and deliberation, the final outcome is likely to be ‘mush’ (Mello, online, 2010).84

The reference to the internal struggles is manifest here.

The relationship between Popolo Viola and the press became hostile, even competitive, as the page founder explains.

Mainstream mass media were remarking on the internal disputes in order to defuse the movement’s potential. In fact, after an initial boost given by their attention, which helped the page to grow considerably, the same media understood we were self-sufficient and almost equal. In other words, we were competitors. The same happened to Beppe Grillo, ostracised by the media for many years, and acknowledged only when his following was so huge that it couldn’t be overlooked or minimised anymore (Interviewee no.7).

During the excitement and formalization stages, the page represented a two-hundred thousand (and more) strong market where mainstream media could circulate their articles. Such a relationship was mutually beneficial: the press could increase their readership both online and offline; the page could attract interest, growing both in terms of affiliation and visits, enlarging the range of mobilization. With the institutionalization, the page became a self-sufficient alternative medium with high levels of participation. However, with the transformation stage, the page kept growing, whereas the movement declined. The press did not want to ruin their reputation by supporting a dying cause, so it started ostracizing the movement. Although isolation did not affect the page, it accelerated the decline of the movement.

Traditional media were still following many of our initiatives but the word ‘Popolo Viola’ was never mentioned, as though we were now part of a black list. That said, many left-wing journalists were assiduously

---

84 Original text: “Se il protagonismo dei troll viene trasferito di sana pianta dai siti web ai teatri; se non ci sono spazi per il confronto democratico sulla base di regole comuni; se non ci sono luoghi e riti ufficiali di dibattito e deliberazione, il risultato finale rischia di essere la poltiglia, appunto, il polpettone”. 
following our page to find out the spirit of its users, and often to find news to copy. This proved our big potential in terms of agenda-setting. Often, news discovered by the page were being recycled straightaway by the newspapers (Interviewee no.7)

There are many examples of ways in which mainstream media snubbed Popolo Viola. On 20th April, 2012, the page published, on the blog Violapost, a racist comment which was posted on Facebook by a Northern League representative. After few hours *Il Fatto Quotidiano* and other newspapers published the same news without a mention of Popolo Viola. On the 5th May of the same year, the page published a list of 94 members of the Senate who had voted against the abolition of super-pensions for public managers. *L’Espresso, La Repubblica’s* weekly magazine, recycled such news two days later, mentioning Popolo Viola only as a secondary source. The page could become a powerful alternative medium thanks to its constituents as sources of information.

Individual page users usually signalled these facts to us. Sometimes other partner organisations were gave us the tip; as when the collective ‘Errori di Stampa’ (‘Typos’, editor’s note) found out that the public service broadcaster RAI had included a maternity clause in their temporary employees’ contracts, basically reserving the right to fire any female employee if they got pregnant. We posted the information and after a few hours it was on Il Fatto’s website. (Interviewee no.7)

The role of the page thus went beyond functioning as a mobilization and organization tool for activists. Active as an efficient alternative medium, it began to be perceived by the mainstream media with suspicion. The reach of the page was vast. As Table 9.5 shows, if we compare newspapers’ circulation to the numbers of affiliates of the Il Popolo Viola page, we can see how the page potentially had a bigger ‘readership’ than any of them.

---

85 http://violapost.it/?p=7833  
86 http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2012/05/20/terremoto-nord-padania-stacca-segretario-della-lega-facebook/235710/  
87 http://violapost.it/?p=7009  
88 http://espresso.repubblica.it/dettaglio/pd-pasticcio-sulle-pensioni-doro/2180174  
89 http://violapost.it/?p=5044  
90 http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2012/02/20/licenziamento-giornaliste-incinte-spunta-clausola-gravidanza/192574/
Table 9.5. Italian Newspapers’ Circulation Vs. Popolo Viola Likers (end 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Circulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook Page Il Popolo Viola</td>
<td>459,141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corriere della Sera</td>
<td>406,706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Repubblica</td>
<td>350,438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Stampa</td>
<td>225,697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Il Sole 24 ORE</td>
<td>224,221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Il Messaggero</td>
<td>144,982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>il Resto del Carlino</td>
<td>128,398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avvenire</td>
<td>118,960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Il Giornale</td>
<td>117,968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Nazione</td>
<td>103,166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libero</td>
<td>90,895</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Il Gazzettino</td>
<td>68,645</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italia Oggi</td>
<td>66,045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Il Secolo XIX</td>
<td>61,519</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Il Tirreno</td>
<td>58,893</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Il Mattino</td>
<td>55,641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Il Giorno</td>
<td>53,714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>il Fatto Quotidiano</td>
<td>53,387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L’Unione sarda</td>
<td>50,657</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Such a comparison alone, though, would be misleading as putting readers and likers on the same level would be inaccurate. If we compare statistics about unique visitors, in 2010 an average of only 4,364 users accessed the ‘Il Popolo Viola’ page, against 1,104,000 of LaRepubblica.it and 801,000 of Corriere della Sera Online. That said, as the reader will see in the next chapter, users interacted on the IPV page mainly through their newsfeed. If we compare access to the page content to access to newspapers’ webpages, the comparison would be much more accurate. In 2010, content uploaded on the page has been accessed a daily average of 1,838,074 times. On the other hand, content on LaRepubblica.it was accessed 10,079,000 times, on Corriere della Sera Online 7,282,000 times. If we consider that news from Il Fatto Quotidiano Online holds an average of 695,000 webpages accessed daily, we can state that the ‘Il Popolo Viola’ page can by any means be considered as a medium that can compete with online newspapers.
On top of this, the page provided first-hand information that could be exploited. After all, according to my survey, newspapers such as *La Repubblica* and *Il Fatto Quotidiano* are among the favourite sources of information for Popolo Viola activists, and the page served as a strong consumer base for such newspapers. As Table 9.6 shows, *La Repubblica* and *Il Fatto Quotidiano* are the preferred sources of information for the users/activists of Popolo Viola. *Il Corriere Della Sera*, the most popular newspaper in Italy, does not seem to be popular among Popolo Viola supporters due to its conservative stance, as also are *Il Sole 24 Ore*, *La Stampa*, owned by Fiat and the Agnelli family, *Il Giornale*, owned by Silvio Berlusconi’s brother, Paolo, and *Libero*, another right-wing newspaper. These patterns of association also show how the profession of independence from any political ideology is deceptive, as the actions of the movement have always demonstrated a strong left-wing affiliation.

Table 9.5. Newspapers Vs. Popolo Viola – Content Accessed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Content Accessed (,000)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>La Repubblica Online</td>
<td>10,079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corriere della Sera Online</td>
<td>7,282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Stampa Online</td>
<td>1,862</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook Page Il Popolo Viola</td>
<td>1,838</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Il Sole 24 ORE Online</td>
<td>1,373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>il Fatto Quotidiano Online</td>
<td>695</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9.6. Favourite sources of information among mainstream online newspapers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>More times a day</th>
<th>Once a day</th>
<th>Once a week</th>
<th>Once a month</th>
<th>Less than once a month</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corriere Della Sera Online</td>
<td>12.17%</td>
<td>14.78%</td>
<td>20.00%</td>
<td>10.43%</td>
<td>13.04%</td>
<td>29.57%</td>
<td>3.86 / 6 (64.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Repubblica Online</td>
<td>57.39%</td>
<td>20.87%</td>
<td>15.65%</td>
<td>2.61%</td>
<td>2.61%</td>
<td>0.87%</td>
<td>1.75 / 6 (29.17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Il Fatto Quotidiano Online</td>
<td>33.91%</td>
<td>28.70%</td>
<td>19.13%</td>
<td>3.48%</td>
<td>3.48%</td>
<td>11.30%</td>
<td>2.48 / 6 (41.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Il Sole 24 ORE Online</td>
<td>2.61%</td>
<td>6.96%</td>
<td>10.43%</td>
<td>12.17%</td>
<td>15.65%</td>
<td>52.17%</td>
<td>4.88 / 6 (81.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Stampa Online</td>
<td>3.48%</td>
<td>2.61%</td>
<td>6.96%</td>
<td>12.17%</td>
<td>16.52%</td>
<td>58.26%</td>
<td>5.10 / 6 (85.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Il Giornale Online</td>
<td>1.74%</td>
<td>5.22%</td>
<td>5.22%</td>
<td>5.22%</td>
<td>10.43%</td>
<td>72.17%</td>
<td>5.34 / 6 (89.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libero Online</td>
<td>3.48%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>5.22%</td>
<td>4.35%</td>
<td>10.43%</td>
<td>76.52%</td>
<td>5.48 / 6 (91.33%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In conclusion, this section has explained how mainstream media held a significant role in both the initial promotion of Popolo Viola’s initiatives and the final decline of the movement. Moreover, I highlighted the controversial relationship between the movement and the press and how this relationship has influenced the mobilizing potential of Popolo Viola. Following the results portrayed here, the assumption that SNM allowed social movements to circumvent mainstream media seems too optimistic. Moreover, as Klandermans (1984, 1997) suggests, the ability to reach citizens is only one of the preconditions for action. Potential activists, in fact, need to feel motivated in order to take to the streets. The next section will investigate how Facebook promoted individual motivations to action.

9.4 Individual Motivations to Action

Individuals may join collective action for a wide range of reasons, which can be related to a personal benefit, collective good, or both. That said, it is necessary for such motivations to be strong enough to overcome any temptation to free ride. Important tasks for any movement are that they foster motivations and lower any barriers to action. What is the role played by technology in this process? Does Facebook hold any potential which could strengthen individual motivations? In this section I will investigate the three-fold relationship between Facebook and Popolo Viola organizers and activists in terms of motivations towards protest. Firstly, I will assess how Popolo Viola supported individual activists’ desire to participate in collective action. Secondly, I will explain how Facebook can facilitate or hinder such a process.

Some Facebook features can promote individual motivations to action; some others can hinder it. However, the benefits have clearly outstripped the risks. Facebook has attracted individuals interested in protest-related issues by acting simultaneously as a networking tool, an alternative medium, and a mobilization tool (questions 1, 2, and 3 on Table 9.7). As one of the interviewees remarks:

In the past, before the coming of Facebook, my activity as an online activist was scattered across countless mailing lists, blogs, and forums. I almost felt like my passion for change was turning into a very demanding job (Interviewee no.18).
The versatility of Facebook has allowed activists to focus their efforts on one platform only. As a London-based activist explains, Facebook helped activists to stay close even when interest was low, at least as far as that local Popolo Viola group was concerned.

For the first few months decisions were taken exclusively at meetings. Then a Google-group was set up. After few weeks the majority of the users found it very intrusive so the ‘IT-group’ created an ad-hoc forum, www.popoloviolalondon.org. This is where we were discussing and voting. The forum worked very well for around six months, when there was enthusiasm for the movement (...) Discussion on the forum was lively as long as there was enthusiasm. After a while, only very few activists were accessing the forum and the group was meeting face to face only once a month. The problem with the forum was that it was difficult to receive information from it, while, on Facebook, feedback was continuous. We decided then to create a Facebook secret group, which is still active (Interviewee no.10).

Moreover, Popolo Viola activists did not trust the mainstream press and relied on Facebook as a trustworthy source from which to be informed about the actual political situation in Italy (q.4). As a former activist points out:

   Trusting the Italian media was simply impossible. Television was in the hands of Berlusconi, if we exclude very few voices on RaiTre and La7. The press was using us rather than listening to us. Even when we were reading critical views about Berlusconi’s government, we felt like there was a hidden agenda behind them. On Facebook we could share independent articles and help trustworthy bloggers to get some visibility. Thanks to the IPV page these blogs could thrive. I think it’s not preposterous to say that the IPV page ‘created’ new ‘blog-stars’ to rise and shine (Interviewee no.15).

Furthermore, Facebook facilitated empowerment in the citizens involved with Popolo Viola. According to 76.64% of my surveyed group, the presence on Facebook of thousands of citizens with similar ideas gave them hope for social change in Italy (q.5). Consequently, people became more active in fighting for their rights and taking political action (q.6). However, the inclination towards action materialized itself in different ways. Peculiarly, we noticed a sort of balance between the amount of respondents who claimed they felt empowered towards street action (10.28%, in q.7) and respondents who moved to online-based forms of activism (9.61%, in q.8). Overall, the use of Facebook increased interest on political issues in
almost 20% of the group surveyed. Nonetheless, the presence of polarized discussion was perceived to be dangerous in terms of the potential to encourage one in every five activists to abandon online participation. This point will be the object of analysis in the next chapter.

Table 9.7 – Facebook’s Potential for Collective Action

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>strongly agree</th>
<th>agree</th>
<th>don’t know</th>
<th>disagree</th>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
<th>Average Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>q1: &quot;I use popolo viola Facebook pages mostly to get informed about what mainstream press ignores&quot;</td>
<td>30.84%</td>
<td>42.06%</td>
<td>8.41%</td>
<td>11.21%</td>
<td>7.48%</td>
<td>2.22 / 5 (44.40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q2: &quot;I use popolo viola Facebook pages mostly to get in touch with people with similar ideas&quot;</td>
<td>16.82%</td>
<td>45.79%</td>
<td>15.89%</td>
<td>14.02%</td>
<td>7.48%</td>
<td>2.50 / 5 (50.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q3: &quot;I use popolo viola Facebook pages mostly to get informed about next demonstrations&quot;</td>
<td>27.10%</td>
<td>50.47%</td>
<td>8.41%</td>
<td>9.35%</td>
<td>4.67%</td>
<td>2.14 / 5 (42.80%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q4: &quot;Without Facebook I would be less informed about the real situation of Italian politics&quot;</td>
<td>13.46%</td>
<td>29.81%</td>
<td>6.73%</td>
<td>30.77%</td>
<td>19.23%</td>
<td>3.13 / 5 (62.60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q5: &quot;Finding on Facebook thousands of people with similar political ideas gave me hope in a change in Italian politics&quot;</td>
<td>22.43%</td>
<td>54.21%</td>
<td>7.48%</td>
<td>10.28%</td>
<td>5.61%</td>
<td>2.22 / 5 (44.40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q6: &quot;Thanks to Facebook I am more active in fighting for my rights and in taking political action&quot;</td>
<td>17.31%</td>
<td>37.50%</td>
<td>12.50%</td>
<td>15.38%</td>
<td>17.31%</td>
<td>2.78 / 5 (55.60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q7: &quot;Before joining Facebook I thought street protest was useless&quot;</td>
<td>3.74%</td>
<td>6.54%</td>
<td>3.74%</td>
<td>24.30%</td>
<td>61.68%</td>
<td>4.34 / 5 (86.80%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q8: &quot;Since I joined Facebook I am more inclined to online activism rather than street protest&quot;</td>
<td>0.96%</td>
<td>8.65%</td>
<td>11.54%</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
<td>53.85%</td>
<td>4.22 / 5 (84.40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q9: &quot;The presence of polarised discussion on Facebook discouraged me to participate in the discussion&quot;</td>
<td>4.67%</td>
<td>17.76%</td>
<td>13.08%</td>
<td>23.36%</td>
<td>41.12%</td>
<td>3.79 / 5 (75.80%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q10: &quot;Before subscribing to Facebook I was less interested in politics&quot;</td>
<td>4.67%</td>
<td>14.95%</td>
<td>2.80%</td>
<td>18.69%</td>
<td>58.88%</td>
<td>4.12 / 5 (82.40%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Facebook was perceived in different ways as far as its potential to perk up interest in politics according to the level of commitment inside the movement is concerned. As explained in the methodology chapter, I divided the surveyed sample into three groups: organizers, activists, and audience. Organisers are those who actively collaborate in the conception, planning and implementation of initiatives and events, both online and offline. Activists take part in those activities, while audiences are fans of the page, but do not participate in any event. A high number of organisers responded to the survey (56 answers, 26% of the total), against 71 activists (33%) and an expected majority of audience (89, 41%). The activists surveyed seemed less influenced by Facebook’s potential than other groups. In fact, only 8.33% of them considered their motivations had grown after having joined the
social network. The number grows among the audience (18.75%), and especially among the organisers (33.26%). All the organizers interviewed were involved for the first time with roles as cadre (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). These subjects considered Facebook as an essential driver to commitment within Popolo Viola. The huge amount of like-minded people joining the page empowered every group (question 2), with, again, an emphasis on organisers (38.71% of them strongly agreeing with the statement). Moreover, a small but not insignificant number of people in all of the groups were convinced by their presence on Facebook to join street protests, which they had once considered to be useless. Facebook thus not only promoted commitment within the movement, but, to a lesser extent, also sparked a new hope for social change.
### Table 9.8. Attitude towards Facebook’s potential for protest – Organisers / Activists / Audience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisers</th>
<th>strongly agree</th>
<th>agree</th>
<th>don’t know</th>
<th>disagree</th>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
<th>Average Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. “Before subscribing to Facebook I was less interested in politics”</td>
<td>3.23%</td>
<td>29.03%</td>
<td>3.23%</td>
<td>35.48%</td>
<td>29.03%</td>
<td>3.58 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “Finding on Facebook thousands of people with similar political ideas gave me hope in a change in Italian politics”</td>
<td>38.71%</td>
<td>45.16%</td>
<td>9.68%</td>
<td>6.45%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>1.84 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. “Before joining Facebook I thought street protest was useless”</td>
<td>6.45%</td>
<td>6.45%</td>
<td>6.45%</td>
<td>29.03%</td>
<td>51.61%</td>
<td>4.13 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. “The presence of polarised discussion on Facebook discouraged me to participate in the discussion”</td>
<td>9.68%</td>
<td>32.26%</td>
<td>6.45%</td>
<td>16.13%</td>
<td>35.48%</td>
<td>3.35 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. “Thanks to facebook I am more active in fighting for my rights and in taking political action”</td>
<td>28.57%</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>10.71%</td>
<td>7.14%</td>
<td>3.57%</td>
<td>2.07 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. “Without Facebook I would not know anything about the activities of popolo viola”</td>
<td>28.57%</td>
<td>32.14%</td>
<td>3.57%</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
<td>10.71%</td>
<td>2.57 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. “Without Facebook I would be less informed about the real situation of Italian politics”</td>
<td>10.71%</td>
<td>35.71%</td>
<td>3.57%</td>
<td>35.71%</td>
<td>14.29%</td>
<td>3.07 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. “Since I joined Facebook I am more inclined to online activism rather than street protest”</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>7.14%</td>
<td>3.57%</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
<td>64.29%</td>
<td>4.46 / 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activists</th>
<th>strongly agree</th>
<th>agree</th>
<th>don’t know</th>
<th>disagree</th>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
<th>Average Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. “Before subscribing to Facebook I was less interested in politics”</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>2.78%</td>
<td>19.44%</td>
<td>69.44%</td>
<td>4.50 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “Finding on Facebook thousands of people with similar political ideas gave me hope in a change in Italian politics”</td>
<td>16.67%</td>
<td>66.67%</td>
<td>5.56%</td>
<td>11.11%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>2.11 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. “Before joining Facebook I thought street protest was useless”</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>5.56%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>27.78%</td>
<td>66.67%</td>
<td>4.56 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. “The presence of polarised discussion on Facebook discouraged me to participate in the discussion”</td>
<td>2.78%</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>16.67%</td>
<td>25.00%</td>
<td>47.22%</td>
<td>4.06 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. “Thanks to facebook I am more active in fighting for my rights and in taking political action”</td>
<td>19.44%</td>
<td>47.22%</td>
<td>11.11%</td>
<td>11.11%</td>
<td>11.11%</td>
<td>2.47 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. “Without Facebook I would not know anything about the activities of popolo viola”</td>
<td>36.11%</td>
<td>30.56%</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>16.67%</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>2.31 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. “Without Facebook I would be less informed about the real situation of Italian politics”</td>
<td>11.11%</td>
<td>33.33%</td>
<td>5.56%</td>
<td>44.44%</td>
<td>5.56%</td>
<td>3.00 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. “Since I joined Facebook I am more inclined to online activism rather than street protest”</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>30.56%</td>
<td>61.11%</td>
<td>4.53 / 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>strongly agree</th>
<th>agree</th>
<th>don’t know</th>
<th>disagree</th>
<th>strongly disagree</th>
<th>Average Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. “Before subscribing to Facebook I was less interested in politics”</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>10.42%</td>
<td>2.08%</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>70.83%</td>
<td>4.23 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “Finding on Facebook thousands of people with similar political ideas gave me hope in a change in Italian politics”</td>
<td>18.75%</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>10.42%</td>
<td>12.50%</td>
<td>2.48 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. “Before joining Facebook I thought street protest was useless”</td>
<td>4.17%</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>4.17%</td>
<td>16.67%</td>
<td>66.67%</td>
<td>4.33 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. “The presence of polarised discussion on Facebook discouraged me to participate in the discussion”</td>
<td>4.17%</td>
<td>14.58%</td>
<td>12.50%</td>
<td>29.17%</td>
<td>39.58%</td>
<td>3.85 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. “Thanks to facebook I am more active in fighting for my rights and in taking political action”</td>
<td>14.58%</td>
<td>22.92%</td>
<td>14.58%</td>
<td>20.83%</td>
<td>27.08%</td>
<td>3.23 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. “Without Facebook I would not know anything about the activities of popolo viola”</td>
<td>27.08%</td>
<td>41.67%</td>
<td>6.25%</td>
<td>12.50%</td>
<td>12.50%</td>
<td>2.42 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. “Without Facebook I would be less informed about the real situation of Italian politics”</td>
<td>14.58%</td>
<td>27.08%</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>20.83%</td>
<td>29.17%</td>
<td>3.23 / 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. “Since I joined Facebook I am more inclined to online activism rather than street protest”</td>
<td>2.08%</td>
<td>14.58%</td>
<td>18.75%</td>
<td>18.75%</td>
<td>45.83%</td>
<td>3.92 / 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall, the affordances for connectedness that were enabled by Facebook, and the efforts for mobilization made by the movement’s organizers, seemed to empower activists and to increase their motivations to take action. That said, this process works only on a short-term basis. The fragmentation of Popolo Viola hampered this potential, discouraging citizens from becoming committed in the longer term.

9.5 The Repertoire of Contention of Popolo Viola

As we have seen so far, the protest discourse of Popolo Viola was strongly centralized on Facebook. Interaction among groups and activists took place mostly on the popular Social Network Medium. Organization, in spite of the numerous attempts made by the movement’s constituents, was strongly influenced by the proprietary nature of Facebook, with the presence of secret groups. Thereby, decisions were taken through an only apparent deliberative process that hid an uneven distribution of power that was skewed in favour of those activists, such as San Precario and the Catania group, who exercised control over the movement through the ownership of the most relevant mobilizing structures. Nonetheless, in spite of the centralization on Facebook of all of the movement-related processes, most of the action organized by the movement took place offline. The repertoire of contention of Popolo Viola was Internet-supported rather than Internet-based. Moreover, it was characterized by a low threshold of risk, as the principle of ‘non-violence’ was constitutive of both Popolo Viola and Rete Viola.

As explained previously, Popolo Viola did not make use of any statutes, while Rete Viola provided a detailed manifesto through its ‘ethical charter’. Whereas the principle of non-violence was clearly stated by Rete Viola, the Catania group had to release several notes on Facebook in order to clarify its non-violent aims. Rete Viola stated in the charter:

The movement rejects any form of violence. It disapproves vehemently of those barbaric acts executed by nation-states, organizations, and fundamentalist groups of any kind on innocent and defenceless populations all over the world. Peace is a fundamental value which won’t
ever be accomplished as long as wars are a lucrative business favouring the few over the humiliation of the many.\(^91\)

The underlying belief was straightforward: as the Italian Constitution “rejects war as an instrument of aggression against the freedom of other people”\(^92\), in the same guise, both Popolo Viola and Rete Viola rejected violence in solving any form of dispute. However, because of the lack of a manifesto, the cadre of Popolo Viola left a vacuum open to those activists who held a different view in that respect. Such a void required the page administrators to reaffirm the principle of peace and non-violence on more than one occasion. The most significant took place on the 7\(^{th}\) February, 2011, a few days before the Demonstration “Adesso Basta! Berlusconi Dimettiti!”\(^93\) when the administrators of the Popolo Viola page released the following note:

Yesterday we posted a status update whose content should be obvious: ‘we are against violence, by anybody, and to anybody’. Anybody means everybody: police forces, demonstrators, institutions, and governments. This update sparked a vibrant discussion which highlighted the presence of at least two currents of thought inside the movement (or inside society). Some think that non-violent demonstration won’t ever solve any issues and that regimes have to be confronted with any means, including violence. Some others think regimes should be grounded on the cultural field, and that any form of violence would contradict the spirit of the movement, and that it would be ethically unacceptable, but also tactically inefficient. We are among the latter group. Violence, from whoever it comes, coincides with the violation of the pact of civil mutual coexistence and the principle of legality that are the foundations of democratic society. Moreover, the adoption of illegal instruments, which are detached from common sense and a Constitution born from

---

\(^91\) Original text: “Il movimento rifiuta ogni forma di violenza condannando particolarmente quegli atti di barbarie eseguiti dagli stati, da organizzazioni e da fondamentalismi a danno di innocenti e inermi popolazioni di tutto il mondo. La pace è un valore fondamentale e imprescindibile che non potrà essere raggiunto finché la guerra resta un lucroso business, a beneficio di pochi, sulla devastazione di tutti. La dismissione degli arsenali bellici permette di assicurare questo obiettivo e convogliare risorse enormi, e sprecate, per fini di utilità umana e sociale. La Rete Viola ritiene fondamentale che lo Stato persegua una coraggiosa e intransigente lotta alla mafia”. Available at http://www.reteviola.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=99&Itemid=1 (last accessed 1\(^{st}\) July, 2013).

\(^92\) Text of Article No.11 of the Italian Constitution: “Italy rejects war as an instrument of aggression against the freedom of other peoples and as a means for the settlement of international disputes. Italy agrees, on conditions of equality with other States, to the limitations of sovereignty that may be necessary to a world order ensuring peace and justice among the Nations. Italy promotes and encourages international organisations furthering such ends.

\(^93\) “Enough! Berlusconi Resign!”
Resistance (which rejects violence) would lead us astray from the objective of our movement. This goal, to use an abused term, is the overcoming of ‘berlusconism’. To be clear, this is not about getting rid of Berlusconi only (whose resignation we have repeatedly asked for), but especially the political, economic and cultural system that is ruining Italy (...) non-violent demonstrations serve to drive our message positively, to avoid the traps of the media circus, to make our claims credible. Everything else is just a shortcut that leads nowhere.  

As is shown by the quote, not all activists shared non-violence as a principle. Some of them came from a background where violence was an accepted form of resistance. That said, all of the demonstrations organized by Popolo Viola were characterized by peaceful displays of WUNC (Worthiness, Unity, Numbers, and Commitment; Tilly, 2004). The majority of the movement’s followers were, in fact, not accustomed to disruptive tactics. As Table 9.9 shows, the majority of the surveyed sample had participated in protests throughout their lives, largely in the form of low-threshold tactics of online contention, such as online petitions (45%) and email campaigns (30.3%). Only 9.2% took part in mail bombings and virtual sit-ins (7.9%). In comparing Popolo Viola and Rete Viola, there is a substantial similarity between the two groups. That said, Popolo Viola activists seemed to prefer conventional forms of contention, while Rete Viola activists had a slightly higher inclination towards forms of hacktivism.

Table 9.9 – Online Repertoire of Contention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>General</th>
<th>Popolo Viola</th>
<th>Rete Viola</th>
<th>Organizers</th>
<th>Activists</th>
<th>Audience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online Petitions</td>
<td>45.2%</td>
<td><strong>46.1%</strong></td>
<td>45.2%</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
<td><strong>52.4%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email Campaigns</td>
<td>30.3%</td>
<td><strong>31.5%</strong></td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
<td><strong>33.3%</strong></td>
<td>31.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mail Bombing</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td><strong>9.1%</strong></td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td><strong>12.3%</strong></td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Sit-In’s</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td><strong>9.6%</strong></td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td><strong>11.5%</strong></td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td><strong>7.8%</strong></td>
<td><strong>12.4%</strong></td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of forms of online activism, a clear relationship between the level of engagement and the threshold of risk is found. While the audience was keener on using conventional forms of contention, such as online petitions, unconventional forms were used more often by activists and organisers, who also used a more varied repertoire of contention. The higher the level of engagement was, the higher the level of the threshold in the form of online contention.

Table 9.10 – Demonstrations and Campaigns Organized by Popolo Viola – Repertoire of Contention Adopted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demonstration/Campaign</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Lifecycle Stage</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Internet-Supported or Internet-Based</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Berlusconi Day</td>
<td>05-Dec-09</td>
<td>Excitement</td>
<td>Rome and other cities</td>
<td>IS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libera rete in libero stato</td>
<td>23-Dec-09</td>
<td>Excitement</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>IS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sit-in in difesa della Costituzione</td>
<td>30-Jan-10</td>
<td>Formalization</td>
<td>Rome and other cities</td>
<td>IS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La legge è uguale per tutti</td>
<td>27-Feb-10</td>
<td>Formalization</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>IS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agorà per l’Emergenza democratica</td>
<td>07-Mar-10</td>
<td>Formalization</td>
<td>Rome and other cities</td>
<td>IS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legittimo impedimento</td>
<td>10-Mar-10</td>
<td>Formalization</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>IS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Mafia Day</td>
<td>13-Mar-10</td>
<td>Formalization</td>
<td>Reggio Calabria</td>
<td>IS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L’Aquila Day</td>
<td>31-Jul-10</td>
<td>Institutionalization</td>
<td>L’Aquila</td>
<td>IS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Berlusconi Day 2</td>
<td>02-Oct-10</td>
<td>Institutionalization</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>IS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viola Convention</td>
<td>05-Dec-10</td>
<td>Institutionalization</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>IS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adesso Basta. Berlusconi dimettiti!</td>
<td>12-Feb-11</td>
<td>Institutionalization</td>
<td>Rome and other cities</td>
<td>IS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petition Legittimo Impedimento</td>
<td>13-Apr-11</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>IB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign Administrative Elections</td>
<td>01-May-11</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>IB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battiquorum</td>
<td>May-Jun-11</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>IB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piazza Pulita</td>
<td>11-Sep-11</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>IS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In paying closer attention to the development of the Popolo Viola’s repertoire of contention, we notice a clear pattern. Whereas, during the stages of excitement, formalization, and institutionalization, all the campaigns organized by Popolo Viola aimed to mobilize citizens to street action, during the stage of transformation the Internet itself became the ground of contention, with online petitions and awareness campaigns at the centre of the movement’s agenda. As explained in Section 7.5, the campaigns for the administrative elections and the referendum attracted a high level of participation and contributed respectively to the victory of the Left at the administrative elections and the rejection of legittimo impedimento at the referendum. The single attempt to organize a street demonstration took place in September, with the event Piazza Pulita95, attracting only a few hundred citizens. However, it would be misleading to measure the

95 Literally ‘Clean Square’
efficacy of mobilization according to the space of contention, stating that during the transformation, in order to be successful, action had to be Internet-based rather than Internet-supported. Instead, the answer found itself in the fragmentation of the movement’s collective identity and the worthiness of the events themselves. The relevance of political events, such as the administrative elections and the referenda, overshadowed the divisions inside the movement, compelling activists to collaborate in the name of a bigger cause rather than fighting each other for supremacy inside the movement. The next chapter will shed light on this issue, focusing on the collective identity of Popolo Viola and its levels of both online and offline participation.

9.6 Conclusion

Mobilization in social movements is a complex and multi-faceted process. The density of the initiatives that took place in the three-year period 2009-2011 created a series of challenges at an analytical level. Any attempt to manufacture a general account became problematic because of the variety of factors in place that influenced mobilization. Mobilization is not a linear process from framing to participation. The diversity of initiatives in place, the tactics employed, the actors involved, and the loci where such processes take place required an in-depth analysis of the collective identity of the movement. Without such an inquiry, any account would be flawed. Nonetheless, the adoption of concepts such as mobilizing structures, individual motivations, and the repertoire of contention, acts as an effective way to assess some essential patterns. The dynamics which emerged in this chapter can be summarized as follows: firstly, Facebook acted as a strong gravitational centre for the mobilization patterns of Popolo Viola. Secondly, the contribution of the mainstream mass media initially helped the movement circulate information and build a vast audience; however, such a flow was broken when the credibility of the movement declined. Thirdly, the reach of the Il Popolo Viola Facebook page grew so much that it could be compared with an average online newspaper. Fourthly, Facebook proved to be an empowering tool promoting political interest and the hope of social change. Finally, it encouraged street action thanks to
its three-dimensional properties as an alternative medium, mobilizing platform, and networking space.
Chapter Ten – Identities and Participation

10.1 Introduction

Section 4.5 of this thesis outlines the concept of collective identity; moreover, it explained the dimensions through which this project assesses the process of collective identity building among the actors who are part of Popolo Viola. Following Melucci’s account in Nomads of the Present, I highlighted three dimensions, cognitive definitions, active relationships, and emotional investments (Melucci, 1989). I interpreted these dimensions in terms of whether and to what extent communication patterns have the potential for, respectively, a shared cognitive definition of a movement, the promotion of interaction among individuals, and the facilitation of solidarity among its constituents. This chapter will attempt to assess these dimensions by analysing the communication flows on the Facebook page ‘Il Popolo Viola’. Firstly, it will evaluate the model of communication in Facebook pages in the design form used during the three-year period 2009-2011. The aim is to provide an answer to the following question: does the technical code provide affordances for every voice inside a movement to have equal power? Later, this chapter will separately assess the page’s potential in terms of the quality of information, its potential for triadic interaction, and solidarity among users. The normative assumption is that for collective identity to develop in a balanced manner the information shared should be meaningful, rather than phatic and effortless; interaction should evolve into discussion rather than merely being feedback to the content shared by the page administrators. Finally, interaction should promote solidarity instead of polarising discourse. The objective is to establish how these dynamics evolve, what factors influence their development, and whether and how the code of Facebook has a specific influence. If we reject the idea that collective identity is a given it is then on these processes that analysis should focus.

10.2 The Voices of Popolo Viola

In order for the process of collective identity building to be balanced among a movement’s constituents it is necessary for these voices to have equal power within the internal negotiation of the values of protest. In the absence of such a balance,
inevitably a dominant group will impose its values and interests at the expense of harmony and unity. This issue becomes even more central when horizontality, inclusion, and participation are declared as the constitutive principles of a social movement. Necessarily, the locus where interaction and discussion take place is required to guarantee a democratic exchange of information. Any contribution, either by a group or individual, necessitates equal visibility.

This section will explore three interrelated issues that will clarify how the nature of the platform influences the power structure of Facebook movements and their internal patterns of communication. The aim is to answer three relevant questions and to understand how forms of communication and participation impact on the development of Popolo Viola’s collective identity. Firstly, where do participants interact and how does the technical coding of such a platform contribute in shaping internal power relationships. Furthermore, what are the models of communication that are enabled by Facebook pages. Finally, how does human agency influence the way in which information circulates and reaches scalability.

10.2.1 Place of Interaction

The collective identity of Popolo Viola was constructed around the discussion which developed on the Il Popolo Viola Facebook page. However, the movement’s followers could interact with the page in different ways and this had a specific influence on the structure of discussion. Users could engage with IPV content directly on the page (through visits), or on their personal newsfeed. As I will explain in detail, assessing such an issue is of vital importance, because it helps to point out to what kind of information users were exposed, whether such a content was uploaded by page administrators or by other users.

Users interacted with the page much more often through their newsfeed\(^96\) rather than by visiting the page. As will be seen in Figure 10.1\(^97\), only a tiny minority

---

\(^96\) In order not to create confusion I will mention henceforth only ‘newsfeed interaction’, despite its inclusion of minifeed interaction too.

\(^97\) Data will not include newsfeed interaction during the excitement stage, since Facebook Insights introduced this feature only from April, 2010, during the formalisation stage of Popolo Viola.
actually visited the page. After all, why would have they visited a page if its most popular content was already visible on the newsfeed? This pattern is essential for the potential for the circulation of information provided by Facebook and it promoted an increasing centralization of Popolo Viola communication on this SNM. If we exclude Twitter, users would have sought information by their voluntary action only on other platforms. Consequently, only the most involved users would have been in touch with information about Popolo Viola. As a matter of fact, Facebook is characterized by a bi-directional flow of information. When users are not seeking information about a specific page, it is information itself that seeks users through newsfeed, mini-feed, and notifications. These patterns multiply the opportunities for communication, but may also discourage users from looking for information, preventing them from accessing less popular content.

Figure 10.1. Place of Interaction: Newsfeed / Visits (unique users) – General Overview

Interaction with the page from personal newsfeed, rather than through direct access exposed users to only part of the content which was actually uploaded onto the page. Facebook’s EdgeRank algorithm provides visibility only to the most popular content; hence, minoritarian content is unlikely to gain any visibility. How does content become popular on Facebook, though? Is popularity the result of
relevance and interest, or rather of visibility? Through explaining the communication model of Facebook pages, the next section will shed light on this question.

10.2.2 The Model of communication on the Page ‘Il Popolo Viola’

As said before, Facebook pages have been designed with the aim of providing brands and businesses with a social tool for marketing. With time, Facebook pages increasingly became characterized by vertical, top-down flows of communication, and content control by their owners. This process has been relatively slow and has been influenced by Facebook’s need to monetize interaction. This requirement grew considerably when Facebook executives announced an initial public offering of the company’s shares.

The design of Facebook allowed the organizers of Popolo Viola to circulate information across a potentially vast population of users. The page’s openness eased this process. A non-member could, in fact, interact and participate in the exchange of information on the IPV page in two different ways: by visiting the page through a simple search (on Facebook or on any search engine), thus through voluntary action and a desire to interact specifically with the page; otherwise, by stumbling on page-related content through the activity of one or more of her own friends and connections on Facebook. This could happen either via Newsfeed or via Ticker (or Minifeed)\textsuperscript{98}. This process represents a sort of two-step flow of communication through which the design of Facebook allows information to circulate quickly and efficiently. The same process took place in order to attract new affiliates; either they looked for the page with the specific intent of subscribing, or they randomly stumbled upon it through friends, via newsfeed and ticker, and consequently developed an interest in subscribing. Moreover, anyone who was a fan of the page received regular updates on their newsfeed from the page. Considering the page Il Popolo Viola to an extremely popular one, it was likely that these updates would

\textsuperscript{98} “Ticker shows you the things you can already see on Facebook, but in real time. Keeps one up to date with the latest news as it happens. Ticker includes live stories—things like status updates, friendships, photos, videos, links, likes and comments. You can see this activity elsewhere on Facebook. Ticker just lets you see it as it happens. (From Facebook help Centre, available at https://www.facebook.com/help/ticker, last accessed 7th June 2012)”
often be on top of users’ newsfeeds, increasing the visibility of the page and its interactive potential exponentially.

The communication model of Facebook pages can be assessed by measuring the visibility of information. Communication on Facebook pages will thus be horizontal when information posted by page administrators, and information posted by affiliates, both have the same visibility. In this sense, Facebook pages have never been horizontal. In fact, content on Facebook gains visibility in two ways: on the wall of pages and profiles, and on the newsfeeds of profiles’ contacts and pages’ likers. That said, any profile on Facebook has a limit of 5,000 friends, whilst pages have no limit in this sense. This means that information shared by a user on the IPV page had a visibility that was limited to a maximum 5,000 connections plus the daily visitors to the page. On the other hand, information shared by the page administrators had a potential visibility among all of the likers of the page (460,000 in August, 2013). These patterns constituted a primary obstacle to the circulation of personal frames among Popolo Viola activists.

Data confirms this assumption. Using information coming from Facebook Insights, I found out that throughout the whole period analysed in this project, posts uploaded by the Catania group, i.e., the page administrators, had an average of 480.8 likes and 216.4 comments, whereas posts uploaded by individual affiliates had an average of only 0.21 likes and 0.12 comments. Such straightforward data demonstrate a significant imbalance in terms of visibility, which implies a substantial supremacy of the narratives created by leaders over the narratives created by users.

A consequence of this phenomenon is that individual users were discouraged from creatively expressing themselves on the page. Table 10.1 shows the levels of online participation on the page under the categories of likes, comments, and wall posts. Likes and comments refer to users’ feedback to posts uploaded by page administrators; wall posts describe any form of contribution, be it visual or textual, that was uploaded by users straight onto the wall of the page. While, during the excitement stage, users’ posts constituted 14% of any form of online participation on the page, the number fell dramatically with time. Users’ posts counted, in fact, for
6% of online participation during the formalisation stage, 5% during the institutionalisation stage, and a mere 3% in the transformation stage. During the excitement stage an average of 1,218 posts were uploaded onto the Popolo Viola page on a daily basis. During the transformation stage this number shrank to 341 daily posts.

Table 10.1. Users’ Online Participation: Ratio likes / comments / wall posts – General Overview (Daily average)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Likes</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Posts</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excitement</td>
<td>6883</td>
<td>669</td>
<td>1218</td>
<td>8770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formalisation</td>
<td>7970</td>
<td>1553</td>
<td>591</td>
<td>10113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutionalisation</td>
<td>6489</td>
<td>2946</td>
<td>532</td>
<td>9967</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>6461</td>
<td>3219</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>10020</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Likes</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Posts</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excitement</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formalisation</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutionalisation</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It could be argued that this strong decrease in the number of posts was due to the decline of the movement and to its internal power struggle. Such a claim, though, is easily disproved. In fact, while users’ posts declined in number, likes remained stable and the number of comments even increased. From an average of 669 daily comments in the excitement stage, comments increased to 3,219 comments during the transformation stage of the page. This dynamic is even more significant if we consider that wall posts decreased in spite of the page continuously growing in terms of new subscribers (See Chapter Seven for more details about affiliation levels). If we correlate data about affiliation and participation through posts, we notice an even more pronounced decline, from 0.61% of users/posts ratio in the excitement stage to a 0.07% ratio in the transformation stage.
Table 10.2. Wall Posts – Average Daily Posts and Posts/User Ratio (in %)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Daily Posts (av.)</th>
<th>Posts/User %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excitement Stage</td>
<td>1217.7</td>
<td>0.61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formalization Stage</td>
<td>590.58</td>
<td>0.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutionalization Stage</td>
<td>532.42</td>
<td>0.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformation Stage</td>
<td>340.62</td>
<td>0.07%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The technical coding of Facebook is central to an understanding of the underlying reasons for these dynamics. In 2010, Facebook implemented gradual changes in pages’ design in order that administrators can have greater control of exchange information. Until 2010 the page presented a lay out like that illustrated in Figure 10.2. As the reader will notice, the page acted as a newsfeed through which whether posted by users or administrators, had the same visibility on the wall of any update.

Figure 10.2. Screenshot of the page Il Popolo Viola – August 2010
In 2011, Facebook launched the new Timeline layout, where EdgeRank, an algorithm, decided what content was to appear on top of a newsfeed. In terms of page design, posts updated by users were now boxed in a little window with narrow prominence (Figure 10.3). This decision by Facebook provided even less visibility for personal expression on its pages. On top of this, developers deleted the feature ‘Facebook Discussions’ in October, 2011. ‘Facebook Discussions’ was the only tool available for a purely horizontal exchange of information on its pages.

Figure 10.3. Screenshot of the page Il Popolo Viola – August 2013

To sum up, the changes undertaken to Facebook’s design in the two-year period 2010-11 denote an increased verticality of communication in Facebook pages. This model of communication exposed users only to content which was uploaded by page administrators, while individuals’ contributions were invisible. This configuration discouraged users from contributing actively with original content. In
spite of increasingly centralized patterns of interaction, some personal frames were still reaching scalability. The next section will attempt to elucidate on such issues.

10.2.3 The Memes of Popolo Viola: Scalability of Information on the Page

Whereas issues of visibility are assessed through the analysis of Facebook data and design, any account of the issues of scalability needs a more qualitative investigation. As previously explained, there is no general rule that explains why certain content becomes popular, or ‘viral’, while other information does not. In terms of the design of Facebook pages, we have acknowledged the absence of horizontality and thus the pronounced inequality of visibility when personal and collective frames are compared.

In order for personal frames to find visibility and then reach scalability, it is then necessary that the organisers who manage a Facebook page will replicate and re-distribute such information. The main ideas around which Popolo Viola found its initial popularity were framed around two simple memes: the colour purple and the No-B Day logo, which went viral on Facebook from the previous page (‘Una Manifestazione Nazionale...’).

The decision to adopt purple as the official colour for the No Berlusconi Day and the symbol of the protest came after a meeting that took place in Rome in October, 2009. Six activists participated at the meeting. As one of the attendees reveals:

I was the representative of the Catania group, while the others were activists from Rome who were already involved with other anti-Berlusconi Facebook pages. Some of them would later have been the leaders of the Popolo Viola, Rome. The idea of choosing purple came while we were having a coffee, even though I am sure somebody posted it on Facebook beforehand. I was sceptical but one of the activists insisted that we should decide on a simple idea and then ‘spam’ it online on any available platform. I thought a process like that would have dumbed down the serious issues behind the campaign, but the success of the demonstration proved I was wrong (Interviewee no.20).
After the discussion, one activist designed the logo (see Figure 10.4) which would have been adopted as profile picture by the page ‘Una Manifestazione Nazionale’ and afterwards by thousands of affiliates.

Figure 10.4. The No Berlusconi Day Logo launched by the UMN page

On 14th October the UMN page introduced a logo inviting users to share and create groups and pages for the No Berlusconi Day. The post gained only 182 likes and 61 comments. However, with the exponential growth of the page, the users’ feedback also increased. The same logo was posted again on the 23rd October, attracting 552 likes and 84 comments. Meanwhile, users produced flyers and alternative logos. The UMN page published the best ones, which also acquired visibility and scalability. For example, the picture of a t-shirt with the logo of the No Berlusconi Day, sent by activists from Vienna, attracted 1,005 likes and 104 comments. Alternative logos, such as the ones displayed in Figures 10.5 and 10.6
were, respectively, liked by 1,408 and 1,413 users, and received 141 and 160 comments.

**Figure 10.5. Alternative No Berlusconi Day Logo shared on 15-11-2009**

![Alternative No Berlusconi Day Logo shared on 15-11-2009](image)

**Figure 10.6. Alternative No Berlusconi Day Logo shared on 19-11-2009**

![Alternative No Berlusconi Day Logo shared on 19-11-2009](image)
The ones shown here are just a few examples. The patterns of adoption of personalized frames and their sharing, led the researcher to two relevant findings: firstly, whereas the design of Facebook favoured collective over personal frames, human agency, i.e., the page administrators’ decisions had the potential to overcome this limit by embracing individual contributions from users. Secondly, even forms of light involvement, such as likes and comments, which were dismissed by some authors as being slacktivism, proved to be excellent providers of visibility and scalability for memes, actively contributing to the maximisation of offline participation. That said, the practice of selecting and redistributing material required a significant effort by page administrators. Inevitably, the absence of such effort led to frame misalignment. This phenomenon will be explained in detail in the following sections.

10.3 Online Participation and its Implications in Terms of Collective Identity

Whereas the previous section focused on the characteristics of the platform on which participation around the Popolo Viola’s protest took place, this part will concentrate on users’ participation. Evaluating how users interact within a social movement medium provides an estimate of how collective identity evolves through time, both emotionally and cognitively. Cognitive and emotional aspects of collective identity are strictly inter-twined, hence here I will also suggest avenues for further research in the field. In the first place, this Chapter categorizes forms of participation and how these forms evolved during Popolo Viola’s lifecycle. Secondly, it explores how solidarity and contestation among the movement’s constituents evolved. Thirdly, it assesses how much the content of communication can contribute to a cognitive definition of the movement and its potential for triologic interaction. Fourthly, it analyses the role played by moderation in exacerbating the polarization of discussion, furthermore, it evaluates the impact of the decline of Popolo Viola’s collective identity on participation levels at Popolo Viola’s demonstrations.

10.3.1 Forms of Participation: Likes, Comments, and Wall Posts

As anticipated in the methodology chapter, likes, comments, and wall posts constituted the main forms of participation on Facebook at the time of analysis. It is
necessary to remember that likes are to be intended here as having exclusive reference to content on the page. Likes to the page itself have been considered in this study only in terms of affiliation (see Chapter Seven). A fourth form of participation, the “Share” button, became available for analysis in Facebook Insights only after the present study was completed, thus it will not be considered here. Likes can be considered to be a ‘passive’ form of participation, since they act as mere feedback to content uploaded by others, while the contribution of original content is absent. On the other hand, comments and wall posts constitute ‘active’ forms of engagement through which users contribute with personal content to the exchange of information. I analysed the nature of online participation on the page Il Popolo Viola both quantitatively and qualitatively. In this section I will define the modalities of participation, distinguishing between active and passive ways of engaging with the page content.

This categorization is necessary in order to distinguish those forms of participation that are relevant in terms of collective identity. Different forms of participation contribute to the development of a sense of belonging within a movement in diverse ways. While likes are essential in terms of the circulation of information and mobilization, they do not hold any qualitative relevance for what concerns collective identity beyond a mere approval to the movement’s organizers. On the other hand, wall posts and comments provide users and activists the opportunity to express either solidarity or disapproval towards the movement.

As explained in Chapter Seven, the excitement stage took place between 9th October, 2009, and 9th January, 2010. However, the data analysis I carried out starts with the opening of the IPV page on 7th December, 2009. During this 34 days- long period, the administrators posted 586 times, an average of 17.23 daily posts. At this stage, likes constituted the major form of engagement with the page (an average of 6883.06 daily likes, 78.49% of the overall participation), followed by a considerable production of wall posts (1217.71 daily posts, 13.89%). On the other hand, users seldom engaged in any form of discussion, with only a few of them commenting on the content posted on the page (668.97 daily comments, 7.63%). In terms of design, it is necessary to say that at this stage wall posts by users and administrators had the
same visibility on the wall of the page (see Figure 10.1). That said, posts by administrators would appear on the page wall and also on users’ newsfeed, while users’ posts would be available only on the page wall.

During the 173-days’ long formalization stage, the administrators posted 2771 times, an average of 16.01 daily posts. The levels of online participation grew significantly during this time. The contents of the page were liked on an average of 7,970 times a day, with an increase of +16% if compared to the excitement stage (even more if we consider the likes per post). Comments grew at an incredible pace, with 1,553 daily comments, +132% on the previous stage, while posts steadily declined, with 591 daily posts and a drop of -52%. This fall in wall posts was due to the very scarce visibility provided to them by Facebook’s design. I calculated an average 0.012 comments per post were uploaded by users during this stage. In fact, only posts uploaded by the administrators reached an audience and created discussion, while the contribution of users was almost invisible.

During this 228-days’ long Institutionalization stage, the page administrators posted 2,208 times, an average of 9.68 daily posts. In regard to the potential of the page in terms of online participation, data during the institutionalization stage show a substantial similarity with the formalization stage, with 9,976 average daily acts of participation against 10,114 during the previous stage (-1%). The nature of participation, though, changed considerably, demonstrating how users became more active in participating in the exchange of information than in the past. In fact, this stage saw a further decline of likes as opposed to posts (6,498 average daily likes against 7,970 during the formalization stage, giving a -18.4% decrease), indicating a growing disaffection with the head of the movement, but also a change in the nature of interaction. This was confirmed by the huge increase in comments (2,946 against 1,553 in the formalization stage, growth +89.6%). Posts decreased by a further 9.9% (532 against 591). The decrease in posts largely depended on the evolution of Facebook design. Now, in fact, Facebook pages showed only the most popular users’ uploads on the home page, while the other users’ posts were marginalised in a separate sub-page called “Posts by Others”.

241
The transformation stage took place between 15\textsuperscript{th} February, 2011, and is continuing at the time of writing. As the reader knows, the fieldwork of this research covered data from Facebook Insights until 30\textsuperscript{th} June, 2011. The transformation stage saw the detachment of the page from the movement. Unexpectedly, the decline of Popolo Viola coincided with an impressive growth in participation in the page. As far as the ratios between likes, comments, and wall posts are concerned, and thus the nature of engagement, passive participation (likes) constituted 64.4\% overall, with active forms of participation accounting for 35.6\% (32.1\% comments and 3.5\% posts).

During the transformation stage, forms of passive participation decreased further, from 6,489 to 6,461 daily likes (-0.4\% if compared to the institutionalization stage), whilst engagement increased, with a trend similar to that which happened during the institutionalization stage, i.e., with an increase in comments and a decrease in the number of posts uploaded to the Popolo Viola page. In fact, comments increased from an average of 2,946 to 3,219 (+9.2\%), and wall posts decreased from 532 to 341 (-35.9\%).

![Figure 10.7. Likes / Comments / Wall Posts Ratio](image)

To sum up, the quantitative analysis of the modalities of participation provides us with precious insights into the collective identity of Popolo Viola. Firstly, the decrease in the number of likes that took place during the institutionalization
stage signalled a decline in solidarity levels, even before the final degeneration of the movement in the transformation stage. Secondly, the patterns of online participation indicate a different path in regard to the movement and its main medium. In fact, while the movement declined, the page thrived with a significant increase in terms of users’ engagement. The following sections will attempt to show why such a phenomenon occurred.

10.3.2 Solidarity and Polarization: Users’ Attitudes towards the Movement

This section will measure the levels of solidarity and polarization in discussions on the Facebook page Il Popolo Viola. Solidarity is a fundamental component of collective identity. Gauging the pulse of the discussion inside the movement allows the researcher to assess solidarity levels within Popolo Viola’s collective identity. The two dimensions are opposed to each other: as solidarity increases, polarization decreases, and vice versa; moreover, high levels of polarization in the discussion would be detrimental to the unity of the movement. Evaluating such issues will help shed light on some of the reasons behind the fragmentation of the anti-Berlusconi protests.

The relevant data for the purposes of this section are based on content analysis, as explained in the methodology section. A qualitative analysis of the opinions of page users to the leadership of the movement allowed me to utilize users’ feedback as a barometer of Popolo Viola’s collective identity during its lifecycle.

The findings showed a remarkable sense of solidarity during the excitement stage. The users’ sentiments to the movement were now remarkably high. During the excitement stage, 37.44% of the comments analysed were favourable to the initiatives of the movement, and only 6.1% were critical. An impressive number of comments expressed gratitude to the organizers of the movement for their ideas and their commitment to the anti-Berlusconi cause. 56.45% of the comments were neutral, commenting on the political situation on a general level and expressing the common grievances of page users. During this stage, negative comments were made mostly by trolls, specifically the right-wing users who had joined the page only to
jeer at the members of the movement, or by members who deemed the
movement’s approach too soft to Berlusconi’s party and to the Italian political class
in general. For example, here is a comment that points the finger at the alleged poor
effectiveness of traditional mass-demonstrations:

A good potential unexpressed... do you realise it’s been years this kind of
demonstrations takes place and the only people who remember about
them are ones who took part in them... the power doesn’t care about
them... we are the people and we are below... they’re the hegemonic
class... a masked aristocracy... they get a pension after two years only...
and here we are still playing at planning one demonstration each year... 99
(comment to post, 7th December, 2009).

It is necessary to remind the reader that the page discussion was subject to
moderation. Unfortunately, it is not possible to quantify the number of deleted
comments and to assess whether the number of critical comments would have been
more consistent in the absence of moderation.

The content analysis carried out during the formalisation stage saw 45.48% of
neutral comments, 41.9% favourable, and 12.54% critical. Because of the increasing
factionalism within Popolo Viola, we might have expected a much higher rate of
negative comments at this stage, but the prompt moderation of most of them now
allowed the researcher to take them into account. The week analysed saw an
exceptional traffic due to the ‘RAI per una notte’ (‘RAI for one night’) event, when the
Italian journalist Michele Santoro, notorious for his anti-Berlusconi views, organised
a one-off talk-show to be broadcast only online and on various local television
channels. RAI per una notte took place as a protest against the suspension of the
political talk-shows that had been declared on the Berlusconi-controlled public
national broadcasters before the regional elections.

During the same week an anti-Sarkozy demonstration took place in Paris,
inspired by the No-Berlusconi day, called ‘No-Sarkozy Day’. The event was posted by

99 Original Text: “va bene ...bel potenziale inespresso ...ma vi rendete conto che sono anni che si fanno
ste manifestazioni e gli unici che li ricordano sono quelli che vi hanno partecipato.....ai piani alti non ci
caga nessuno...siamo il popolo e stiamo sotto ...loro sono la classe egemone ...un’aristocrazia
mascherata....minkia ottengono tutti la pensione dopo meno di due anni....e ancora giocchiamo a fare
una manifestazione all’anno.....”
the administrators of the page amid a general consensus and sporadic critiques. As a user commented:

I thought Popolo Viola represented that part of Italy that wishes to restore honest and democratic politics, that part that fights against the man who has been ruining the country for 15 years (...) (and who voted for him) -and not a gathering of extreme leftists against any right wing politician (comment to post, 27th March 2010)\(^{100}\).

In the analysis undertaken during the institutionalisation stage, neutral comments amounted to 45.04%, while favourable comments decreased to 29.87%, reflecting the fragmentation within the movement and an increasing discontent with the Catania group, deemed by many to be responsible for the movement’s issues; critical comments rose steadily to 25.08%. This was the week of No Berlusconi Day 2, seen by some users as a flop. Some blamed the participation of political parties, like the user who said:

I was there but seeing all those IDV and PRC flags annoyed me. I would have loved to see free citizens wearing purple, singing the national anthem, or in total silence to commemorate a defunct democracy (comment to post, 2nd October 2010).

Others pointed the finger at some overoptimistic statements that were made by the page administrators. On the evening of 2nd October, 2010, in the aftermath of No-Berlusconi-Day 2, the administrators shared this status update: “A splendid and full square! More purple than last year. According to the police we were 50,000, according to us 500,000!”\(^{101}\). While the majority of comments agreed that, after all, numbers were only relative, a noisy minority accused the organisers of the protest, such as the user who complained about the low profile of the demonstration:

\(^{100}\) Original text: “pensavo che il Popolo Viola fosse un’Italia che desiderava restaurare una politica degna onesta e democratica, un’Italia che lotta contro l’uomo e coloro che lo votano che da 15 anni manda a rotoli l’Italia, un’Italia che non può accettare un emendamento come “salva rete 4” (ke vergogna!!), Iodo Alfano (vomito), accusato di: falsa testimonianza, falso in bilancio, corruzione, concorso in associazione mafiosa, tangenti fiscali ecc ecc...e non un raduno di estrema sinistra contro qualsiasi esponente di destra”

\(^{101}\) Original text: “Una bellissima piazza e stracolma! Più viola dell’anno scorso. Per la Questura 50.000, per noi 500.000! Ma il dato più importante è che l’abbiamo realizzata da soli e senza il supporto dei media tradizionali! Presto le foto di piazza San Giovanni!”
I haven’t seen such a low-profile demonstration for long time. In the parade there were huge empty spaces (...) sorry to say, but today’s protest was objectively a total flop.\(^\text{102}\)

Some others were even more critical, questioning the overall relevance of the movement\(^\text{103}\). Some page users, on the other hand, expressed solidarity with the administrators, accusing the mass media of having abandoned the movement. On the same status update, in fact, the administrators wrote: “The most important aspect is that we did it on our own without any support from the traditional media”. Many comments accused RAI of totally overlooking the event,\(^\text{104}\) and remarked on Berlusconi’s media monopoly, as this user said:

Now all information coming from the media is monopolised by the dwarf, if we don’t do anything soon, TV channels will broadcast regime bulletins only, as in the best tradition of dictatorships.\(^\text{105}\)

During the transformation stage, the number of neutral comments did not vary significantly, counting for 45.32% of the total, against 24.98% favourable comments and 29.68% critical comments. During the week analysed, attention was focused on the Libyan crisis and the international debate on military intervention against Gaddafi’s regime. Popolo Viola joined the demonstration organised by the charity Emergency and its leader Gino Strada against intervention in Libya, but in spite of Strada’s popularity, the decision attracted plenty of negative comments from page users, especially because of a speech given by Strada on RAI3 the night before. Strada’s speech was accused of being vague and generic, while the demonstration was deemed useless. Some even approved the use of force against Gaddafi. The disapproval was efficiently summarised in this comment, where a user complains:

---

\(^{102}\) Original text: “era da tempo che non vedevano una manifestazione così mosca. nel corteo c’erano buchi di decine di metri. sul palco c’era una gallina che diceva di abbassare le bandiere perché le telecamere non potevano riprendere. mi dispiace dirlo, ma la manifestazione di ieri oggettivamente parlando è stato un flop totale”

\(^{103}\) “A real flop! ...and you’re supposed to be the future?” Original text: un vero flop! e voi saresti il futuro?” (Posted 3\(^\text{rd}\) Oct at 10:01)

\(^{104}\) “Those s...s at RAI1 and RAI2 news didn’t even mention it!” Original text: “quelle merde del tg1 e tg2 non ne hanno manco parlato!” (posted 3\(^\text{rd}\) Oct at 14:29)

\(^{105}\) Original text: “oramai tutta l’informazione è monopolizzata dal nano. se non ci diamo una mossa tra un pò le tv ,trasmetteranno a canali unificati ! solo cinegiorinali di regime, come nelle migliori tradizioni delle dittature!” (Posted 2\(^\text{nd}\) October at 23:01).
I’m sorry but I disagree this time. The concept of peace, explained this way, seems rather abstract. Regarding Strada, when he’s been asked ‘what would you have done, then, to stop Gaddafi?’ his answer was: ‘I don’t know, I’m a surgeon’. Why didn’t they plan the demonstration in February when Gaddafi was bombing his own people? How come, contemporaneously to the demonstration, Emergency’s new monthly magazine is coming out? Should I presume this demonstration was organised to launch the magazine?\(^{106}\).

Table 10.3. Users’ Opinions of the Movement’s Leadership - Lifecycle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Excitement</th>
<th>Formalisation</th>
<th>Institutionalisation</th>
<th>Transformation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Favourable</td>
<td>37.44</td>
<td>41.97</td>
<td>29.87</td>
<td>24.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>56.45</td>
<td>45.48</td>
<td>45.04</td>
<td>45.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>12.54</td>
<td>25.08</td>
<td>29.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variations</th>
<th>Favourable</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Critical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-4.53</td>
<td>-12.1</td>
<td>-4.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>-0.97</td>
<td>-0.44</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>6.44</td>
<td>12.54</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After the excitement stage, favourable comments grew by +4.53% during the formalisation stage, before dropping -12.1% during the institutionalisation period and by -4.89% during the transformation stage. On the contrary, critical comments increased during the whole formalization period by 6.44%, by +12.54% during the institutionalisation stage, and by +4.6% during the transformation stage.

Overall, the data show an ever-growing level of polarization throughout the whole lifecycle of Popolo Viola, due to extreme factionalism and a growing disaffection among its users. As the reader already knows, dissatisfaction drove users away from the movement, but not from the page. As the next sections will explain, the page provided space for effortless phatic expression without promoting the emotional, cognitive, and interactive processes that are necessary to foster collective identity.

---

\(^{106}\) Original Text: “Mi dispiace non sono d’accordo questa volta. In questo modo la pace sembra un concetto astratto. Quando a Strada è stato chiesto, lei cosa avrebbe fatto per fermare Gheddafi a questo punto? Risposta: non lo so, sono un chirurgo. Perché non hanno indetto la manifestazione a febbraio quando Gheddafi ha iniziato a bombardare il suo popolo? Come mai contemporaneamente alla manifestazione esce il mensile di Emergency? Dovrei dire che la manifestazione l’ha indetta perché deve pubblicizzare il mensile?” (Comment posted 29th March 2011 at 16:52)
10.3.3 The Cognitive and Interactive Characteristics of Collective Identity Processes

The aim of this section is to assess the quality of discussion on the Facebook page Il Popolo Viola. Four dynamics will help to evaluate the quality of the exchange of information: firstly, the nature of informational content in the users’ comments as feedback to posts uploaded by the page administrators. Secondly, their length; the assumption is that comments shorter than 140 characters cannot really contain meaningful information. Thirdly, whether these same comments are consistent with the main topic of discussion, and, finally, whether the discussion portrays either a dialogic or trialogic nature by means of which individuals interact amongst each other instead of merely providing feedback to the page administrators.

This kind of analysis is fundamental in understanding the two essential parts of the process of collective identity that were defined by Melucci (1989), namely, the cognitive definitions of, and the active relationships within, a social movement. If collective identity is a process of negotiation among a movement’s constituents, the internal debate must have specific features. In the first place, it should invite informative content in order to foster a shared cognitive definition of the values of protest. Moreover, it should promote, through trialogic interaction, the activation of interpersonal relationships.

As anticipated earlier in this thesis, assessing the quality of discussion is far from being an unproblematic task. The results of any assessment would be arbitrary without clear classification. Drawing upon Malinowski (1925), Schneider differentiates between ‘instrumental’ (or ‘purpose-oriented’) and ‘phatic’ forms of communication (Schenider, 1989). However, the boundaries separating the two forms are unclear. Moreover, it could be argued that even phatic talk may have specific functions, at least in emotional terms. Aware of the limitations of this categorization, I will categorize content as being ‘instrumental’ whenever it holds information that potentially contributes to a debate around the definition of a social movement, and as ‘phatic’ when it only serves to establish a social presence.

In these terms, the findings of the content analysis show unexpectedly forthright results. In as far as the presence of instrumental content, the page did not
seem to provide the space for informed conversation amongst its users. A great majority of comments did not contain any sort of information, but rather had either phatic content, very simple messages of approval or disapproval of the initiatives of the movement, or were even less constructive, consisting of trivial content against Berlusconi, his government, and the political class in general.

During the excitement stage, 94.28% of the comments constituted phatic communication, 5.72% contained instrumental information. During the formalisation stage, phatic communication slightly declined (92.28%). During the institutionalisation stage, the number of phatic comments grew to 94.14%. Similar results are recorded for the transformation stage with, respectively, 94.85%, and 5.15%.

**Figure 10.8 – Phatic Vs. Instrumental Content on the Il Popolo Viola Facebook Page**

(Users’ comments)

A similar pattern was found in terms of the length of the activists’ comments. A vast majority of very short comments (<140 characters) shows evidence of effortless participation by the users who were involved. In fact, during the excitement period, 84.15% comments contain less than 140 characters, against 15.85% that were longer comments. During the formalisation stage the ratio is 85.42% against 15.58%. During the institutionalisation stage, 86.28% and 13.72%, while in the transformation stage it is 85% and 15%.
In terms of the presence of off-topic content, which would symbolise the levels of fragmentation in social movement discussion, the data show an almost total absence of content which was not inherent to the topic of the status updates that were uploaded by the page administrators. During the excitement period only 0.85% of the comments were off-topic. This number decreased to 0.71% during the formalisation period, before reaching peaks of 1.57% during the institutionalisation and 2.14% during the second formalisation stage. Here, moderation might have played a relevant role, considering that the netiquette of the page clearly stated that off-topic content would be removed. The growth taking place during the institutionalization and transformation stages is likely to be caused by the diminished effort made by the administrators in terms of moderation. It is helpful to remember here that during the last stage of the lifecycle only two activists were managing the page, against six during the initial stages.

In as far as the potential for the creation of new active relationships amongst users is concerned, I relied on the framework of dialogic and trialogic interaction. Here, the findings do not acknowledge the rich soil for interaction among the individual users. In fact, the conversation is made up mostly of mere feedback from users to page administrators, rather than of user-to-user interaction. The configuration of
interaction on Facebook pages, rather than promoting the creation of new ties, limits itself to what Flanagin et al. (2006) define as ‘affiliative ties’, meaning the impersonal relationships that indicate “a sense of common connection that occurs absent direct communication or other known linkages among individuals” (ibid, 2006: 35).

During the excitement stage, the majority of the comments analysed referred to the status updates uploaded by the administrators (87.2%), rather than referring to other comments (12.8%), signalling a weak potential for discussion and indicating the dialogic rather than the trialogic nature of the conversation. This potential becomes even weaker throughout the lifecycle of Popolo Viola. With time, the prospect of discussion decreased, with dialogic conversation growing to 88.6% during the formalization stage, 90.7% in the institutionalization stage, and becoming 92% dialogic during the transformation stage.

**Figure 10.10 Dialogic vs. Trialogic Interaction**

![Diagram showing the percentage of dialogic vs trialogic interaction across different stages](image)

To summarize, this section provides a meaningful portrayal of the potential of Facebook pages in terms of quality of discussion, another essential factor in collective identity building processes. Facebook pages’ affordances, in terms of discussion, do not seem to promote a cognitive definition of the values of social movements, nor do they strengthen the affiliative ties among users. However, further research would be helpful from three aspects: firstly, in order to find a
possible correlation between the lack of extended content and the increasing use of Facebook through mobile applications, with the consequent on-the-move use of the social networking platform. Secondly, in order to assess whether and how phatic communication may influence the emotional aspects of a movement’s collective identity; and, finally, in terms of how the polarization of discussion can be exacerbated by the policies of moderation that curb the potential for critical discussion. The next section will shed more light on the relationships between moderation and participation on the Facebook page Il Popolo Viola.

10.3.4 The Role of Moderation in the Il Popolo Viola Page

In Section 5.4.2 I have highlighted the role of moderation as being a necessary safeguard for healthy and balanced exchange in discussions. However, I have also warned that the distinction between moderation and censorship is thin and blurred. The analysis of the Facebook page Il Popolo Viola has confirmed such concerns. This is true especially when moderation is applied in a movement that considers freedom of speech to be one of its principal values. One episode in particular, in February, 2010, helped me to understand how the role of moderation can be paradoxical in such a situation.

February 2010, in the formalization period, saw the first big schism inside Popolo Viola, which resuled in the birth of Resistenza Viola (See 8.3.2 for more details). The activity on the page was now frantic and there were attacks by trolls on a daily basis. The peak of polarisation was reached when the announcement of a second big demonstration following No Berlusconi Day was planned for the 27th February, 2010. Trolls overloaded the page with requests for clarifications. Some users, in fact, just wanted to create havoc and to slow down the page’s normal functioning. Some others questioned the nature and the ‘ownership’ of the movement. On the 8th February, the administrators took an unprecedented decision and closed the page’s wall, releasing a note to explain the reasons for this decision. The text of the note says:

We have decided to temporarily close the wall after the announcement of the national demonstration against ‘legittimo impedimento’ and the ad-personam laws proposed by Berlusconi. This decision, in fact,
attracted too many unjustified attacks on the page. The demonstration is planned for the 27th February in Rome, and it is promoted by the Popolo Viola Roma, the permanent presidium in Montecitorio, Bo.Bi.Blog, San Precario and the association LiberaCittadinanza (...). As happens systematically whenever a demonstration against Berlusconi is planned (since the No Berlusconi Day), a series of attacks took place on the wall of our Facebook page. Many of these people were involved in similar attacks at the time of the No Berlusconi Day and the sit-ins in defence of the constitution on 30th January. The wall of the Popolo Viola page thus evolved from a democratic space for debate among its subscribers to a breeding ground for spammers, attacks, and threats to other users, and, in some cases, even a place for smear campaigns against users. We tried to exclude from the page those users, who nevertheless were representing themselves under different nicknames with the sole objective of hindering democratic debate. To keep the page open would have opened us to the risk of getting the page flagged with Facebook and then of it consequently being closed. We could not allow that, and we decided to close its wall. We are not proud of this, we would love to keep seeing that huge and constructive flow of thoughts, proposals and aspirations that have always livened up our wall. With this purpose we are setting up a new group of six administrators, with three new administrators joining those now in place (names hidden). This decision will allow us to rekindle the debate on our wall. We hope you will understand our decision. Please support us.

As one activist explains, “People changed their nickname even 7 or 8 times, just so as to come back inside and attack the ownership of the page in an almost obsessive way” (Interviewee no.5). Another activist continues,

The Facebook page was bombarded by messages and such information overload didn’t allow creative ideas to blossom. As a social centre, the page hosted everything, with no barriers. This chaos included productive ideas but also messages of discontent, often coming only from envious users, and eventually users with interesting ideas where discouraged by participating leaving the movement in the hands of the same people who couldn’t manage the page and left it at the mercy of trolls (Interviewee no.3).

The level of moderation was too high, according to many users: “You cannot ban a user for a legitimate question and then talk about freedom of speech and protest against the gagging law”, laments a Rete Viola activist.

The problem was all about the management of the page. Probably it is something concerning the personality of the managers. I was sometimes convinced that there was a police state controlling the page, since many comments were being judged and deleted after only a very few seconds, and I can prove that they could do it in less than 10 seconds. I was convinced they had instruments for the automatic content analysis of posts.108 Only afterwards did I understand that there were people there 24 hours a day refreshing the page every few seconds so as to delete uncomfortable messages and posts. Posts were disappearing, and even posts asking why previous content was deleted were themselves being deleted (Interviewee no.6).

At this stage, the organisers maintained a post-moderation policy, requiring intense work by the page administrators. Facebook did not yet provide a service of automated moderation (it would be introduced in February, 2011). Moreover, all the interviewees categorically ruled out the adoption of third party automated moderation services.

---

108 As already noted, Facebook provides page administrators with two moderation tools: a moderation blocklist (“You can add comma-separated keywords to the ‘Moderation Blocklist’. When users include blacklisted keywords in a post and/or a comment on your Page, the content will be automatically marked as spam. More information can be found here: http://www.facebook.com/help/?faq=19793”), and a profanity blocklist (“Facebook will block the most commonly reported words and phrases marked as offensive by the broader community”).
The big mistake of the administrators was to expect to control a Facebook page in the same way as a union assembly, imposing behaviour lines and ignoring that the virtual dynamics of interaction are very different. This is why other platforms, such as blogs, where communication is less problematic, were being continuously experimented with (Interviewee no.3).

The discussion around the schism and the internal struggles provided an excellent example of the controversial relationship between moderation and freedom of speech. This is especially true when one of the foundations of the movement rested on the struggle against Berlusconi’s attempts to limit freedom of speech through the gagging law. However, if moderation had not been implemented, the presence of flaming could have put the whole existence of the page at risk because of its lack of compliance with the Facebook community standards. Facebook netiquette relates to issues of: violence and threats; self-harm; bullying and harassment; hate speech; graphic content; nudity and pornography; identity and privacy; intellectual property; phishing and spam; and, finally, security. While Facebook and Popolo Viola netiquettes matched in as far as such issues were concerned, the terms of use of the movement’s page introduced categories that are completely open to interpretation. For example, the second point of Popolo Viola’s netiquette states: “Do not digress from topics that regard the interests and initiatives of the movement”. Here, it is not clear what the ‘interests’ of the movement should be when a mission for the movement had never been released. Moreover, Point Three says: “Do not carry out ‘opinion wars’ on the wall through messages and counter-messages: if personal disputes take place, it is much better to solve them using private messages”. Here, it is not clear what an ‘opinion war’ is, or what the boundary is between a personal dispute and an argument relating to the movement. This lack of clarity provided too much space for intervention by the moderators. Furthermore, breaching the terms of Popolo Viola netiquette could result in having a profile banned from the page. On the other hand, breaching Facebook’s terms of use might lead to the deletion of the entire page.

---

109 More about Facebook community standards at https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards

110 It must be said that while Facebook netiquette is quite thorough in illustrating the categories of issues, Popolo Viola netiquette approaches such issues in very general terms.
To conclude, the role played by moderation on the Facebook page of Il Popolo Viola is two-fold. On a short-term basis, moderation limited the visibility of the polarization of discussion, as with the page wall’s closure in February, 2010. However, on a medium-long term basis, it exacerbated patterns in the movement’s fragmentation and in the levels of the polarization of discussion. Three concurring factors influenced the issues of moderation on the page. Firstly, the page mirrored the structural fragmentation of the movement. The more factionalism was in place within the movement, the more polarized the discussion became on the page. Secondly, moderation needed to be based on solid foundations; the lack of a statute impacted negatively on the netiquette, offering its principles for open interpretation by the movement’s constituents. Thirdly, in a context where freedom of speech became a fundamental value of the purple protest, any attempt to moderate discussion could easily be perceived to be censorship.

10.3.5 The Misalignment of Popolo Viola’s Agenda

As explained before, in the transformation stage only two individuals managed the page. The consequence of employing such a restricted group of managers was that it became very difficult for them to select and redistribute the creativity of the users on the page. The Catania group’s disregard of the activist base is one of the factors that led to the decline of the movement, contributing to a misalignment between the leaders’ agenda and the movement’s ‘public’ agenda. This phenomenon provides further evidence in considering the page as a mobilizing structure that was increasingly detached from the movement itself. As already explained, in the initial stage, frames of Popolo Viola revolved around the main theme of ‘anti-Berlusconism’. Focusing on such a general cause allowed the movement to reach activists from very different backgrounds, even right-wing citizens, who saw Berlusconi as a populist leader rather than as a representative of European conservatism. Gradually, the movement enlarged its range of interests to include issues such as the mafia and corruption, before transforming itself into a more traditional left-wing social movement, focusing on issues of labour and welfare. As one of the activists affirms:
Popolo Viola was initially ground-breaking as, for the first time in Italy, a popular movement could experiment with post-ideological politics. This experiment clearly failed very soon as the movement became contaminated by the old logics of the political parties, which infiltrated and manipulated it. It is not a coincidence that the radical and innovative push generated by Popolo Viola has been absorbed by Beppe Grillo’s emerging Five Star Movement leaving the purple protest as a fad, useless as the umpteenth girotondo ¹¹¹ (Interviewee no.18).

While, on the one hand, the gradual evolution of Popolo Viola helped the cause establish a diverse identity and express its voice about different issues, on the other hand, it pushed away those activists who were interested in the resignation of Berlusconi and an innovative vision of politics, and who did not see themselves sharing the other views of the movement.

In September, 2011, during the transformation stage, the movement was probably at its lowest levels of popularity. Here, a huge gap existed between the themes proposed by the administrators of the page and its users. During this month, the administrators posted on the page 144 times, while the activists posted 900 times. Figures 10.11 and 10.12 compare the organizers’ agenda to the users’ agenda on Facebook in September, 2011, during the transformation stage. The divergence of priorities between the leaders and the followers is manifest. While the administrators focused mainly on the theme of mobilization to action, inviting users to join the ‘Piazza Pulita’¹¹² demonstration, planned for the 11th September, and to organize further sit-ins (35% of all of the administrators’ posts), users paid no attention at all to this theme, with only 2% of the posts dedicated to mobilization to action. This discrepancy showed an alienation of the movement’s base which materialized with the extremely low turnout for the Piazza Pulita demonstration on the 11th September. The themes relating to Berlusconi and his scandals were central for the users (39%), but they were not endorsed with the same frequency by the administrators (14%). The same can be said about the budget law, then being discussed in the Italian Parliament, that received a high amount of attention from users (36%), but not from the administrators (19%). The same applies to issues

¹¹¹ See Chapter 5 for more information about the “girotondi” protest.
¹¹² Literally ‘Clean Square’, it is an Italian expression which could be translated with ‘Let’s Wipe Them Out’
regarding the Northern League, the populist and separatist right-wing party which was allied to Berlusconi. Issues about the Northern League were considered more interesting by the users (12%) than by the administrators (6%). The information shared by the administrators was extremely diverse: the category ‘various’ accounted for 19% of their posts, against only 5% of those of the users, which were much more focused on issues concerning Berlusconi and the budget law. The only concurrence takes place in posts that were critical to the conduct of left-wing parties, which were considered too weak and as not being not significantly different from Berlusconi’s party. Such issues were perceived with a similar intensity both by administrators (7%) and users (6%).

Figure 10.11. Posts Uploaded by the Il Popolo Viola page Administrators Per Topic (Orange: Others)
Figure 10.12. Posts Uploaded by users per topic (Orange: Others)

The misalignment explained here contributes to understanding the fall of offline participation levels. Indeed, collective identity constitutes a relevant factor that influences offline participation, affecting the movement’s unity and its followers’ commitment. Facebook provides researchers with a valuable means for analysis in these terms. For example, levels of polarization within the discussions on the Facebook page of Popolo Viola and a general fall of ‘likes’ to page content faithfully reflected the process of its internal fragmentation. As unity decreased, activists’ commitment faded away and the demonstrations organized by the movement increasingly failed to attract an acceptable number of people. However, throughout its lifecycle, levels of participation of Popolo Viola’s actions did not follow these logics entirely.

In fact, the levels of participation of Popolo Viola’s demonstrations were generally high during the excitement stage and surprisingly also during the transformation stage. Such a finding is contradictory had we limited our analysis to the general support that the movement received during its lifecycle. After all, during the excitement stage, the movement showed high levels of multiplicity and still showed few signs of fragmentation, whereas throughout the transformation stage it
declined. However, whereas action during the excitements stage was Internet-supported only, during the transformation stage most initiatives were Internet-based. Moreover, it seems that the worthiness of the administrative elections and the referenda allowed high levels of participation in spite of the collapse of Popolo Viola. The value of these campaigns had national relevance so the individual commitment of users was not influenced by the deterioration of the movement. On the other hand, the experiment of the ‘Piazza Pulita’ demonstration, in September, 2011, failed completely.

Piazza Pulita was an event organised exclusively by Popolo Viola following a mobilization scheme that was similar to that of the No Berlusconi Day. The fragmentation and the declining credibility of the movement here impacted directly on the levels of participation: as a matter of fact, participation to the event would have meant for individual activists to show affiliation to the movement. On the other hand, it is impressive that the success of campaigns such as the petition against legittimo impedimento, Battiqororum, and mobilization for the administrative elections in May, 2011, took place in spite of complete disaffection from the movement by most of the activist base. As one interviewee reports:

When it came to spreading information about these events we were frightened even to mention the name ‘popolo viola’. The reputation of the movement was so low that many of my friends at that time used to have a laugh at it, repeating that the colour purple brought bad luck. It was basically impossible to talk about the movement without falling into a spiral of quarrels and misunderstandings (Interviewee No.3).

As another former activist adds:

Former activists were now considering Popolo Viola as a deteriorated fad. It seemed as it had been ‘cool’ to be part of it but, after a while, it was time to move to another ‘alternative fashion’. The new trend replacing Popolo Viola was, by all means, Grillo’s Five Star Movement (Interviewee No.18).

This account confirms the patterns that emerged from the quantitative analysis of online participation. In other words, even in the presence of high levels of organizational fragmentation and the strong polarization of discussion, the worthiness of specific campaigns potentially lead social movement media, such as
the Popolo Viola Facebook page, to act as powerful mobilizing structures and as arenas for participation. However, in this situation, other forms of mobilization such as the one that lead to the No Berlusconi Day are not feasible.

To sum up, a misalignment between the leaders’ and the activist base’s agenda undercut the relationships between Popolo Viola’s constituents, distancing them in terms of what the agenda of protest should be. The decision to restrict the management of the page to two managers only limited the potential of the page for issues around the redistribution of personal frames, contributing to the fragmentation of the movement’s collective identity. Despite of the mobilizing efforts that were still being put in place by the Catania group, the activist base seemed to use the page more as a platform for discussion and the exchange of information. As a former activist points out: “Participation on the page now (Spring 2013) rarely regards the movement itself, but rather general political issues. It seems that the majority of the users does not see Popolo Viola as a movement anymore, but just as a simple Facebook page” (Interviewee No.18).

10.4 Conclusion

This chapter intended to analyse the development of Popolo Viola’s collective identity and how the use of Facebook pages impacted on its evolution. At a methodological level, it showed how a qualitative and quantitative analysis of Facebook data and the discussion on Facebook pages provides precious insights in this regard.

Analysing the design of interaction on Facebook pages allowed me to highlight a vertical model of communication that is more similar to the classic broadcast than to the horizontal interaction which is generally considered typical of Social Network Media. Such verticality affects collective identity, exposing users mainly to popular content. Popular content was almost exclusively uploaded by page administrators. The design of Facebook pages thus privileges the circulation of collective frames over personal frames. The possibility for individual frames to circulate is in the hands of the page’s organizers, who decide which content will
circulate and which will not. Here, though, it is necessary to remind that this finding refers specifically to Facebook pages rather than to Facebook in general.

This chapter also explored the potential of Facebook pages in terms of the promotion of solidarity, quality of discussion, and interactive aspects of collective identity. In brief, the phatic, effortless communication that takes place among the page users neither promoted cognitive processes for the appraisal of movement’s values, nor the increase of solidarity among the participants. In fact, higher levels of polarization of discussion reflected the rising organizational fragmentation inside the movement. Here, moderation played a relevant role, exacerbating these patterns and promoting factionalism and internal divisions. Eventually, comparing the organizers’ agenda with the users’ agenda showed a manifest misalignment of agendas.

Concentration of power in the page’s management inhibited the potential for the redistribution of personal frames. Two factors could have avoided the decline of the movement’s collective identity: on the one hand, a fairer and more extended division of responsibilities within the management of the page; on the other hand, the presence of a manifesto and a more accurate netiquette. The lack of these factors promoted a loss of credibility for the movement’s leaders and a speedy decline in Popolo Viola’s mobilizing power. In the absence of unity, only the worthiness of the cause can guarantee the success of a campaign. In fact, only the relevance of the administrative elections and the referenda in May-June, 2011, made sure that the page could act as a powerful mobilizing structure. Any other attempt at mobilization connected to the “trademark” Popolo Viola failed.

It was during this period that the page ceased to act as a social movement medium and transformed itself into a mobilizing structure that was detached from the movement. Such analysis should serve as a reflection of those movements that centralize every online activity on Facebook. Under these conditions the technological coding of Facebook is itself an agent that is capable of influencing the lifecycle of protest when there is any change in its design and management features.
Chapter Eleven – Discussion and Conclusions

11.1 Introduction

The exploratory analysis of the relationship between Popolo Viola and the use of Social Network Media has revealed the great diversity of the constituents of movements and how this diversity can influence the development of protests throughout their lifecycle. The interdisciplinary nature of this study, which links communication and media studies with social movement theory, has allowed me to explore the role played by computer-mediated communication in terms of the elaboration of an organizational structure, the development of a collective identity among participants and the mobilization processes within social movements. Moreover, an approach based on the principles of the critical theory of technology has enabled me to consider the political economy of social network media as an active player in this discourse. In other words, the history of collective actors, such as Popolo Viola, is written with an eye to the human political actors involved, and also through contemplation of the space where interaction between these actors take place; its rules, how these rules develop through time, and the values that drive such developments.

As critical theorists such as Feenberg, Fuchs, Fenton and Barassi state, the relationship between users and technology can be assessed by considering the commercial interests that shape the design and functionalities of technological tools (Feenberg, 1991, 2001; Fuchs, 2011; Fenton & Barassi, 2011). This contribution has helped me to refine my research questions in such a manner as to avoid any technological determinism. Instead of seeking any cause-effect relationship between technology and society, my research asked whether and how the corporate interests embedded within the design of a Social Network Medium, such as Facebook, have an influence on the Social Movements that adopt this platform as their main tool for communication. This approach does not consider technology in a vacuum but, rather, as an ever-changing environment whose development, through time, is driven by specific values with specific implications.
Attempting to generalize on the potential of social network media is not only problematic but may also be misleading. Distinctive affordances and patterns of communication emerge according to the peculiar nature of the platforms which are being analysed. Non-market and market-based platforms differ greatly in this sense. An SNM such as, for example, Diaspora, is said to rest upon the same principles of sharing, participation and collaboration which characterize a platform like Facebook. However, the profit-driven interests which govern the design of Facebook translate into a very different idea of sharing.

As Van Dijck points out, any SNM aims to promote the sharing of information among its users (Van Dijck, 2013). Non-market platforms focus on the promotion of connectedness, i.e., the management of pre-existing relationships and the creation of new ones; they foster the creation of new groups and networks. What is more, they facilitate the dissemination of information. On the other hand, profit-driven SNM, such as Facebook, still aim to generate connectedness. However, for these platforms, connectedness is one of their means rather than being a goal in itself. The final objective is, rather, connectivity, through which sharing relates to the provision of a user’s data to third party marketers and advertisers (ibid, 2013). This view, although correct, is only the starting point of my argument, rather than being its objective. My research aims to overcome connectivity as the sole principle behind Facebook’s business model. I argue that since planning its IPO on the stock markets in 2008, the SNM’s technical coding has privileged brands over users as being the main customer segment of Facebook. This switch goes way beyond mere connectivity, involving a process that sees communication on Facebook evolving from a participatory many-to-many model to a more centralized one-to-many broadcast model. Furthermore, I argue that this change holds serious implications for those movements that adopt Facebook as their communication hub. Whereas the adoption of Facebook provides movements with an efficient means for mobilization and the circulation of information, it also puts their constitutive principles of inclusivity and horizontality at risk because of its vertical communication patterns and its proprietary logics.
The analysis of the development of Facebook-based movements, like Popolo Viola, has to take into account dynamics which take place along different lines. Firstly, the analysis needs to consider the relationship between the technical coding of Facebook and social movements in terms of how the proprietary values behind Facebook design clash with the copy-left values of movements such as Popolo Viola. Secondly, it is necessary to highlight the internal power struggles taking place among the constituents of social movements and the values that drive such groups. While the first dynamic takes place in a technological environment, the second takes place both on- and offline. Following these lines of thought, I will attempt to add some layers to the academic debate regarding the potential of the use of digital technologies for social change.

The theoretical framework adopted here considers technology as an actor, rather than as a mere communication tool. This research aims to avoid any essentialist view of social technologies which do not consider the different affordances that are provided by each specific platform, even among apparently similar corporate-driven networks. For example, both Twitter and Facebook are decentralized market platforms which are typical expressions of the Networked Information Economy, categorized by Benkler (2006). However, a platform such as Twitter entails very different patterns of interaction, participation, and the circulation of content from those allowed by Facebook. Adopting the same analytical lenses for different platforms leads to very different findings in terms of how their use impacts on movements, enriching but also fragmenting the academic discourse around them.

The role played by Facebook in the rise and fall of Popolo Viola provides researchers with a very suitable case study through which to attempt to overcome theoretical over-generalizations. As a matter of fact, Facebook became the gravitational centre of any dynamic concerning the purple protest. Popolo Viola, rather than being an online movement, was a Facebook movement. Popolo Viola was born on Facebook, was pushed to notoriety by Facebook, and Facebook-related dynamics contributed to its decline. The popular SNM seems to have been the movement’s fortune and curse at the same time, as the movement became totally
dependent on this medium. This was partly due to contingencies, such as the uncontested predominance of Facebook in the Italian SNM panorama, but also to its suitability for the aims of the group in charge of Popolo Viola, i.e., to mobilize citizens, circulate information, and preserve power. As explained in Chapter Ten, the replicability and scalability of the information that was posted by the organizers made the page Il Popolo Viola a powerful alternative medium that was able to reach a number of users which could be compared to the numbers reached by an average Italian online newspaper.

The following sections will separately explore the three main dimensions of this research’s interests, namely its organizational structure, collective identity, and its mobilization processes. Afterwards, a final synthesis will frame the research’s findings around the concept of social movements’ lifecycles. The findings of this research show an extremely close relationship between the mutual influence of these dimensions. The conclusions will highlight the main dynamics in order to disentangle an otherwise inextricably complex set of relationships and to create a model which can constitute a basis for any future research on networked movements.

11.2 Social Network Media and Movements’ Organizational Levels

One of the principal aims of this research is to assess whether and how the use of SNM such as Facebook has the potential to influence the organizational levels of social movements. Literature has, in the past decade, reported the rise of spontaneous and horizontal forms of protest which have apparently superseded established formal organizations at the forefront of contention. The causes of this change have entailed widespread cynicism towards the ‘official politics’ of representative democracy, disengagement from conventional forms of political participation, globalization, and the structural crisis of capitalism (Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005; Clement, 2011). These forms of protest have been called “connective action” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, 2013), or “networked movements” (Juris, 2005). Even though the terms are not synonymous, their main common trait consists in the role played by technology. As a matter of fact, these new forms of protest have seen
“technology platforms and applications taking the role of established political organizations” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012: 742). Communication became even more of an organizational principle. Consequently, the design of technology acquired an essential role.

The assessment of the organizational structure of a social movement has to be carried out on at least two different levels, distinguishing the movement as a whole from its organizational and decisional centre(s). The related literature establishes a distinction between social movements and social movement organizations (Zald & McCarthy, 1980). Despite acknowledgement of this difference, the majority of empirical studies tend to blur the boundaries between the two actors, creating conceptual confusion. These two collective actors differ greatly. In general terms, while social movements tend to display decentralized informal structures, informal groups and formal SMOs lean towards more hierarchical and stable configurations. Social movements, according to the SPIN model, can be described as being segmented, polycentric, and integrated constellations of various constituents (Gerlach & Hine, 1970). On the other hand, the structures of the singular constituents, such as SMOs and informal groups, depend on contingencies that are related to the social and cultural environment in which the organizational processes take place, and are influenced by the architecture of the environment in which decisions are taken, whether that environment is a physical or technological space.

This conceptual confusion is due to the fact that often, as in the case of Popolo Viola, SMOs are not the actual decisional and organizational centres of social movements. Technology may intensify this issue. While movements’ constituents may establish formal SMOs as the formal or quasi-formal central foci for organization and mobilization, actual power may reside in the informal groups that retain control of the technical tools of communication. While the power that lies in the hands of formal SMOs can be accountable through the following of a set of rules, informal groups exercise a more hidden power, which is provided to them by the technology and where that technology sets the rules.
In the Popolo Viola case study, the leading group coincided with the founders and administrators of its official Facebook page. I have called this group the “Catania group”, after the name of the city from which most of its members came. This group, having control over the platform of communication, held unquestionable power over the movement, and even over the SMO that was launched following the institutionalisation of the movement. The structure of the group was self-declaredly characterized by informal relationships and a lack of rules. However, the management of the Facebook pages was characterized by centralized power and ownership. The verticality, hierarchies, lack of transparency and unaccountability which characterized the management of the Facebook pages at the time of my analysis strongly influenced the Catania group’s structure.

As a matter of fact, in the three-year period 2009-2011, Facebook did not provide the instruments for shared management of its pages tool\(^{113}\). The proprietary nature of Facebook skewed the power relationships among movements’ constituents in favour of those holding ownership of the pages where mobilization took place. The strong centralization of the leading group has potentially contributed to the fragmentation of the social movement. Basically, hyper-centralization, the promotion of power conflicts, turns polycentrism into factionalism, segmentation into fragmentation, and integration into disintegration. As the minor constituents’ voices in a movement fail to reach resonance, these voices seek other ways to protest, thus creating antagonistic sub-movements.

In Popolo Viola, whoever held control of the technical tools of communication, tended to exercise control over the whole movement, deciding arbitrarily which frames to circulate and also on the overall agenda of the movement. The lack of space for a variety of voices led to people abandoning Popolo Viola, eventually left the Catania group tat the head of a powerful mobilizing structure, the Facebook page, but without a real movement it disintegrated due to the lack of shared leadership and a place for deliberation.

\(^{113}\) Changes implemented in 2012 improved this problem only partially. Still now, the page’s main manager has superior powers over other administrators. More information is available at https://www.facebook.com/help/323502271070625.
It could be argued that a movement would not exist without central leadership. However, such leadership must be manifest and transparent in order to last. Leadership is a central issue in social movements, as leaders “inspire commitment, mobilize resources, create and recognise opportunities, devise strategies, frame demands, and influence outcomes” (Morris & Staggenborg, 2002: 1). Recent relevant literature (see Kavada, 2009, Juris, 2008, and Gerbaudo, 2012) has focused on whether or not technology provides movements with affordances that enable the adoption of acephalous leaderless configurations. Although they do so with different intensities, these studies agree on the assumption that, in spite of technology, centres of power are ever present. As has already been shown, my argument goes beyond that, stating that, in specific circumstances, leadership is in the hands of those activists who hold power over the technical tools that are used for communication and mobilization, even when there is a lack of consensus among movement constituents. The nature of the platform that is adopted influences the decision-making processes and the openness of leadership. When an SNM, such as Facebook, constitutes the main mobilizing structure of a movement, as with Popolo Viola, control over the official Facebook page coincides with the exercising of control over the movement itself. A group has the power to retain the ownership of the platform, as San Precario did with the il Popolo Viola page, or to share it among a group of trusted activists, as Rete Viola did. Sharing access to the management of tools may open the survival of a page to the risks of defacement or deletion, especially when the movement attracts negative attention from institutions, police forces, or the mainstream mass media.

Facebook pages are tools that are created for brands and corporations in order to engage users, improve customer relations and to increase conversion rates on e-commerce websites. Facebook implemented major changes during the three-year period 2009-2011. Initially all control was in the hands of a super-manager, the page founder, who could appoint administrators with only limited control over the page. In May/June, 2010, Facebook decided to provide equal levels of control to any administrator. For example, the founder could now be excluded by any other member of the page management. The decision taken by Facebook strategists had a
strong corporate connotation: the aim was, in fact, to shift page control from the fans/users who founded them to the corporations that owned the brand and claimed ownership over its management on the SNM. As far as Popolo Viola is concerned, this implementation had detrimental effects on the unity of the movement. San Precario, in fact, had to immediately exclude anyone among the administrators whom he did not know personally. While Facebook had initially promoted a circumvention of physical proximity, thus enabling strangers to trust each despite not being related through personal friendship, now it forced the page’s owners to rely only on the most trusted activists.

The fragmentation of the movement, with the factionalism between Popolo Viola and the rival Rete Viola, is not a direct cause/effect relationship that depends merely on the new management rules that were imposed by Facebook but, rather, they depend on the movement’s inability to rely on a set of shared rules. The adoption of a statute or a manifesto became urgent only when the hyper-centralization was acknowledged to be hampering the mobilizing power of the movement.

Online movements may disregard the presence of a statute in order to promote inclusivity. That said, many popular movements in the past have suffered internal divisions over such issues. Kavada (2013) reports on a polarization inside the European Social Forum between the ‘verticals’, i.e., the activists promoting centralization, hierarchy, and top-down communication, and the ‘horizontals’, who instead supported a decentralised distribution of power. Similarly to the ESF, Popolo Viola has also gone through an internal discussion on whether or not to adopt a set of rules by which to regulate the leadership and the decision-making processes. The lack of statutes in Popolo Viola, instead of fostering decentralization, promoted the concentration of power within the movement. When ever an organizer was excluded by the page’s manager, his decisional power was also diminished. However, any organizer constituted a relevant node within the movement’s network. On any occasion when a tie between the leaders’ group and an organizer was broken, a whole part of the network was excluded. In fact, the personal connections of the expelled were unlikely to trust the Catania group as being a
credible interlocutor. This proved extremely disadvantageous when the administrators excluded were those acting as public relations officers, hampering the spill-over from other collective actors and alienating external forces, such as organizations and other SMOs, who were previously actively engaged in supporting the initiatives of Popolo Viola.

Popolo Viola, Resistenza Viola, and Rete Viola differed greatly in terms of culture. The first called for a fluid and molecular structure for the movement but, on the other hand, its organisers claimed ownership of the page. The Catania group claimed there was no correspondence between the page and the movement as a whole. This statement was far from flawless, as the page became the locus where collective identity was shaped and also became the main link between the movement, institutions, and the mass media. Resistenza Viola, and Rete Viola later, promoted the distribution of power and horizontality, but it could not compete in terms of mobilization and reach. The momentum provided by the No Berlusconi Day campaign quite soon reached its exhaustion point, proving an accelerator of the excitement stage, facilitated by the patterns of circulation of information on Facebook.

To sum up, the configuration of Popolo Viola confirms the statement made by authors such as Juris, Kavada, and Gerbaudo, who underline the only apparent horizontality of contemporary social movements (Juris, 2011; Kavada, 2007; Gerbaudo, 2012). Popolo Viola claimed to be leaderless, but this claim hid the unquestionable leadership of San Precario, whose anonymity defied any accountability for any decision he took. San Precario went beyond just being a “soft leader”, or a “choreographer of protest” (Gerbaudo, 2012), as the ownership of the Facebook page provided him de facto with significant power over the movement.

A similar statement can be made about the decision-making process. The “networked self-management” described by Castells (2009) has been proven to have been transformed into centralized self-management when the preconditions experienced by Popolo Viola are in place. What is more, any decision taken during face-to-face meetings is of no use when the distribution of power is uneven. This is
especially true if we consider that deliberation seemed to be a secondary goal for Popolo Viola. While the rejection of personal politics would presume the pronounced relevance of deliberative democracy, the daily practice of decision-making in Popolo Viola saw the prioritization of action over deliberation. Ironically, Popolo Viola eventually developed as a vertical structure with a leader with charismatic traits, exactly as had the political logics of ‘Berlusconism’, which the movement had so vehemently opposed. Furthermore, Facebook provides leaders with the possibility to adopt non-transparent decisional processes through the adoption of secret groups.

The use of Facebook potentially respectively promotes a centralization of power, a lack of accountability and transparency in terms of how its technical coding allows anonymous leaders to emerge and decisions to be taken in secrecy. These possibilities clash with the values of deliberative democracy and inclusivity that are typical of egalitarian social movements. This is the background against which the power-struggle within social movements such as Popolo Viola rest. On the one hand, power-holders will overlook alternative platforms in order to preserve power. On the other, other constituents will abandon the movement in order to voice their opinions, defusing the mobilizing power of the movement.

11.3 Social Network Media and Movements’ Collective Identity

This section aims to discuss how patterns of interaction and discussion on Facebook influence the process of collective identity building of social movements. In brief, two main inter-related dynamics influence these patterns: firstly, the communication model of Facebook pages and how such a model influences power relationships among a movement’s constituents, and secondly, the organizational centralization and the consequent movement’s fragmentation, as explained in the previous section.

The case study of Popolo Viola and its official Facebook page has provided meaningful insights in terms of the ways in which the design and the affordances of technology affect the movement’s collective identity. As Danah Boyd states, “the architecture of a particular environment matters” (Boyd, 2010: 39). The model of
communication enabled by a virtual platform, such as a Facebook page, influences communication patterns in various ways. Firstly, the EdgeRank algorithm exposes its users mainly to popular content, promoting interaction via Newsfeed rather than through visits to the page. Moreover, the progressive marginalization of user-generated content on the page promotes the circulation of information to content uploaded by administrators’ only. Facebook pages are thus characterised by a pronounced communication verticality and framing centralization. The use of Facebook pages promotes the dissemination of centralized frames that are created by page administrators, thus hindering the circulation of personal frames. The platform’s technological coding skews communication patterns, thus altering the process of the frames’ negotiation in favour of page administrators. On a short-term basis, the centralization of frames guarantees coherence in the movement’s agenda; in the long run, it hampers its participatory potential.

As I will explain further in the next section, the multi-step communication that is enabled by Facebook and the presence of notifications on users’ profiles, provides a formidable power for mobilization. That said, this process stops being efficient when fragmentation becomes perceived by the page users. As long as unity and solidarity are strong, the empowerment promoted by Facebook encourages multiplicity, confirming the views proposed by Fenton, which place collective identity as a central factor for the survival of social movements (Fenton, 2008).

This study has adopted a novel methodological framework for the assessment of the three main dimensions of the process of collective identity building. Using both quantitative and qualitative assessment of communication patterns has enabled the researcher to evaluate how much a Facebook page can disclose in terms of the cognitive, emotional and interactional aspects of the collective identity building process. These aspects have been interpreted in terms of the quality of the information that is exchanged, as a precondition for a shared cognitive definition of the aims and means of a social movement; the potential of an SNM platform, such as Facebook pages, as promoters for the creation of relationships among individuals; and, finally, the promotion of solidarity among a movement’s constituents.
In regard to the cognitive aspects of collective identity, the findings of the content analysis showed a direct preponderance of phatic effortless forms of communication. The aim of this form of communication is to establish a social presence rather than to create the basis for the informed discussion that is necessary for a shared cognitive definition of the aims and means of a social movement. An overwhelming majority of comments on the Facebook page of Il Popolo Viola did not contain any sort of meaningful information. Moreover, it was characterized by very short comments, even shorter than text messages. On the other hand, the data showed an almost total absence of fragmentation in discussion. Two factors influenced the poorness of the content. Firstly, the ever-increasing on-the-move use of Facebook tools. During the fieldwork of this research, the usage of the popular SNM shifted progressively from desktop computers towards mobile technologies. Secondly, the role played by moderation. As a matter of fact, as fewer human resources were devoted to moderation, so the fragmentation and polarization of the discussion increased.

Findings are straightforward also in as far as the potential for active relationships among users. The structure of Facebook pages does not promote the formation of strong ties among users. It rather reinforces affiliative ties (Flanagan et al., 2006), through which the only link between participants in discussions is the common connection to the movement’s cause. However, page users seldom discussed among themselves, and thus the potential to build strong ties was scarce. It can be argued that the potential for active interactions might reside elsewhere, in smaller Facebook groups, such as the ones used by the most committed activists, in other Facebook profiles and also offline. However, these other loci for interaction were risible in terms of numbers. As the reader knows already, profiles are limited to 5,000 users and groups, in spite of being numerous, and they were soon replaced by pages by Popolo Viola activists as tools for large-scale communication because of the limits enforced by Facebook in regard to group-messages.

While the vertical model of communication that is typical of Facebook pages did not promote the development of cognitive definitions and active relationships, the survey and the interviews show how the strongly polarized discussion negatively
affected the participants’ levels of commitment. Exploring the nature of discussion through qualitative content analysis allowed me to test the pulse of the conversation. The findings showed a strong positive correlation between the tone of discussion and the levels of fragmentation within the movement. The higher the structural fragmentation that was in place, the higher the levels of contestation that were present. Moreover, the increasing diffusion of goals in the movement contributed throughout its lifecycle to diversifying the activist base, thus diluting the senses of collective identity and solidarity among the participants. In the presence of organizational fragmentation, the levels of polarization in the discussion thus increased at the expense of affiliative ties among users and in the collective identity of the movement. As was confirmed by the interviewees, the dissolution of these ties opened the page to more confrontational discussion, which attracted online participation but also led activists to no longer identify themselves as part of the movement.

Some external factors helped in the decline of Popolo Viola’s collective identity. We know, for example, that the contribution of institutions such as political parties benefited the efficacy of demonstrations, such as the No Berlusconi Day, both in financial and mobilizing terms. However, such external help also “polluted” the values behind protest. As we have seen in Chapters Eight and Ten, the involvement of actors who were supposed to be the targets of protests negatively influenced the collective identity of Popolo Viola. In the absence of a manifesto, some activists prioritised the “anti-Berlusconi” frames of protest; some others prioritised the “anti-politics” ones. This latter group felt alienated when the flags of reformist parties were seen at Popolo Viola’s demonstrations. During the excitement stage, this issue was overshadowed by the worthiness of the No Berlusconi Day. Later, with the fragmentation of the movement, questions arose. The impression was that political parties were manipulating the values of protest and that the leaders of the movement were being co-opted. The anonymity of the leader, San Precario, exacerbated this discontent. Eventually, an increasing number of users and activists asked what the real agenda of the movement was, and whether Popolo Viola hid political party interests.
The response by San Precario to the mounting internal protest was nefarious: strong moderation and even closure of the page wall. The excessive policies of moderation that were implemented by the leaders of the page worsened the levels of structural fragmentation and intensified the polarization of the discussion. The lack of a manifesto impacted negatively on the collective identity process, here also, promoting decisions that were based on self-interest and contingencies, rather than on a shared set of rules.

The centralization of the page’s management and the fragmentation of the movement impacted on the collective identity of the movement in other ways. The repeated purges within the administrators’ team weakened the potential of the page to amplify personal frames. With the decline of the movement, the failure in frame alignment was manifest, and the process of both identification and identitization was broken.

To sum up, this study has highlighted the factors that have contributed to affecting the collective identity process of social movements, such as Popolo Viola. These factors are both external and internal. The interferences of political parties may promote mobilization and ease organizational issues on a short-term basis, but they also pollute the values of movements. The technical coding of SNM, such as Facebook pages and their affordances, encourages phatic forms of communication which are insufficient for a shared definition of the meanings of protest. Moreover, Facebook pages do not enable the formation of strong ties among users, since they privilege dialogic rather than triadic interaction. The relationship between technology and movements is not univocal. Human decisions affect these dynamics. Issues such as organizational fragmentation, centralized and unaccountable leadership, adoption of too strong moderation policies, diffusion of goals, and the lack of a manifesto, contribute to the weakening of the levels of solidarity and a balanced process of collective identity building. As we will see in the next section, these factors together will also contribute to hampering the mobilizing power of the movement.
11.4 Social Network Media and Movements’ Mobilization Processes

The aim of this section is to assess the potential of SNM, such as Facebook, as a mobilizing structure for participation in social movements. This study proves that Facebook allows social movements not just to “preach to the converted” but to extend their reach well beyond the relatively small audience of those citizens who are already involved in activism and protest. Patterns in the circulation of information are central if we are to understand this affordance. The adoption of an ad hoc platform, such as, for example, a mailing list, or a website, would have required voluntary action by any potential activist in order to access information about Popolo Viola. In other words, information on such tools would have just “convinced the convinced”. On the other hand, on Facebook, information is disseminated both horizontally among personal networks, and vertically through patterns of affiliation in the page tools. A multi-step flow of communication, facilitated by the openness of the page, allows unexpected audiences to be exposed to social movement information, with the potential to considerably enlarge the activist base and to mobilize previously uncommitted citizens.

Multi-step communication flows are enabled by likes, comments, and wall posts. These forms of interaction have often been dismissed as useless acts of ‘slacktivism’ or ‘clicktivism’ by authors such as Morozov (2009a). I strongly oppose such a view. The Facebook data analysis and the survey carried out in this research prove that these forms of “light involvement” were necessary preconditions for the growth of Popolo Viola and, rather than being deterrents, they acted as promoters of offline action. Firstly, they facilitated information circulation. Any form of active interaction, be it a comment, or even just a like, promoted the dissemination of content across individual users’ newsfeeds, guaranteeing visibility to the movement’s instances. Secondly, they intensified patterns of affiliation. Patterns of affiliation on Facebook enabled a potentially infinite number of users/activists to join the movement just with a click of their mouse. Such loose affiliation arrangements have allowed movements, such as Popolo Viola, to adopt extremely flexible and informal forms of membership.
Obviously, considering Likes as a form of affiliation would be misleading. The mere act of liking a Facebook page hardly reflects any form of commitment, but it rather constitutes a manifestation of interest. As explained in Chapter Ten, many users liked the Popolo Viola page only so they could act as ‘trolls’ and disrupt any form of discussion and engagement on the page. Moreover, joining the page was as easy as leaving it. Nonetheless, even the disruptive aims of opponents and trolls provided higher levels of visibility for the page. As long as information circulated, visibility increased. In the third place, as the survey demonstrated, interaction had the potential to promote citizens’ empowerment, fostering individual motivations to join action.

Social movements’ Facebook pages, such as the Popolo Viola page, have a three-fold role: they act as networking platforms, alternative media, and mobilization tools. Initially, the mobilizing potential of Facebook seemed astonishing. The findings of this project could, at first sight, lead the analysis to conclude that Facebook has the potential for social movements to circumvent such traditional institutions as the mainstream mass media as a necessary form of mediation. That said, this assumption is highly problematic.

The first issue regards the issues of the digital divide and of media literacy. Using Facebook as a main mobilization tool potentially skews participation towards specific groups of individuals, excluding those who do not have access to SNM, or those who do not know how to use them. Considering the proliferation of cheap devices, this could be a temporary problem, but at the moment of writing it has to be taken into account. The second matter regards the ostensible independence that action owns, in terms of mobilization processes, from established formal organizations, such as unions, political parties, non-profit organizations, and mass media. This issue is inextricably linked to the political and social environment in which protest takes place. I will discuss this in relation to political institutions and mass media separately.

In the Italian context, parties such as the Communist Party, in the past, and the Democratic Party later, and unions such as CIGL, CISL, and UIL, have always held
huge power in terms of mobilization. These collective actors in Italy, directly or indirectly, organized all the major demonstrations which took place after the Second World War. However, a demonstration such as the No Berlusconi Day complies with the state of scepticism and mistrust that now characterizes Western contemporary society. Such institutions slowly came to be considered to be traitors or enemies by the Left-wing activist base. The NBD did not aim to protest only against Berlusconi’s government, but also against the weakness of reformist parties, deemed to be too lenient with, let alone compliant with neoliberal logics. That said, movements such as Popolo Viola are characterized by multiple memberships. Some of its most active members were also affiliated to those political parties and institutions, such as the Democratic Party, which the movement fervently criticised.

As explained in the precious section, the interference of political parties contributed to the weakening of the collective identity of Popolo Viola. What is more, althoughy the use of Facebook enabled organizers to mobilize a significant number of citizens and to help them with the crowd-sourcing issues of logistics, such as transportation, it helped crowd-funding only relatively. The financial help of organized institutions then became necessary. The contributions of political parties helped Popolo Viola to mobilize a large number of citizens. As explained in Chapter Eight, political parties, such as IDV and SEL, adhered to, sustained and participated at most of the demonstrations organized by Popolo Viola. Their support varied from providing human resources to financially providing funds for the physical setting up of gazebos and stages. Even more importantly, these organizations mobilized other citizens through their own channels, contributing to the significant turn out at some demonstrations. Yet, the parties’ contributions were indirect at the beginning and became manifest to the activist base only after the institutionalization stage. The more open the parties’ support was, the weaker the potential for mobilization. For example, while during the No Berlusconi Day, in December, 2009, the use of official parties’ symbols, such as flags, was tacitly forbidden, the presence of the same symbols during the No Berlusconi Day 2 discouraged a significant number of activists from participating.
A different pattern emerges in terms of the support for mobilization that was provided by the media. My research shows that mass media still play a role which cannot be neglected. The interviews carried out for this project compelled me to investigate further in order to seek a relationship between patterns of mobilization and the mass media coverage of the anti-Berlusconi protest. The study’s findings showed a positive correlation between media attention and increases in subscription to the page. The positive outlook of the movement that was initially provided by Left-wing newspapers, such as *La Repubblica* and *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, provided a significant boost to the visibility of the page during the stages of excitement and formalization. Positively influencing the public identity of the movement, these newspapers initially “invested” in Popolo Viola because its agenda coincided with their editorial line and because the page was able to provide them with space on which their online articles could circulate. It was a relationship of mutual benefit: the movement enjoyed visibility, the online newspapers took advantage of increased traffic flows.

Further research would be needed in order to assess the relationships between the circulation of information on the mass media and SNM as drivers of social movement mobilization. My research found a positive correlation on both levels, but a media coverage analysis would be helpful in assessing the point up to which each of the media have contributed.

Framing is an important step throughout the mobilization process. As stated by Klandermans (1977; 1984; 2010), mobilization has to be intended as a two-fold process which aims to build consensus and undertake action. Consensus mobilization is preparatory to action mobilization. Action is, in fact, very unlikely to take place without a solid consensus among the constituents of a social movement. Mobilization undergoes four steps through which activists need to share common beliefs, to become aware of the movement’s initiatives, find motivation and, finally, to be able to participate. I have interpreted this framework as a communicative process which can be divided into two parts: an initial stage, on a meso-level, where the main actor is the group that frames and circulates information; a second stage where, on a micro-level, individual activists find a motivation and overcome any
barrier which may impede participation in action. Mobilization is thus affected by collective identity processes.

In terms of framing processes, technology seems to allow the personalization of frames to be in place (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012: 2013). According to this framework, connective action differs from collective action where the act of framing is in the hands of organized institutions. The horizontality of communication flows is a necessary precondition for personal frames to be able to reach the same scalability as that of collective frames. As Costanza-Chock affirms, horizontality has to be perceived as an ideal concept, rather than as something present in reality. In such an ideal model, the tools of communication must be available at no cost, many-to-many, socially filtered, and characterized by deliberative decision-making. In SNM scholars such as Stiegler and Castells see the materialization of such an ideal (Stiegler, 2006; Castells, 2009). However, the flows of the communication exchange on Facebook follow very different patterns according to the different affordances that are in place for personal networks and pages.

As anticipated at the beginning of this chapter, the configuration of Facebook pages is, in fact, characterized by progressively higher levels of verticality, as Facebook intends brands to retain control over the information flow and to protect themselves against any form of resistance from users. The coding of Facebook pages creates a significant imbalance in terms of visibility that is skewed in favour of frames created by page owners. This lack of balance discourages personal frames from circulating as long as page administrators do not decide to embrace their meaning and re-distribute them. Of course, individual users can still use their personal networks to circulate information but, being profiles limited to 5,000 contacts each, they do not have the same potential as Facebook pages. Moreover, the act of re-distribution requires a significant effort in terms of human resources; an excessive centralization of Facebook pages hinders this process. Moreover, this lack of human capital translates into frame misalignment, for two concurring reasons: firstly, page administrators do not have the necessary time to take into account the themes which are regarded as being relevant by individual users; secondly, the contributions of individual users, being unheard, diminishes with time.
These patterns contribute to weakening the potential for mobilization of Facebook pages. Moreover, they show the inextricable relationship between mobilization, organizational issues, and collective identity. The three dimensions are mutually dependent. The potential for mobilization displayed by the Facebook page of Il Popolo Viola was formidable when there was a balance between these dimensions. The empowering features of personal frames could not blossom without organizational efforts. Organizational failure translated into the decay of the movement’s collective identity, which hampered the mobilizing power of the movement. Overall, separating mobilization from collective identity becomes extremely problematic in an all-encompassing account of the relationship between social movements and their uses of SNM.

The present research shows how, gradually, the movement and the Facebook page where mobilization took place were distanced. It could be argued that the page was, after all, just an instrument of the movement and any constituent could establish their own independent page without relying on the Catania group. In fact, other constituents, such as Resistenza Viola and Rete Viola, attempted to create alternative mobilizing structures on Facebook. That said, these attempts failed to attract the necessary critical mass that would allow them to have an influential voice within the movement. In fact, while the Facebook page of Popolo Viola could benefit from the excitement leading to and following the mobilization for the No Berlusconi Day, reaching an astonishing number of likers, any other attempt to replicate this success failed. The pages that was first created by Resistenza Viola and later by Rete Viola grew at a similar pace to the Popolo Viola page during the movement’s formalization and institutionalisation stages, which was very slow if compared to the staggering influx who registered during the excitement stage.

As Explained in Chapter Ten, mobilization in social movements is a multifarious process. Any act of participation, be it a street demonstration or an online petition, may display different levels of involvement according to the specific stage of the lifecycle during which it takes place and the solidity of the movement’s collective identity. For example, my analysis has shown that while Popolo Viola distinguished itself by a pronounced virtualization of organizational processes, it was
also strongly grounded in the physical space as far as the repertoire of contention that was adopted is concerned.

The use of decentralized protest proved to be particularly efficient, as the use of Facebook during the mobilization process encouraged activists to participate in their own locality. The circulation of how-to-do lists, leaflets, and flyers that could be manipulated and personalized promoted protest to spread beyond the traditional spaces for protest. The No Berlusconi Day was symbolic of the glocalization of Italian protest. The demonstration was initially intended to occur only in Piazza San Giovanni, in Rome, the iconic square where all of the largest demonstrations organized by the unions and the Left have taken place in Italian history. That said, San Giovanni could not physically reflect the delocalization of mobilization that followed the networked structure and the dispersion of Italian youth across Europe and the globe. The protest thus spontaneously spread across national borders through those cities, such as London, Paris, and New York, where the diaspora concentrated. Rather than a re-occupation of the physical public space, as performed by the Occupy Movement and the protests in Tahrir Square, the No Berlusconi Day represented a re-aggregation of that social dispersion across disparate localities, which the economic crisis accentuated. The role played by the spontaneous spatial decentralization of the No Berlusconi Day confirms a trend which does not coincide with the incorporeal conceptualization of the space of flows made by Castells (2009) but, rather, it reinforces the necessity of physical proximity. As fragments in search of unity, individual activists seek the closest material gravitational point, driven by solidarity and identification.

When this sense of solidarity faded away, the search for unity failed, and what remained was only the shared discontent. That said, grievances were not enough for offline mobilization to take place (Klandermans, 1984). The movement, declining, was no longer able to organize street protest. The Internet, then, rather than acting as a tool for the mobilization of offline protest, became itself a ground for contention through users’ participation. Now, the Facebook page had evolved into a mobilizing structure, and the only successful campaigns took place online,
where high numbers of users could be reached, even without unity, as long as the worthiness of the cause was also high.

This chapter highlights the formidable potential of Facebook pages in terms of mobilization processes while the circulation of information that was enabled by likes, comments, wall posts, and notifications, allows a multi-step flow of communication that is vital for mobilization. This study totally dismisses the superficial accounts of “slacktivism” (Morozov, 2009). Instead, it places Facebook mobilization in a wider context which considers political institutions and mass media as being influencing agents. Moreover, it underlines the close relationship between organizational issues, collective identity, and mobilization processes. The role of technology is complementary to human agency here, while SNM acted as powerful re-aggregators of social dispersion.

11.5 Social Network Media and Movements’ Lifecycle

The section concerning the Popolo Viola lifecycle constituted the most inductive part of my research. The lack of theorization and empirical studies complicated the development of this research, both methodologically and in terms of the interpretation of data. Literature on the SM lifecycle is fragmented and descriptive. This lack of insights forced me to rely on a framework that was designed when social technologies were not yet introduced. On the other hand, the academic gap allowed me to experiment with relative freedom: firstly, adopting data from Facebook Insights as complementary to the historical account that was reconstructed through the interviews; afterwards, interpreting the relationship between this data and the fragments of literature that focus on the temporal dimensions of protest. While stages of the lifecycle are traditionally articulated through the development of organizational patterns, my account of the Popolo Viola lifecycle highlights the role played by the values embedded within technology as being relevant factors within the development of protest.

Social technologies, that allow information to circulate at phenomenal speed, have the potential to allow social movements to reach critical mass in significantly shorter intervals of time. Whereas the mobilization process becomes exceptionally
fast within the technological realm, organizational issues, which are necessary to sustain mobilization, can be facilitated by technology only up to a certain extent. In fact, technology offers a space for interaction that translates itself into organizational affordances only through human agency.

**Table 11.1. Summary Data Facebook Page Il Popolo Viola (daily average)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Excitement</th>
<th>Formalisation</th>
<th>Institutionalisation</th>
<th>Transformation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>New Affiliations</strong></td>
<td>5845</td>
<td>728</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>604</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unsubscriptions</strong></td>
<td>185</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visits to the Page</strong></td>
<td>13939</td>
<td>5421</td>
<td>3577</td>
<td>4146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Likes</strong></td>
<td>6883</td>
<td>7970</td>
<td>6489</td>
<td>6461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comments</strong></td>
<td>669</td>
<td>1553</td>
<td>2946</td>
<td>3219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Posts</strong></td>
<td>1218</td>
<td>591</td>
<td>532</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Interactions</strong></td>
<td>8755</td>
<td>10102</td>
<td>9507</td>
<td>9815</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this research, data on affiliation acted, borrowing a term from marketing research, as efficient key performance indicators in order to evaluate the duration of the excitement stage (see Figure 7.1 again). These data indicate the exhaustion of excitement even before the establishment of a formal structure for the movement was put in place. This pattern demonstrates how the affordances for circulation and the scalability of information on Facebook speeded up the excitement stage. Any act of participation, be it ‘passive’ like buttons, or the more proactive comments and wall posts, guaranteed visibility to the No Berlusconi Day event. The demonstration itself was characterized by high levels of participation, with hundreds of thousands of citizens involved both in the streets of Rome and in other parallel demonstrations across the world’s major capitals, and it was hailed by the left wing press and those same adherents for its multiple nature and high solidarity levels. At this stage levels
of offline participation were high: activists were so committed that many of them engaged in long journeys to participate at the movement’s events. Instead, online participation was relatively low and was characterized by forms of passive participation and high approval in the discussion, in order to symbolize an uncritical attachment to the movement.

The formalization process is considered, indeed, to be necessary for activists to maintain order in an otherwise noisy and confusing cacophony of opinions. However, activists need time to negotiate the most suitable organizational form. The excitement stage thus goes through two distinct phases: a first phase of ‘virality’, when the movement reaches critical mass, and a second phase of ‘pre-formalization’, when the significance and the weight of the critical mass compels leaders to seek organizational forms that are able to manage protest and discontent in a democratic way. This process is not driven by technology itself but rather by the ideals of horizontalism and inclusivity that are typical of new social movements such as Popolo Viola. The outcome of the process is decided according to the internal power relationships among the movement’s constituents.

As a movement grows, an increasing number of voices will want to take part in the decision-making process. The role played by technology is two-fold. In fact, technology allows movements to organize protest efficiently without the need for a formal structure, but it also skews power relationships in favour of those who hold control of the technological tools. When the proprietary nature of social technologies allows the movement’s leaders to retain power, formalization results as an unfulfilled process, a ‘quasi-formalization’. I will explain this point more extensively later.

The patterns recorded during the formalization stage are characterized by a gradual increase in interaction and a move to more confrontational and polarized participation. These patterns are strongly influenced by the contingencies caused by the organizational struggles around the movement. The movement underwent a rapid diffusion of goals which, on the one hand, allowed the movement to widen its agenda and increase participation. On the other hand, though, this increased
polarization and fragmentation due to the diverse nature of the movement’s audience. Participation levels of Popolo Viola’s demonstration were affected by this: unity decreased, negatively affecting both numbers and commitment.

As far as the institutionalisation of social movements is concerned, the analysis must also include the political environment that surrounds protest. The institutionalisation of Popolo Viola does not take place in order to improve the coordination or efficacy of the protest. On the contrary, the institutionalisation of Popolo Viola took place because of the need that was perceived by its leaders to achieve independence from external formal organizations. In fact, under Italian law, only formal organizations can request the right to demonstrate. The establishment of a formal SMO meant Popolo Viola did not have to rely on other organizations in order to plan demonstrations. The ideal of non-violence drives movements such as Popolo Viola to operate lawfully. Illegal demonstrations would require intervention by the police which might create potentially dangerous situations and increase the threshold of risk for the activists involved. However, institutionalisation is also a form of co-optation which many activists do not accept. Moreover, when the role of an SMO is limited to being a legal entity with no decisional power, the organizational confusion within the movement increases, with detrimental consequences for its unity. The expulsion of the SMO leaders from the Facebook page constitutes an example of this. Despite being visible, the institutionalisation of Popolo Viola fragmented the movement by co-opting its leaders, by creating inefficient SMOs, and by contributing to the leaders’ unaccountability. This situation was detrimental to the collective identity and contributed to the movement’s decline.

The use of SNM suggests the difficulty Facebook movements have in reaching a solid and shared organizational configuration. The persistent deterioration of solidarity among the movement’s constituents definitely shortened the lifecycle of the movement considerably. That said, while the movement declined at the end of this stage, with the “final purge” in February, 2011, the page remained as a platform for discussion. This is an essential finding of this research. While the internal struggles faded as the movement disappeared, the page remained as a space where the same causes that had led to the existence of the movement in the first place can
still be discussed. In other words, as Popolo Viola declined, the page, freed from issues directly related to the movement, thrived.

When a networked movement ceases to exist, their pages and groups on Facebook may not necessarily also disappear. When these tools survive, they can still act as powerful structures for mobilization and discussion. However, the narratives of mobilization detach themselves from the movement focusing only on the targets of protest. For example, the campaigns for the elections and the referenda in May/June, 2011, were extremely successful, in spite of the decline of Popolo Viola. Any argument about the movement was irrelevant when the users’ agenda was focused on these important political events. On the contrary, when in September, 2011, the Catania group tried to revive Popolo Viola with the demonstration Piazza Pulita, participation was so low that this event may be considered to be the epitaph of the movement.

During the transformation stage, when the page evolved into a mobilizing structure detached from the movement, participation solely followed the worthiness of the relevant political issues according to the common principles shared by the movement community. Popolo Viola was no longer a movement, but its page could still offer activists a space for participation with the potential for online mobilization. Despite the Catania group still controlling the flow of information, the discussion moved from movement-related questions to general issues, partially lifting from its management the burden of moderating possibly threatening topics, and opening the page to exogenous mobilization processes which were dictated by the general political agenda of the country. While the identization within the movement faded and thus any attempt at offline mobilization that was strictly related to Popolo Viola failed, participation thrived in relation to political events, such as referenda and elections. While the activist base would now hardly have participated in any Popolo Viola demonstration, as they were not keen to be identified with the movement any longer, the same base found in the page the necessary motivations to overcome the historical divisions when the opportunity to strike a major blow against Berlusconi’s government was given by the administrative elections and the referenda. Voting at the referenda meant once again saying ‘No’ to Berlusconi’s attempt to circumvent
justice, and this act did not require any identification with the movement. In this situation the page did not see any effort to action being hindered, but it recovered its motivational power.

This analysis demonstrates how a new categorization of the lifecycle of networked movements is required. The traditional categories do not apply to forms of protest such as Popolo Viola because of the ways in which the technical coding of social technologies allows leaders to resist any form of formalization and institutionalisation. The affordances of social technologies speed up the excitement surrounding protest, but they also promote an excessive centralization of power.

I thus propose a revision of the existing SM lifecycle framework, which considers the key variables for the development and survival of protest to be the networked nature of contemporary movements, the technical coding of the communication platform, and the human dimensions of decision-making and collective identity. Such framework applies to movements based on values of inclusiveness and horizontality. The model proposed envisages five different stages: unrest, excitement, quasi-formalization, quasi-institutionalization, and transformation.

**Figure 11.2. Facebook Movements’ Lifecycle**

![Facebook Movements' Lifecycle Diagram]

The stages of unrest and excitement do not change in qualitative terms. However, the affordances for individual empowerment, the circulation of information, and the mobilization which emerges through the use of social
technologies, may accelerate their evolution. The excitement stage starts with a single person or with a group of innovators who will channel unrest through the creation of a social presence, such as a Facebook page, as being the mobilizing hub and to establish an implicit leadership. This stage sees the surfacing of various groups, in terms of localization or interest, according to the movement’s nature. The leaders of these groups, and an increased movement base, will claim a voice inside the rising movement.

The quasi-formalisation that follows is the crucial stage for the endurance of the new collective actor. The creation of a manifesto, the establishment of a general and shared set of rules, and the inclusivity of the leaders’ group are the factors that shape the future development of the movement. However, a networked movement is not a unified actor. It is not necessary for all of its major constituents to undergo formalization. As with Popolo Viola, its centre of power may exclude itself from the process of the adoption of a formal structure. Here, the technical coding of Facebook plays its crucial role, allowing the hyper-centralization of power. If the leaders’ group leverages the coding of Facebook in order to preserve power, a process of centralization will take place, with negative consequences for the collective identity of a movement. Centralization will then lead to fragmentation, which will speed up the path to decline. An alternative path is possible when the movement’s leaders resist the “power-card” that is offered by Facebook’s coding in the name of horizontalism and inclusivity. The ideal configuration of integration is that where leaders distribute power among the movement’s constituents, promoting solidarity among its users and activists. This path would extend the movement’s lifecycle.

The stage of quasi-institutionalization follows a very similar pattern. Once again, the proprietary nature of social tools such as Facebook enables movement leaders to avoid institutionalisation. Again, it is not necessarily the institutionalized part of the movement that is the one in power. When leaders circumvent this process, the creation of powerless SMOs will take place, increasing internal bureaucracy and worsening structural fragmentation. Unity, commitment, and numbers will gradually decrease along with the movement’s credibility, and the mobilizing power of the page will rest solely on the worthiness of action itself.
The last phase is the transformation stage. Here, organizational levels fail and collective identity disintegrates. However, in terms of mobilization, the potential for online participation is almost intact. This happens because, whereas the movement itself declines, its communication hub survives by transforming itself into a mobilizing structure where mobilization and participation are still possible. However, the possibilities for action are solely defined by the worthiness of the cause. The movement, as a collective actor, fails, and the power of the leaders will be circumscribed to the page management. Pages see their role as social movement media terminated, but potentially survive as networking tools and platforms for discussion.

11.6 Conclusions

In the age of convergence, protest rises from unexpected underdogs and develops through unpredicted paths that reach a critical mass able to threaten established powers. The affordances of a popular social network medium, designed to connect people to people, brands to people, and people to brands, potentially transform the balance of power between established political players. However, Internet-based attempts at new forms of political aggregation too often resemble the broadcasting top-down model of mass communication. Once again, the adoption of technology as a means to an end is shaped by how such means is used, and not by its essence. Popolo Viola is an expression of this contradiction.

The highly vertical and centralized architecture of a social network medium has allowed the founders and leaders of the movement to perpetuate ownership and to take control over information flows. Even though this configuration has allowed these subjects to retain power, it has also promoted the fragmentation of the collective actor that it allowed to spring up and thrive. The opportunity to exploit the mobilization potential of social technologies, such as Facebook, comes at a price, for instance, the risk of remaining trapped within its proprietary design at the expense of the values of horizontality and deliberative democracy that a movement such as Popolo Viola welcomes. This risk directly involves organizational issues, whereas it indirectly affects mobilization and collective identity.
The centralized nature of Popolo Viola, a manifestation of this contradiction, in some ways also reflects the cultural attitude of Italian citizens who are searching for a sort of ‘protection’ from strong and charismatic political figures. After all, Italy acted as a laboratory for anti-democracy in the Western world with the introduction of Fascism and Berlusconism, intended here as the first media-driven form of populism in Europe. As Ginsborg states:

Italian history in these years, whatever its final destiny, is highly instructive for a number of central issues in the modern world: the nature of personal dominion at a time of crisis in representative democracy; the relationship between the media system and political power; the connection between consumerism, families, and politics; finally the ongoing weakness of the Left, its failure to identify and combat dangers, its incapacity to arouse enthusiasm for credible alternatives (Ginsborg, 2005: 3).

The three dimensions along which this research is structured, have helped the research to untangle an otherwise inextricable knot of influences, relationships, and correlations. However, this dissertation has a number of limitations. Firstly, the adoption of further methods, such as frame analysis, would have provided a more complete account of the relationships between Social Network Media and mass media as the means for social movement visibility and mobilization. Moreover, a wider and more representative sample for the survey would have offered a wider plurality of individual motivations for action. Finally, the peculiarity of the Italian situation of the concentration of media power could have provided a more pronounced social need for an alternative medium than would environments with more freedom of the press.

In a historical moment when the world wide web is undergoing profound transformations, facing “pressure for profits and the walled gardens that bring them” (Anderson, 2010) and threats in terms of control (Lessig, 2006; Berners Lee, 2011), this study provides empirical data that may stimulate further reflection on the tension between the commercial interests that govern its technical code and the human need to cultivate interaction and participation for social change in an unfettered manner. The struggle between competing forces for the openness and neutrality of social technologies has begun, but it is still far from having winners and
losers.
Bibliography


• Barnes, S., and Kaase, M. (1979) Political Action: Mass Participation in Five


April 2006, pp. 163-176.


• McAdam, D., McCarthy, J. D. & Zald, M. N. (1996) *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*. New York: Cambridge University Press.


Appendices

Appendix I – The Netiquette of Popolo Viola

Italian Version:

1) Evitare di assumere posizioni provocatorie: e' molto facile generare discussioni (flames) a volte spiacevoli.

2) Non divagare rispetto agli argomenti inerenti le iniziative e gli interessi del movimento.

3) Non condurre "guerre di opinione" sulla bacheca a colpi di messaggi e contromessaggi: se ci sono diatribe personali, è meglio risolverle usando la corrispondenza privata, personal messaging o la chat.

4) Non pubblicare post che siano lesivi della dignità delle persone che partecipano alle discussioni o inutilmente offensivi: mandarsi a "fanculo" non è un'opinione politica, nè un'idea sul da farsi.

5) Non SPAMmare: non inviare messaggi pubblicitari o comunicazioni che non siano stati sollecitati in modo esplicito, nè riscrivere innumerevoli volte lo stesso messaggio. Questo comportamento oltre ad esser fastidioso rende illeggibile la bacheca, facendo passare velocemente in secondo piano le segnalazioni di altri utenti.

6) Mantenere un comportamento rispettoso della privacy evitando di includere negli spazi pubblici di un profilo riferimenti a terze persone che non possono intervenire. Evitare inoltre di rendere pubblico un messaggio ricevuto personalmente senza autorizzazione dell’autore.

7) Rispettare il lavoro dei moderatori. I moderatori rispettino le diverse posizioni ed opinioni, se espresse civilmente e con rispetto, di tutti gli utenti della comunità.

8) Ogni persona, prima del ban definitivo, riceverà due segnalazioni (warning). Successivamente, le verrà motivato il ban.

9) E' stato istituito l'indirizzo email: popoloviola.garanti@gmail.com controllato da un gruppo di volontari che, a rotazione, si occuperà di recepire le lamentele degli utenti colpiti da "ban" e verificare la fondatezza delle denunce di abuso consultandosi con amministratori e moderatori della pagina.

English Version:

1) Avoid provocative positions: it is very easy to start incendiary discussions online.

2) Do not go off-topic in respect of the topics inherent the initiatives and the interests of the movement.
3) Do not initiate “opinion wars” on the wall with one-to-one discussions. In occasion of personal discussions, we invite the users to solve them using other tolls such as private messages or chats.

4) Do not publish posts which could be considered as harmful or offensive towards other users involved within the discussion: to say ‘f..k off’ is not a political opinion, let alone a constructive idea.

5) Do not spam: do not publish advertising messages, unsolicited information, or the same message too many times. This behaviour, on top of being annoying, disrupts the flow of communication on the page wall.

6) Be respectful of everyone’s privacy avoiding private information on our public wall. Furthermore, avoid publishing a private message without an authorization from the original author.

7) Be respectful of the administrators’ job. Moderators respect the diversity of opinions on the page, when these are expressed with respect of everyone in the community.

8) Everyone, before an ultimate ban, will receive two warnings. Afterwards, the reason for the ban will be provided.

9) The email popoloviola.garanti@gmail.com will be managed by a group of volunteers, in rotation, in order to deal with the complaints coming from banned users to verify their ground in accord with the page administrators.

## Appendix II – Coding Scheme for the Content Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Constructs of Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive</strong></td>
<td>Approval of the Movement’s Mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Popolo Viola as representing civil society’s reaction against Berlusconi’s personal power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Popolo Viola as sole mobilizing hub of the Italian political opposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facebook Page as discussion arena</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facebook Page as place where to vent rage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facebook Page as alternative medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neutral</strong></td>
<td>Off-Topic Messages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Messages of approval to external movements or politicians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Messages of disdain against external movements or politicians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative</strong></td>
<td>Popolo Viola as Berlusconi’s invention to fragment the Left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Popolo Viola as marked by inefficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Popolo Viola as marked by fragmentation and internal rivalries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Popolo Viola as a poorly organised movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Popolo Violas as lacking a structured ideology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Posts Analysed</strong></td>
<td>100% in 4 selected weeks (each week per lifecycle stage)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comments Analysed</strong></td>
<td>10% of total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix III – Roles of the Interviewees inside the movement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewees</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. 1</strong></td>
<td>Initially involved in the organization of a local group in Northern Italy, this interviewee will be later among the founders of Rete Viola and administrator of RV Facebook Page.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. 2</strong></td>
<td>Member of the Catania Group, this interviewee contributed as a Facebook page administrator for the whole time of fieldwork.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. 3</strong></td>
<td>Initially involved in the organization of the No Berlusconi Day, this interviewee will become a member of the first Coordinating Committee and will stay active in the local group in Rome.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. 4</strong></td>
<td>This interviewee collaborated as page administrator (moderation) and as press officer for the movement before being excluded in February 2011.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. 5</strong></td>
<td>As a member of Popolo Viola Milano, this interviewee was particularly interested in searching new forms of internal democracy inside the movement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. 6</strong></td>
<td>Member of Popolo Viola Perugia, this interviewee will collaborate extensively both with Popolo Viola and Rete Viola, becoming a member of the second Coordinating Committee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. 7</strong></td>
<td>San Precario, founder and administrator of the Facebook Page Il Popolo Viola.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. 8</strong></td>
<td>Member of the Catania Group and member of the second Coordinating Committee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. 9</strong></td>
<td>Former member of the Catania Group. This activist actively participated until the Naples meeting before gradually leaving the movement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. 10</strong></td>
<td>Founder of Popolo Viola London. This interviewee coordinated actions in the UK in total independence from the Italian movement. Left the movement after leaving London.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. 11</strong></td>
<td>Among the founders of Resistenza Viola, this activist re-joined Popolo Viola in occurrence with the referendum campaign in May-June 2011.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. 12</strong></td>
<td>Former member of the Catania Group, this interviewee was the first excluded by the management of the Facebook page in December 2009.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. 13</strong></td>
<td>Former member of the Catania Group, this activist gradually left the movement with the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 14</td>
<td>This former member of Popolo Viola Roma left the movement because of the interferences coming from political parties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 15</td>
<td>Former follower of Popolo Viola, active in online campaigns but not involved with the organizing of the main demonstrations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 16</td>
<td>Former member of Popolo Viola Roma, this interviewee has been actively involved with the organization of the movement until its decline.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 17</td>
<td>This member of Rete Viola was among the first ones to criticise the management of the page and the movement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 18</td>
<td>This member of Rete Viola abandoned any commitment to the movement after the last break-up in February 2011.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 19</td>
<td>Member of the first Coordinating Committee, this interviewee led the movement because of the futility of the role played by the committee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 20</td>
<td>Member of Popolo Viola Milano. This activist was very close to the Catania Group, collaborating to the Facebook Page and to all initiatives until the end of the movement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix IV – Sample Interview Guide

1) When did you join the movement?

2) Were you involved in other forms of activism before Popolo Viola?

3) What was your role inside the movement?

4) Were you involved in the organization of the movement? How?

5) Were you involved with the management of the Facebook page of the movement? How?

6) Describe your ‘online’ contribution to the movement.

7) Describe your ‘offline’ contribution to the movement.

8) Were you involved with other organizations or political parties?

9) How did such external involvement influenced your commitment to the movement?

10) Describe your relationship with the other members of the movement.