



Online communication spheres in social movements campaigns: the Italian referendum on water

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Abstract

In 2011, a vast coalition of social movement actors coordinated one of the largest and most successful political campaign that characterized recent Italian history, organizing and winning a referendum that blocked a serious attempt to privatize the entire water distribution network. In a year characterized by intense mobilizations throughout the world – with the Occupy, the 15-M and the so called Arab Spring protests dominating the scene – the main Italian organizations and networks coalesced, with the external support of some small declining or newly formed parties, and gradually captured an increasing attention in society. The main environment of action of the Referendum supporters slowly passed from the Italian streets, assemblies, and squares, to the websites of the organizations, and – during the very last phase of the campaign – to Facebook, finally conquering at least in part the very closed space of the Italian mass media. On Facebook, in particular, the politically oriented communication of the referendum supporters proved to be very pervasive: the words *referendum* and *quorum* were the most present in the statuses of the Italian users of this platform for the entire 2011.

The dissertation explores in detail this successful campaign, focusing on how the activists elaborated new strategies of online communication and on the processes of adaptation that the emergence of the Social Media in the Italian political environment promoted in this social movement milieu. Adopting a very wide set of methodologies, which includes Digital Ethnography, Social Network Analysis, interviews and data collection through computer programming in Python, the author explores different aspects of the mobilization that are particularly relevant for the broader discussion on online activism and campaigning. In particular, he traces the network of websites that supported the campaign, he observes the online communication practices of the activists on the web and Facebook, he describes the link that connects online and off-line activism during this large-scale campaign, and he connects the different ways of perceiving the social media environment with divergent uses of these platforms.



Jury: Donatella della Porta (EUI), Matteo Cernison (candidate), Mario Diani (Università degli Studi di Trento), Lance Bennett (University of Washington), László Bruszt (EUI, in videolink)

Bio

Matteo Cernison focuses his research on social movements and online communication. During his PhD he investigated the online communication that characterized the 2011 Italian referendum campaign against the privatization of water, under the supervision of Donatella della Porta. He graduated at the University of Padua in 2006. Since then, he participated to a national research project regarding the online debate on Communication Rights (Universities of Trento and Padua, 2007/2008), to the ERC funded project "Mobilizing 4 Democracy" (EUI – Cosmos, Centre on Social Movement Studies – 2012/14), and to a research on framing in international campaigns (LUISS University, 2014). He is interested in methods, and he is an expert in Social Network Analysis, Digital Methods (in particular digital ethnography), and computer programming for social science.