What kind of grassroots e-participation? The uneasy demand of new politics in Italy: between continuity and innovation

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Abstract. The first part of the article provides a review of the empirical research about the usages of Internet and ICTs by civil society in Italy in the last decade. Three periods are identified, related to the spreading to the Internet access and the political evolving context: the pioneering phase along the '90s, characterized by the activism of one-issues movements and a great component of techies among the online activists; the new global movements and the anti-Berlusconi mobilizations at the beginning of the new decade; the more recent phase characterized by the emersion of the blogosphere, and the extension of the citizens mobilizations. The expectations towards the enabling virtue of Internet and ICTs are discussed, giving evidence to the persisting problems in innovating both the communication and organizational practices of the collective action and the relationship with the mass media system in the public sphere. In the last section of the paper, the analysis focuses on one of the most relevant non-institutional experience of e-participation within the national context: OpenPolis/Voisietequi. This initiative provides tools for horizontal information and control over politicians, in the attempt to 'reverse' the prevailing logic of 'techno-politics'.

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1 Introduction

The relevance of grassroots forms of online participation as a source of social change and democratization within the network society has been pointed out by the classical literature on the social and political implications of the new digital media (Castells, 1996). The potential of widening and deepening the citizens' participation by means of the Internet has been increasingly located more in the initiatives of civil society and individual citizens than in the domain of e-democracy institutional projects (Bennet, 2003). Ideally, the new media may improve the deliberative quality of participation at the grassroots level, favouring more inclusive and discursive forms. New technologies are expected also to broaden the participation to a wider number and variety of citizens. Furthermore, new media should favour new flows of information directly by social actors, without the intermediation of mainstream mass media.

In Italy in the last decade there has been a growing and variegated diffusion of the political usages of Internet and other new media by different social actors. Three phases of citizens' political usages of the ICTs in Italy and related studies can be distinguished. A first pioneering period leads from BBS to the advent of the Web and it is characterized by the activism of small groups, mobilized on single issues, often related to the social and political features of information society development (cyber-rights), as well as to civil rights issues. The second period, at the turning point of the new decade, is featured by the public emersion of the new media activism in conjunction with the wave of mobilizations of new global social and pacifist movements and, in the Italian national context, of the movements of protest against Berlusconi's government. Finally, the current phase shows a densification of the Internet by the mainstream media and a parallel process of pluralisation through the Web 2.0 applications, related to a wider access to the Internet, in a context shaped by the extension of a feeling of strong criticism and disaffection towards all political parties (Mastropaolo, 2006; Mete, 2008) and the mass media system. The most relevant experience in this field is the online-offline network promoted by the Blog of Beppe Grillo. The changing profiles of the citizens-activists involved in these phases, as well as the crucial relation between the online opportunities and the Italian offline political and communicational context, are underlined.

In the last section, we focus on the analysis of an example of e-participation tools (*OpenPolis* and *VoiSieteQui*) implemented by a small association within the context of this third wave of the citizens e-participation development, featured by the diffusion of Web 2.0. The core idea of this project is to provide digital tools enabling 'reverse' in favour to the citizens the vertical logic of techno-politics (Rodotà, 1997), which is based on polls and citizens profiling, managed by political actors (parties, professional politicians and political consultants). According to the 'reversed engineering' approach to techno-politics, the citizens

would play, by means of the Openpolis platform, an active and cooperative role in monitoring, analysing and updating a data storage on the political leaders' behaviours (tracked out through speeches, votes, electoral programs, appointments in public and private companies, etc.). In parallel, during the last two campaigns for the general election, a peculiar service was launched to intercept the citizens' interests towards the project: *Voisietequi* is an online game/poll designed cooperatively in the form of a test and aiming to activate a flow of interactive dialogic relationships among respondents. It is a way to disclose 'in practice' one of the central techno-political 'dispositives', which allows to the politicians to channel and shape the demands of the their voters avoiding any dialogical relationship.

Although some limits of the current practices of participation through the ICTs seem inherent to the nature of the social relationships and of the collective action, online as well as offline, the main constrain to a wider empowerment of the citizen participation emerged on the ground of the relationships between virtual sphere and general public sphere, non commercial information spaces and market-oriented ones.

2 From the pioneering activism to the civic telematics: cyberspace between citizenship and market in the '90s

In Italy the development of the political usage of digital networks by civil society begins at the end of the '80s, after a former season of quite widespread experimentations of local media, both radios ('70s) and televisions ('80s). At this stage, digital networks were mainly BBS, basically means of alternative information for activists in the fields of internationalism, environmentalism, pacifism, gender issues and feminism, civil and human rights, techno-artistic vanguards emerging in cyberpunk, digital art and hackers communities. Therefore, the Italian virtual communities were well connected to their related international networks in a growing 'web' of local to local, or local to global relationships. These experiences involved specialized, often marginalized, groups of critical techies, who conceived the new media as crucial tools for a societal transformation in a direction of pluralisation and democratization of the information flows and of the organizational forms of the collective action. Thus, most of the available contributions about these experiences are narrations, where the protagonists offer their outlook on the potentials of new media; they often have emancipative and optimistic expectations (Gubitosa *et al.*, 1996; Picci, 1999). There are also critical analysis that stress both the persistence of usual power functionings and the new risks of social exclusion, authoritarian political control and privatization of knowledge. These new risks appeared connected to

the lack of updating of the citizenship rights adequate to the digital age and knowledge-based capitalism (Rodotà 1997; Freschi & Leonardi, 1998; Stranonetwork, 2000; Pasquinelli, 2002; Tozzi & Di Corinto, 2002).

The central question was whether computer mediated communication was a more egalitarian and democratic model, thus empirical research was concentrated on the analysis of virtual communication and cyberspace. Empirical findings emerged in contrast with the rhetoric of horizontality developed in the first virtual online community, even in the case of the electronic conference experimented by cyberpunk activists communities (Paccagnella, 1997): social relationships are shaped in continuity with offline social dynamics, showing an online reproduction of the gender issues (Capussotti, 1997). Other studies (Freschi 2000, 2002), still focusing on these minorities and other stigmatized communities (like the hackers), which have a peculiar place in the academic literature on cyberspace as vanguards and pioneers, shed light on the interchanges between online and offline relationships, extending the research tools beyond the online sphere, by means of interviews, ethnographic observation and focus groups. Thanks to the online-offline interlink, virtual communities can feed social capital. When horizontal structures of power relations emerge inside the groups, it depends more on the offline social roles and the common background culture, than on the communication instruments adopted. A further emerging finding is the evident trend, along time, toward a re-territorialization of the online groups, reflecting their social relations maps.

The debate on the participative potentials of the web knows a new élan with the birth of the first 'municipality digital networks' in the mid '90s and an expansion of Internet usage due to the new World Wide Web services. The pre-existing grassroots online groups proposed to the municipalities to adopt an approach opened to the civil society contributions: free access to the Internet, autonomous spaces on the websites, educational and training programs addressed to all the citizens: a kind of new online local public sphere, which at that time appeared easier to attain than in previous technological phase because of the new tools provided by the World Wide Web. In most of the cases these proposals remained unheard by the local political institutions, which saw the new digital networks as an instrument for the provision of e-services by the administrations for the citizens. The underlying problem of the debate is the tension between the demand for access to a new free communicational sphere and the emerging new market of digital services (Berra, 1997; Freschi, 1998). The outcome of this confrontation depended largely on the local political context and the relative policy innovation models (Baglioni & Berra, 1999; Freschi, 2000). At the end of '90s the civic network model based on the provision of administrative services largely prevailed, while the institutional channels opened to citizens' participation seemed to provide very rare occasions of a true debate with the politicians: the

supposed interactive spaces often reflected a mere symbolic function (Freschi, 2003).

With reference to the political impact of citizen participation fostered by the new media, the problem of the access to the general public sphere was already visible. In the case of the mobilizations promoted by women associations, for instance, the gap between the degree of development of online mobilizations and the ability to penetrate the mainstream media agenda seems to be very large (Leonardi, 2001). The issues related to digital rights, privacy, free licensing, raised by hackers communities and later continued by growing new professional groups, will not achieve public relevance in the Italian media until the second half of the following decade, when, in practice, these issues will be imposed by the international agenda.

3 Internet, new global movements and the protests against Berlusconi's Government

At the beginning of the new decade, the Italian political landscape was strongly characterized by the shock of the days of the G8 meeting held in Genova in July 2001, culminated in the murder of Carlo Giuliani, a 22 years old participant to the demonstration contesting the governmental meeting. In this international occasion the digital media activism played an important role, revealing the incredible violence exerted by the police on the participants to the protest events, and providing information about the workshops and events promoted by the organizations of the counter-meeting. News collected by non-mainstream media received a lot of attention by online and offline national and international media. The Italian node of the world network Indymedia - one of the targets of the bloody police repression in the Diaz's school[1] - had an important role of alternative source of information also for the mass media channels (Freschi, 2003). The participative web radio, Radio Gap, based at the Genoa Media Center, that started to broadcast on the 16th of July 2001, also played a key function, due to the privileged and lively accessibility of the radio-channel.

The new digital networks became also spaces of social and political elaboration, interconnection of different political identities and demands which characterized Italian altermondialist movement since its beginning. In Italy the movement is particularly different, made up by social groups with distant cultural backgrounds: pacifists, 'disobedients', environmental groups, feminists, grassroots and consolidated trade unions, networks promoting international cooperation and development, catholic groups and anarchists. Along the preparing

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[1] Diaz's school had hosted a dormitory for activists and the media center of the counter-meeting during the G8. Here, the night after Giuliani's murder, police broke with extreme violence, while people were sleeping

phase of the counter-meeting, movements and associations' mailing-lists were very active, and the movements' media got consolidated (Calderaro, 2007). Some studies put in evidence that movement's mailing lists are "permanent meetings", which favours a constant deliberation among members (Della Porta & Mosca; 2006, p.538; Calderaro 2007). However, according to a diachronic research that takes into account a longer period and other movement's experiences, mailing lists tend to be organized in smaller groups, with different amplitude of the circles of dissemination of the information, according to its strategic value, and a decreasing deliberative attitude, so that groups would always prefer to organize the relevant deliberative processes in offline meetings (Freschi, 2008). A number of empirical studies (Freschi, 2003; Della Porta & Mosca, 2004, 2006; Mascio 2008) have underlined the relevance of the cognitive functions of online communication: news, articles, special 'dossier' but also conference, seminars' materials and bibliographies. The discursive flows on the mailing lists are important resources of 'in progress' knowledge and collective memory, for both the members of the movement networks and the external general public.

Among the participants to the new global mobilizations the diffusion of Internet is significantly higher than in the general population (Andretta *et al.*, 2002). Notwithstanding, the Internet seems to be more an instrument for offline mobilization, than a space for online communication and mobilization (Freschi 2000; Della Porta & Mosca, 2006; Mascio 2008). The pioneering phase seems to be partly overcome. In the new context of diffused social mobilization, therefore, the availability of technical resources, intercepting the motivations of a bottom-up participation, has been translated in the opportunity for forming new identities, and for transforming the forms of civic and political participation, thanks to the spread of alternative practices of technology, communication, information, put in practice by social actors coming from specific experiences and critical readings of the dominant models (Freschi, 2003, p.70). Grassroots new media, or *new media-activism,* so defined for its characterization as channel for contents produced directly by the participants to the mobilizations, tried to overcome the constrains of the so called 'movement's media', perceived as structurally similar to mainstream media for their market dependence and organization in the production of information. It emerges the effort to develop forms of relations among the social actors who directly take part to the collective action, in order to intervene in the production of the public sphere (Freschi, 2003, p. 52, p.58). The concept of *right of information* is replaced by new media activism with the right of *self-production of communication,* at the base of a "new idea of democracy and citizenship". In this way, media activism has become directly a "model and metaphor of producing the society", that is to say an instrument for creating new political subjectivities, according to the principle that "it is information that shapes users" (Pasquinelli, 2002, p.17). Nevertheless, experiences like Indymedia wave between a plan of reform of the media system and a plan of emancipation

from the system itself (Milan, 2006, p.558). Although the later crisis of the ItalyIndymedia project[1] shows these unresolved problems of a such ambitious experimentation, in terms of objectives of openness and horizontality, it could be also interpreted as the result of the successful spreading of the un-intermediate communicative practices within the following mobilizations.

The growing interconnection between digital activism and offline based activism seemed able to challenge the mainstream mass media model. Nevertheless, this seems realistic as there was a favourable social and political context, characterized by a high level of social mobilization, marked by the development of social movements since Seattle and, in Italy, by the wide protest movements against the tycoon Prime Minister. The fact that Berlusconi controlled the largest part of the national mass media system, was an element that favoured the interest of the opposition groups towards the utilization of communication in the Internet. After the boost in using the Internet as an instrument of participation by the altermondialist movement at the beginning of the new decade, two mobilizations took place during the Berlusconi's government and increased the presence of the civil society on the Internet: the very relevant pacifist national mobilization – synchronized at global level and spread thanks to the web – and a growing number of mobilizations aiming for democratic rules since 2002, named *Girotondi* (ring-a-ring-o' roses) because of the use of this classic children game during the protest events. These mobilizations found a further channel in the new development of the tele-street movement (Andreucci, 2006), that set up independent TV stations in several metropolitan areas at sub-municipal level (*Orfeo-TV* in Bologna, *Anelli Mancanti* in Florence, *In Sù-TV* in Naples) or at national level (NoWar-TV project). In the deployment of these last national mobilizations, the Internet becomes the "ideal platform for the realization of more or less extended networks, similar in some cases to real communities, that connect people with very different origins" (Mascio, 2008, p.150). Even more than in the experiences of the G8 in Genova 2001 and of the European Social Forum, held in Florence in the 2002, the *Girotondi* season showed the consolidation and the consecration of the Internet as a new collective space for citizens participation. Although the *Girotondi* is a kind of elite mobilization, expressing the concerns of the 'reflexive medium ranks', according to one of its opinion leaders and speakers. However, the participants to these demonstrations were ideologically more heterogeneous, than those who took part in the alter-mondialist and pacifist movements.

The efficient use of the new media made by the *Girotondi* and the participation of leading intellectuals strengthened the ability of the movement to shape the agenda of the media (Mascio, 2008, p.168). This effect appears to be helped by

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1 As known, Indymedia is the widest global network of independent media around the world, developed since Seattle 1999.. The Italian project grew up at the beginning of the new decade, mostly from previous networks of media activists.

the political-communicational general context, characterized by a high level of dramatization of the dialectic government-movements, in parallel with a scarce stress on the debate between government and opposition. It is the interaction among these factors, rather than the mere opportunity made available by technologies, that allows to be heard in the mass public sphere. Even a wide network of online communication may become insufficient to overcome the mainstream barriers, as the experience of the feminist movements demonstrates (Leonardi 2001; Nardi 2002). A recent national protest event in Rome focused on the fight against violence on women was launched in Italy in November 2007, using e-mails and SMS; but it had a narrow and distorted coverage on the mainstream media. Other demonstrations, like those made by 'flexible' or precarious workers (Mattoni, 2008) and by homosexuals (Trappolin, 2008) had a similar distorted coverage.

In sum, we can agree with Sebastiani (2008, p.11), who said that the Internet plays a "subsidiary communicative function" for movements, civic committees, associations, informal groups who can produce relevant public discourses only if they have the resources for accessing the political-institutional arena and also the traditional media. The Internet does not guarantee the automatic creation of a renewed public sphere, more inclusive and horizontal, neither an egalitarian and dialogical relationship with the other components of the public sphere (traditional media, political system, public opinion). Nevertheless, it is also true that the picture seems to become even more complex and ambivalent due to the more recent technological and social developments.

4 Web 2.0: from strategic resource to a new routine? Fragmentation and re-aggregation of online public sphere

After the alter-mondialist mobilizations and the *Girotondi*, with the increasing diffusion of Internet access (that rose from about 22% of families in 2000 up to a bit over 40% in the 2003) (Sartori, 2006, p.333), the web has entered, also in Italy, among the usual instruments adopted by mobilized citizens and groups for inside and outside communication. While citizens leave the online institutional forum because of the lack of a direct and public debate with the administrations, other online non-institutional autonomous places of interaction are built by grassroots groups, densifying the local online sphere "far from the municipalities networks" (Freschi, 2008). Nearly all the most important local mobilizations in Italy in the latest years (for example those against the building of the big high speed trains infrastructures in Val di Susa (Northwestern Italy) and in Tuscany, known as *No-TAV* movement; or those against the enlargement of the NATO military base in Vicenza, *No-Dal Molin*), rely not only on strong localized

network of grassroots groups, but also on the relationships fostered by the web among the movements' networks, included the new media activism, grown up in the previous two-years of the alter-mondialist Italian mobilizations. Among these new generations of grassroots experiences, which seem to have integrated the use of the new media in their tool-case, EuroMayday, rooted in Italy among the emerging components of the high as well as de-qualified services sector, mainly in cities like Milan or Rome, deserves a peculiar attention for its deconstructive potential of the mainstream media codes. This network of precarious workers, due to the prevailing cultural and educational backgrounds of its social basis, aims to express a radical criticism towards both trade unionism and the mainstream communication, by means of the adoption of strategies that interfere with the commercial flows, especially in the business sectors at high symbolic intensity. An example is the creation of the brand Serpica Naro, a mysterious *maison d'haute couture*, which was able to force the narrow selective filter of the media coverage on the international fashion show in Milan (Freschi & Raffini, 2008).

With the diffusion of the Web 2.0, the relationship between the emergence of a wider virtual public sphere, crowded by an increasing number of individuals and new mobilized groups, and the mass media sphere is still problematic. The commercial colonization of the virtual sphere makes less easy to interfere with the mass media agenda. Therefore, active citizens find the new media a useful instrument for networking, sharing knowledge and information, rather than for affecting the media agenda and consequently the political agenda. According to the latest Technorati research on the state of the blogosphere, it emerges that, over the total number of posts in the world, the Italian ones rose to the 4th position, after those in Japanese, English and Chinese (Sifry, 2007; Mediameter-Wordpress, 2007). The blogosphere shows not only the strong demand of self expression by individuals, but also the need to get and give alternative, un-intermediated, individualized information to the mainstream market-oriented one. Examples of this are: the boom of warblogs and personal journalism after the 9/11 attacks; the diffusion of blogs and war diaries, written by soldiers in Iraq and journalists not embedded with the fighting troops (like Enzo Baldoni[1]), or in cases of "widespread emergency" as in the aftermath of the Tsunami in South-East Asia (De Rosa, 2007; Sofi, 2006).

Blogs seem to answer to a new ethical need within professional journalism, as well as to a strategy of building individual reputation and visibility in order to better compete on the new information online market. The quick and widespread diffusion of blogs and citizen journalism has provoked contrasting and polarized reactions. According to some observers and bloggers, positive and cooperating synergies may emerge between traditional journalism and the new forms of web-journalism. A journalistic "re-mediation" is already partially in progress:

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1 Italian journalist and blogger, correspondent of the weekly "Diario" to Iraq who was kidnapped and killed during the summer 2004.

mainstream media use some blogs as sources; some bloggers check the honesty and transparency of traditional information and they write also for newspapers and magazines; the professional journalism would maintain its prerogatives of interpreting the complexity of society, as citizens journalism tend to adopt a more partial point of view (Sofi, 2006, p.20; Spina, 2006, p.496). Both mainstream media and the blogosphere continue mainly to be self-referential. When investigating the relationship between traditional journalism and online journalism, Fortunati and Sarrica (2006, pp.524-526) found out that the professional journalists (who write for the newspapers) distrust the Internet and think also that both citizen and "self-made journalism" will never be "real journalism". Milič, Marchetto and Costa (2007), when surveying 5.000 Italian authors and readers of blogs through an online questionnaire focused on the relations between blogs and the public sphere, put in evidence an analogous self-referential trend, combined with growing mutual suspicion. Moreover, the majority of respondents declared to trust more the authoritative/influential blogs, than the traditional newspapers, notwithstanding it is still mostly the mass media agenda that shapes the one of the blogs. Nevertheless, the processes of "internetization" of the traditional information and "mediatization" of the web proceed, both in the virtuous and vicious meanings, in "circular and synergic" ways (Spina, 2006, p.498; Fortunati & Sarrica, 2006). For example, inside the blogosphere the social problems of unequal distribution of scarce resources are not vanished, both in terms of the attention obtainable from the citizens and from the mainstream media or the institutional actors, in a context of an overload of information (De Rosa, 2006). In this perspective, the blogosphere situation of endemic competition for the attention and the communicative strategies of bloggers and blogs does not diverge much from those of the mainstream media, especially over a certain number of comments for post.

The main problem remains the fact that the Italian mass media system and the political-institutional arena seem not to be currently affected by the blogosphere, which is lacking in modifying the mainstream agenda (De Rosa 2006, p.148). An exception to this rule is the blog of the comedian Beppe Grillo[1], opened in January 2005. His blog is the most popular Italian blog, the third more visited information website, with an average of 160.000 contacts per day (Technorati ranks it 18th in a list of more 70 million of blogs in the world)[2]. The Internet has been used also to create local meet-ups: currently the Grillo's meet-up network counts about 200 units, in more than 150 towns, also outside Italy (Navarria, 2007). The posts about the more recent campaigns proposed by Grillo, as *Parlamento Pulito*[3] and *Le Primarie dei Cittadini*[1] received each thousands of

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1 www.beppegrillo.it

2 In 2005 the Times included Grillo between the 37 "European heroes" of the year, because of the critical and un-conformist communicational style and the ability to provoke and inspire the public opinion, bloggers and readers.

3 Translation: Clean Parliament www.parlamentopulito.com

comments. The campaigns and mobilizations promoted by Grillo are characterized by a strong integration between offline actions – like meetings and events which take place simultaneously in different towns, big shows, visits to local communities claiming on specific issues – and the use of the new digital media. Moreover, Grillo's initiatives aim at connecting clearly the movement's initiatives with the institutional available democratic instruments (petitions, laws proposed by the citizens, referendum, class actions). In the same perspective, Grillo organized some big events in conjunction with important national celebrations (like the anniversaries of the 8th September 1943 and of the 25th April 1945, the Italian Liberation from the Nazi occupation): it seems not only a matter of attracting the biggest participation, but also an answer to the need of connecting the protest to the public sphere and locating one's own political proposal in a symbolic space, from where the institutional political actors seem in retreat. The first political initiative with a strong echo was *Parlamento pulito* launched online in June 2005 to shed light on the high number of people under investigation or condemned in the Italian Parliament[2]. The 8th of September 2007 Grillo organized the so called *V-day per un Parlamento pulito*: 50.000 persons attended the meeting with the comedian in Bologna, while in 200 Italian squares and public spaces in various towns, and in 30 towns abroad, 300.000 signatures were collected for the petition campaign to propose a popular law on this issue. During the 23-25th of April 2008 "V2 day", 500 self-organized groups in several Italian cities collected 1.500.000 signatures in three days in order to propose three referenda to reform the Italian media and journalistic system; the slogan was "free information in free state". As Grillo commented, "it [this extraordinary number of signatures collected] never happened in the history of the Republic in such a short period of time". The success of the mobilization promoted by Grillo's organization depended on a mix of elements: the ability to intercept the increasing delusion and mistrust towards the political class and mainstream media; the contribution provided by the wide range of communications channels, deployed in the building of local groups and in the promotion of timely, content rich and incisive campaigns; the experimentation of the newest digital services and the rediscovery of basic participation forms (grassroots local groups). This experience shows also some problematic traits in continuity with the usual political dynamics. High personalization of the leadership and some problems like the scarce accountability, transparency and representation of Grillo's blog have already been underlined by Navarria (2007); even "the friends of Beppe Grillo" noticed some lack of interaction within the inner circle in straight contact with Grillo, when some strategic and important decisions for the whole movement are concerned. There are also some other limits in the participation quality, which

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1 Translation: Citizens' Primaries www.beppegrillo.it/grillonews.html

2 In the XIV Legislature (2001-2006) there were 25 people condemned with final judgment, even if not all of them for serious crimes as corruption.

reflect some features of the Italian society. For example, the analysis on the online communication and on the participants to the meet-up shows a weak presence of women, but this is true also for those issues as public health, environmental preservation, wellbeing of future generations which women are traditionally more involved in (Carroll, 2001). The scarce active presence of women on the Grillo's website is in contrast with the fact that, at least among the young generations, women are those who blog more (Milič *et al.*, 2007). The Grillo's style of communication, characterized by the adoption of a male-centred slang (which is not so rare in the Italian political communication) may have contributed to this feature. Finally, for some aspects, Grillo doesn't use some typical networking functions: comparing Grillo's Blog to some other Italian blogs, it emerges that there are less links to external websites and other bloggers, and there is not a real interaction between the blogger and the citizens who comment his posts, also as a consequence of the high number of comments from citizens (thousands for each post launched by Grillo).

In conclusion, notwithstanding some inner limits, the forms of online participation in Italy in the last 10 years have shown a quantitative and qualitative extension. The most incisive experiences in terms of identity building as well as in terms of reaching the general public, however, have been characterized by the integration of online and offline communicational and organizational dimensions, exploiting both the emerging political opportunities and the usual spectacular logic to interfere with the agenda of the media mainstream public sphere.

5 Testing reversed techno-politics

Among the recent Italian experiences promoted by non-institutional actors, aiming to influence significantly the institutional dynamics, which obtained similar, even if not identical, interest compared to the Grillo case, stand out two projects of the nonprofit association DEPP (Electronic Democracy and Public Participation): *OpenPolis* and *VoiSieteQui*[1]. The interest to these projects is due to their attempt to reverse the logic underlying the combination of political marketing, polls and ICTs adopted by the political-institutional actors. Rodotà (1997) defined "techno-politics" this scenario of making the citizens passive sources of feedbacks towards the political dominant actors, by means of a continuous use of polls, the fragmentation of the citizenship sovereignty and the sterilization of the dialogic-deliberative opportunities. It deals with a use of the new media that is limited to the exploitation of their potential of challenging a fragmented and atomized political demand. The digital practices, proposed by the

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1 The assessment of these projects is based on: the analysis of the web sites Voisietequi (www.voisietequi.it) and OpenPolis (www.openpolis.it). The analysis consists of the debates developed in blogs, mailing lists, forums, and on the mainstream websites which published news about the projects and in depth interviews to the creators and managers of the projects.

two projects here analyzed, try to favor reflexive processes among citizens and political actors by means of upsetting their roles within the "game" of techno-politics.

During the 2006 campaign, Voisietequi proposed an online poll that asked the Internet users to express their preferences (on a scale of different positions from "I strongly agree" to "I strongly disagree") about a set of political issues, selected as crucial in the general electoral campaign. Based on a comparison with the official positions of the parties, the poll allowed the users to measure their proximity or distance from the various parties on the given political space, through a graph used in the social sciences and realized applying the Multi Dimensional Scaling (MDS) technique. In 2006 the parties' positions on 25 issues were defined consulting nearly 1.000 sources, ranging from the electoral programs to the leaders' public declarations. 730,000 users completed the test in this first edition. Voisietequi obtained a high resonance mainly thanks to the word of mouth and the coverage of the mass media, which interpreted it as an interesting and light innovation in the context of an electoral campaign which was characterized by acrimonious and hard tones. As the president of the promoting association interviewed said, "Voisietequi fits in the strategic scenario of OpenPolis", which aimed at developing in Italy an instrument similar to the British "they-work-for-you"[1] - a tool for getting information and for checking the declarations and the activities of politicians at different levels – and "publicwhip"[2], a source of information on the voting decisions taken by the parliamentarians. On the other hand, such an instrument can become a useful source of information for the politicians themselves and the media. The creation of a relevant database of information on the activities of the local and national politicians (more than 130.000 Italian elected representatives, from local to European institutions) is based on the contribution of the citizens themselves, but also of journalists, associations, and professional politicians registered to the community of the users of the service. They were invited to "adopt" one or more politicians, to accurately keep track of the activities of these politicians and to post news on the website, always making references to the sources (press statements, interviews, etc). This is the most interesting and problematic aspect of the project because it requires an active role of the participants and a large "critical mass" of contributors. The great interest stimulated by Voisietequi nourished the community OpenPolis, both in 2006 and in the further experience occurred in the electoral campaign for 2008. This anticipated general elections – in which the political supply seemed quickly and to a large extent modified, but not less confused for the partial break up of the former coalitions – aroused strong expectations for the new edition of the poll. The same day the test was available online, the Corriere della Sera (one of the main national newspapers) published the news on its website, and after that the

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1 www.theyworkforyou.com

2 www.publicwhip.org.uk

site was not available for a while because too many users were trying to access it. The news spread immediately on the Internet, starting from the bloggers. The prompt publicity of the site and the huge diffusion in terms of visited pages (the number of contacts, about two millions, is comparable to those of the large commercial channels) are the first elements of interest. The 2008 edition extends the role of the participants. During a first stage, the users could choose the political issues they considered most important (users proposed and voted the issues according to their salience, then made a ranking, and finally the editorial board picked up 25 questions). At the same time a mailing list opened the discussion. In the second stage, the selected questions were sent to the political parties, which were invited to provide their positions on the issues. During the last period, citizens could complete the test. Despite being online fewer days than the first edition (14 days against 21), about 800.000 people filled in the test in 2008. The communication style adopted was playful and ironic: "Got lost in the electoral campaign? ORIENTATE YOURSELF!". Through the flow created by e-mailing the personal among the users, started online processes of comparison among participants who discuss the results, the pertinence of the questions, not foreseen proximities and distances. For these reasons, the experience differs clearly from the market-services of voter/party profiling that started to spread in Italy since 2006 (Bentivegna, 2006).
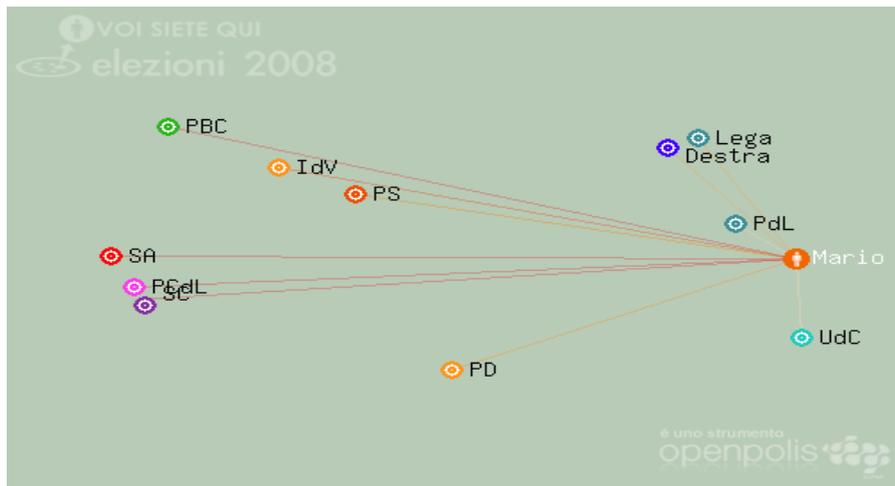
Figure 1. Party positioning of Mario, user of the test www.voisietequi.it, for the 2008 Italian general elections.

Voisietequi unleashed a very intense debate on the Internet, on its-own website and in the wider Italian blogsphere, in the forums, in the mailing lists or through single emails. The opportunity offered by Voisietequi to send one's personal graph by email (with the subject: "Io sono qui", [I am here]) or to post it on one's own blog created a triggering effect: other citizens did the test and sent their graph to friends and acquaintances. The graphs comparison was often the reason for stimulating political informal debates. On the one hand, the test tried to activate the relational function using the instruments of forwarding; on the other hand Voisietequi promoters aimed also at providing a service of information for the citizens and forcing somehow the parties to express an opinion on the same issues on which citizens are usually called to respond. The participatory elaboration of the questionnaire thus aimed at selecting the more relevant issues of the electoral campaign, having in mind an average voter, not very well informed. By the project side there was the plain awareness that selecting only 25 questions would inevitably imply a simplification, which nevertheless could be different from the simplification of the television because of the opportunities of free interaction and debate.

What kind of influence this 'game' may have on real politics, other than to discuss the use of the poll as a political instrument and to build a debate flow, mainly among friends? Analyzing the discussions triggered by Voisietequi on forums, mailing lists and blogs, a variety of uses emerges. This game seems to stimulate the breaking down of cognitive routines as far as political opinions are concerned, even though it does not influence directly the decision of vote. Many users appreciated the test but declared they would not decide to vote according to its result: that was a game and they have their own opinions. By encouraging the users to debate not only on their profile but also on the used tool and its limits, Voisietequi deconstructed in a easy-going way a typical form of contemporary politics, the poll, which usually remains armoured in the abstract public sphere of the media. In the process of defining the 2008 edition, it emerged also a further interesting dynamic related to the reactions of the party system. According to the

president of the association DEPP, the parties, when responding to the questions, "accepted somehow the simplification of the game, and accepted to position themselves, something that is not granted especially in Italy where politicians seldom accept "actual" questions, not previously agreed with journalists; moreover traditional talk shows permit ambiguous answers. [...] In this case, the simplification constrained the party to position itself on a very clear scale, ranging from strongly in favour to strongly against" (Bentivegna, 2006). This simplification is the same to which citizens who respond to opinion polls are constrained and used. Out of twelve parties, nine accepted immediately to reply, three refused (La Destra, the centre party UDC and Il Partito Democratico).

In this experience there were also some limits, if the promoters' aims and the obtained results are compared. In fact, only few citizens who did the game-test got involved in the interaction of the projects *Voisietequi* and *OpenPolis*; the dialogic processes triggered by the test included only an elite; the cooperative process of creating the informative database had many practical problems in terms of quantity, continuity and quality of the contributions. For these reasons the promoters are trying to establish new forms of cooperation with other associations, like for example territorial organizations, which have the appropriate informative and organizational resources and can also favour the development of the project offline.

6 Conclusion: The persisting gap between virtual sphere and mass general public sphere

Since the '90s the Internet has become in Italy, especially for the new social movements and groups of self-organized citizens, at local, national and supranational level, a strategic instrument to spread out alternative information, to challenge the mass media agenda, to self-coordinate and build new relationships and identities. The main research findings about Italy show that communication and organization styles remain more shaped by cultural and organizational routes of the different groups and by the traits of the communicational and political context than by the new media opportunities. Moreover, it is not clear if the Internet can attract political participation of citizens who are not already active. According to a detailed survey (Cellini *et al.*, 2007) on the citizens involved in an Italian relevant institutional deliberative e-experience, there is a strong direct relation between being politically active and the use of Internet (over 90% of the participants were connected and over 70% daily). It is also well known that the contrary is not true: being online doesn't mean to engage in social and political participation.

The development of online participation contributed to shape a virtual public sphere, in a problematic relation/tension with the offline general public sphere,

coping with the dominant logic of techno-politics. Relevant mobilizations of socially disadvantaged or conflictual subjectivities mobilized by means of the Internet may disappear in the off-Internet media realm, if there aren't resources, external to the Internet, to enter the general public sphere. Nevertheless, some niches of new practices aiming to deconstruct the dominant logic of techno-politics have been identified as interesting cases in terms of building discursive relationships among the citizens-participants, although some limits under a participatory perspective emerged. The synergy of the two analysed online projects, OpenPolis and *VoiSietequi*, represents an attempt of: a) strengthening the democratic control by the citizens on the political representatives, administrators and parties, reversing the channelling potential enabled by the ICTs in a new form of shared production of contents, accredited by official sources, but also allowing forms of communitarian lobbying based on political detailed maps built up by the citizens themselves; b) reversing the direction of the simplification's pressure that the poll usually exercises on the citizens; c) breaking up the verticality and the uni-directionality of the poll's mechanism and promoting the creation of relationships among the respondents, the participatory elaboration of the questionnaire, and the discussion of the results. Doing this, the two projects aim at favouring a public and shared disclosure of the techno-politics functioning, putting them at citizens' disposal. However, these projects addressed its criticism to the functioning of techno-politics, up to now, mainly internally to the political agenda shaped by the institutional actors, highlighting its inner contradictions and short-circuits (and thus it was not concerned with the creation of dedicated spaces for the emergence of an alternative agenda of the participating citizens, even tough this could occur as an effect of the free interactions among the participants). The agenda power held by the mainstream media (i.e. televisions and national newspapers) appears again unchallenged; it is threatened only under very extraordinary circumstances, and it seems to require a sort of isomorphic spectacular strategy. This remains today the crucial problem for the emersion of citizens' participation from the virtual sphere towards the general public sphere.

The "Internet-based" virtual public sphere may be conceived as a third dimension of a higher differentiated public sphere, along with the "media-based" abstract public sphere, and with the face-to-face public sphere (Rasmussen, 2007, p.4). This process of stratification of the public sphere is, however, very problematic. "Due to the proliferation of personal media among individuals, they are used mostly as channels for citizens activity in the civil sphere and in everyday life. The heterogeneity of Internet communication stands in a dynamic relationship with the homogeneity of the mainstream mass media" (*ivi*, p.14), as the high fragmentation of the virtual sphere seems to coincide with a strong homologation of the mass public sphere.

In this context of fragmentation and densification of the virtual sphere, to which highly asymmetric actors contribute and where the informational overload

increases, some problems become even more apparent and urgent: the online visibility of the weaker actors and thus their opportunity of networking and mobilizing, and the ability to influence the mass public sphere's agenda. The problematic nature of the relationship between mass media system and virtual sphere seems again to be one of the main constrains to the empowerment of the citizens role, by means of the new media, in the production and reshaping of the public sphere according to the principles of true openness, inclusiveness and deliberation. The Italian context, because of its peculiarities – the highly concentrated media system and its ties with the political institutional powers, the unstable political party system, the variety and density of participative initiatives by the citizens, who actively recur to the new media, and the increasing attention of the political institutions towards e-democracy tools – could be a terrain worth special attention in the next years.

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