



Matteo Cernison

Social Media Activism

Water as a Common Good

Social Media Activism

Protest and Social Movements

Recent years have seen an explosion of protest movements around the world, and academic theories are racing to catch up with them. This series aims to further our understanding of the origins, dealings, decisions, and outcomes of social movements by fostering dialogue among many traditions of thought, across European nations and across continents. All theoretical perspectives are welcome. Books in the series typically combine theory with empirical research, dealing with various types of mobilization, from neighborhood groups to revolutions. We especially welcome work that synthesizes or compares different approaches to social movements, such as cultural and structural traditions, micro- and macro-social, economic and ideal, or qualitative and quantitative. Books in the series will be published in English. One goal is to encourage non-native speakers to introduce their work to Anglophone audiences. Another is to maximize accessibility: all books will be available in open access within a year after printed publication.

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Matteo Cernison

Amsterdam University Press

Cover photo: During the Italian campaign against water privatization, social media provided a digital backbone to hundreds of everyday, well known forms of off-line activism. On this table, electoral symbols created and selected online coexist with traditional leaflets, posters, and jugs of free fresh water.

Photo: Luca Faenzi

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Typesetting: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6298 006 8

e-ISBN 978 90 4852 919 3 (pdf)

DOI 10.5117/9789462980068

NUR 697

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In memory of Berta Cáceres

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Acknowledgements

This book is the result of eight years of life, research, and writing. During this time, I broke three cars (once while trying to reach and interview an activist), relocated to ten different houses and three different countries, changed methodological approach and research questions, and met about 200 water activists in different parts of Italy and Europe. First, I would like to thank every one of them: you opened the doors of your assemblies, organizations, and houses, spending precious hours with me while you were fighting and winning one of the most important political battles of your and our lives. Above all, I am particularly grateful to the *Segreteria Operativa* of the Forum: in 2011, I discovered at the Rialto Sant'Ambrogio an incredible laboratory of ideas, observing exceptional levels of professionalism and dedication to a cause. Remixing the words of one of the members of this group, I can say '*Quelle settimane con Luca seduto accanto a Nino furono belle*'. Furthermore, special thanks go to the activists and friends who shared with me the experience of Marseille, and, in particular, to two activists from Genoa, who decided to reveal to me very important news during a dinner on the hills that surround the city.

My second thought goes to Bretz'Selle, a Strasbourg-based community of political thinkers, fellows of Anaxagore, artists, makers, and feminists, which strongly supported the production of this book. Bretz'Selle, thank you for the countless tools that you gave me in these last two years: you increased my level of self-confidence, and showed me new forms of learning and teaching.

I am grateful to the European University Institute and to the academic community of COSMOS, the assorted bunch of social movement scholars that Donatella della Porta gathered together in Florence. Within this group, I dedicate a special place to my dear friend Alice Mattoni, to Riccardo Emilio Chesta, and to Lars Erik Berntzen, but also to Marion, Frank, Caterina, Pietro, Matteo, Markos, Massimiliano, Chiara, Salvatore, Helge, and Lorenzo (all of them). Furthermore, I would like to thank those people who contributed to my professional development during these years: Federico Da Rold, Chiara Cassese, Mario Diani, Claudia Padovani, Francesca Forno, Alexandra Segerberg, Paola Migliorati, Katarzyna and Kajtek Gracz, Adriana Bessa, Jonathan Bright, Letizia Vettor, Letizia Cassarà, Ludovic Chevalier, Valentin Reinhard, Sacha Pelletier, Estelle Schmitt, Justin Timmel, Robin Faivre. Thank you for having encouraged my steps, for having shared with me your invaluable technical expertise, and for having discussed with me why we research, experiment, and teach.

I am particularly grateful to the co-editors of this series, James Jasper and Jan Willem Duyvendak, who contributed to this book with their suggestions and their informal support, and to Vanessa de Brueger and Marina Jongkind for their persistent help.

A final thought goes to the members of my family. I am grateful to my parents, Gianna and Paolo, who gave up several holydays in order to sustain my work, and to Alessandro, who kept my curiosity about the world alive. A more than special thanks goes to my two dearest loves, Natalia Allega and Anna Cernison Allega: with energy and determination, they permitted me to dedicate a considerable amount of time to this book, in a phase that I should (or I would) have devoted only to ourselves. Anna, Natalia, I am sorry, thank you, and I hope we played enough. *Os quiero mucho. Mucho mucho!*

List of Abbreviations

15-M	<i>Movimiento 15-M</i> (Spanish movement that emerged in 2011)
AATO	<i>Autorità d'Ambito Territoriale Ottimale</i> (Optimized Territorial District Authority, a local authority on public services, including water)
ADUSBEF	<i>Associazione Difesa Utenti Servizi Bancari e Finanziari</i> (Users Association Defense Banking and Financial Services, an Italian consumer association)
AIDA	Attention, Interest, Desire, Action (acronym indicating a marketing model)
AMREF	African Medical and Research Foundation
ARCI	<i>Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana</i> (Italian Recreational and Cultural Association)
ATTAC	<i>Association pour la Taxation des Transactions financières et pour l'Action Citoyenne</i> (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions and Citizen Action)
CEVI	<i>Centro di Volontariato Internazionale</i> (International Volunteering Centre, an Italian NGO)
CGIL	<i>Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro</i> (Italian General Confederation of Labour)
FIMA	<i>Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua</i> (Italian Forum of Water Movements)
G20	Group of Twenty (governmental forum of the world's major economies)
HTML	Hypertext markup language
ICT/ICTS	Information and communication technology/technologies
ICWSM	International Conference on Weblogs and Social Media
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PD	<i>Partito Democratico</i> (Italian Democratic Party)
RAI	<i>Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana S.p.A.</i> , the Italian public broadcasting service
WWF	World Wildlife Fund

Introduction

In 2011, while the Arab Spring was rapidly changing the political scenery of the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea and the *Indignados* were beginning to occupy the Spanish squares with the help of tents and innovative social media communication tactics, Italian society faced a different, yet linked, form of mobilization. Since the previous year, a broad and heterogeneous coalition of social movement organizations, gathered in the framework of the *Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua* (Italian Forum of Water Movements), had been promoting a referendum campaign against the privatization of water services, a popular issue in Italy for over a decade.

Radical left activists, environmentalists, ecclesiastics, and members of leftist parties extensively publicized the idea of considering water as part of the commons, convincing apolitical and informal groups of citizens – football fans, designers, cyclists, or gastronomic associations – to support their struggle, finally persuading about 25,000,000 Italian citizens to vote. In order to contact the youngest segment of the population and bypass the filter of the mainstream media, these relatively traditional networks of activists decided – for the first time in the country – to rely in a heavy way on social media (and, in particular, on Facebook) to spread their political messages to a wider population. Some hundreds of veteran activists and thousands of people embarking on their first political experience organized events that spread both online and offline, adapting to a new digital environment their previous tactics of communication and organization, or importing in the campaign their everyday experience of using the Net.

Due to the numerous and different actors participating in the campaign, to the strategy of loose coordination that the Forum adopted, and to the different possibilities of use that the digital environments permit, divergent tactics and combinations of online/offline actions emerged. For instance, activists succeeded in distributing petitions to millions of citizens, presenting them as placeless Facebook events. Famous singers organized free concerts for everyone who could prove that they had voted by showing a validated electoral certificate; similarly, a disperse ‘community’ of bartenders, chefs and sport instructors coalesced online to follow this example, offering breakfasts, pizzas or yoga lessons to the voters. Activists started to share their local initiatives (human chains on riverbanks, leaflets distribution on the beaches, bicycle rides with referendum flags) in a new, interactive section of the central website of the campaign, giving in this way

national visibility to their ideas, and promoting mechanisms of imitation and diffusion of symbols in other local contexts. Associations supported informal car-sharing services, combining email, telephone and social media use to offer free rides to the elder voters. Well-organized communities of activists decided in closed Facebook groups to invade with messages the comment spaces of the main online newspapers, while average social media users manifested their support for the issue, adding one of the numerous referendum badges in their photo profiles.

In May and June 2011, these heterogeneous, pervasive initiatives of communication slowly colonized the entire Italian online sphere, leading the referendum supporters to a sound victory on 13 June 2011. Together with this political achievement, the water activists obtained a complete communication success. Initially reluctant, some of the main Italian newspapers became active players in the campaign: for more than a month, these media hosted in their websites special sections that listed numerous local initiatives that the referendum supporters were organizing, while their cartoonists created symbols and images that the activists contributed to share online. Furthermore, according to the Facebook Memology – the official Facebook list of the most current issues on users' personal statuses (Bianchini 2011) – the two Latin words *referendum* and *quorum* were the most adopted on the Italian Facebook space in 2011. Finally, this powerful wave of communication started to become visible, in a distorted and adapted form, even in the programmes of the national television services: as one of the Forum key activists declared, the campaign 'blew up the cathode ray tube' (Munafò 2011).

Web and social media political campaigns are complex communication phenomena, in particular, when a cluster of connected social movement actors contributes to their development. Following the coordinated or semi-spontaneous actions of numerous organizations and activists, these campaigns tend to fragment in separated propaganda initiatives, which take place in real-life tangible places, in online environments, or in a combination of both. In this book, I describe in detail the intricate set of creative and sometimes divergent communication tactics that activists elaborated during the Italian referendum campaign on water. Through the description of this single (yet evolving and multifaceted) case, I present how numerous practices of activism and campaigning entered in relationship with the use of digital technologies, of social media, and, in particular, of Facebook. This book explores in detail the link between the referendum campaign on water and the online communication that supported along the following three lines.

First, it aims at exploring how the decisions to create online platforms of interaction and to cooperate on Facebook influenced the campaign in

its entirety, contributing to changing the experience of being an activist, and fostering the adoption of different forms of internal organization and action. Due to the relative autonomy of the activists and of their groups, the case of the Italian referendum on water property permits me to analyse a wide set of online-aided (or, in some cases, online-based) forms of activism in a moment of intense evolution. Of course, some of the disparate, creative and diffuse activists' strategies of communication that I described in the previous paragraphs were part of the protest repertoire of movements since well before the creation of the web and of the social networking sites. Nonetheless, the use of social media interacted with these previous practices in interesting ways, and gave to expert activists as well as newly arrived sympathizers a different space in which they could mobilize, experiment with new ideas, and adapt old behaviours to a new environment.

Due to the high level of variation that I observed, the book does not aim at presenting to the reader a well-defined 'Facebook effect' on activism and campaigning, even though I claim that social media and other forms of digital communication visibly influence activists' practices. As recurrently happens in media studies, scholars tend to contrast optimistic and pessimistic views on how new forms of communication can influence participation. In this case, researchers have suggested that digital media 'encourage new protest dynamics online', increasing the ability to create fast, telegraphic actions (Earl and Kimport 2011: 204), while other authors have proposed that social media can open the way to dangerous surrogates of activism (Morozov 2011, cited in Marichal 2012a: 10). However, in my research I had the opportunity to observe the contemporaneous emergence of both new forms of 'digitally empowered' activism, and of less engaged, short-term practices of participation. In some cases, these two apparently divergent phenomena combine, creating complex digital structures that coordinate the small local efforts of a disperse population of less engaged activists.

This research also provides a detailed presentation on how online participation and social media use have changed for many people 'what it feels like to be an activist' (Marichal 2012a: 112). My answer to this question is necessarily plural: in an environment that includes social media, the experience of being an activist changes in part following the choices and the attributes of the activists. This book concentrates its attention on the characteristics of the campaign that seem to interact most with the evolution of the media sphere: in particular, questions regarding the level of centralization of the communication efforts, the combination of digital and physical spaces, and the role of perceptions in determining how activists adopt social media recur in the book.

Second, this research aims at helping other scholars who want to investigate large-scale digital campaigns, presenting a set of methods and theoretical approaches that can be useful in describing large flows of digital communication (with a particular focus on the use of Facebook and on the traditional web). To a certain extent, online interactions are human phenomena that share numerous traits with their previous non-digital counterparts: for instance, at first activists tend to use Facebook to spread virtual leaflets, to invite people to their offline events, to distribute press releases to their online audience instead of to journalists or newspapers. However, the interaction between online and offline plans slowly permits the emergence of new and sometimes unexpected phenomena, which are very difficult to analyse when following standard methods of research. Diana Owen, in her description of how new media are contributing to modify the form of political campaigns, indicates that research should renovate its toolset, in order to analyse in detail this evolution:

Much of the existing scholarship has employed well-worn theoretical frameworks that are not entirely appropriate for the new media age and have relied on orthodox methodological approaches, such as survey research and content analysis. In order to track new developments and voters' use of campaign media innovations, theories [...] should be defined or recast. Creative research methodologies [...] should be employed. (Owen 2014: 832)

Luckily, during the last 20 years scholars have extensively analysed online interactions and their interplay with the 'real' world. In several independent debates that emerged at the confluence between sociology, media studies, and computer science, researchers have adapted traditional methods of investigation to this new environment, arriving in some cases at proposing epistemological turns to better conceive the digital as a space of interaction. In this research, I widely discuss, combine and connect these approaches, with a particular attention to the ethnographies of digital environments, to versions of social network analysis centred on the online spheres, and to the theoretical discussion on the boundaries between virtual and 'real' spaces. The reader can adopt this book, therefore, as an introduction to these debates, as a sort of applied handbook on the methods and on the theories that discuss how researchers can observe distributed online phenomena.

This research combines two main approaches. On the one hand, I observe numerous online 'traces of communication' (for example, networks between sites, or sets of Facebook notifications) as a digital source of data, which

I adopt to analyse the diffuse mobilizations that preceded the vote. On the other hand, I describe how activists were interacting on and with the web. This second approach – mainly based on interviews and participant observation in offline and online contexts – permits me to understand how actors and organizations have differently adopted digital technologies, and under which conditions the use of social media or collaborative websites have permitted an evolution of activists' practices.

Third, readers can approach this text by considering it as a detailed description of a significant political event. In particular, the referendum campaign contributed (in part in an unintentional way) to modify the equilibrium of Italian party politics, destabilizing the right-wing coalition that was governing the country. Furthermore, the Italian referendum is part of a larger worldwide effort to contrast neoliberal politics on the issue of water property: the Italian experience is deeply connected with struggles on water in Latin America, while similar campaigns appeared in the last ten years in numerous European countries, in the European institutions, and at the level of the United Nations. Analysing the Italian campaigns in support of the water referendum, this book traces the emergence, the evolution, and the outcomes of one of the most successful social movement actions in recent Italian political history. The online creativity of the water coalition and its deep penetration in the country largely derived from the ten-year-long effort of a nucleus of activists engaged on this issue at the local, national, and international levels. Therefore, one of the goals of the book is to present the history of this mobilization, maintaining a focus on the variegated online production of the activists, and on how the intense referendum campaign influenced through time the structure of the Italian Forum of Water Movements.

Case Study: the Italian referendum campaign against water privatization

Even though the Italian referendum campaign gave life in 2011 to a spectacular explosion of web communication, it had emerged two years before as a traditional, offline political phenomenon. In November 2009, the cabinet led by Silvio Berlusconi and the large centre-right majority that was supporting it in the parliament introduced a crucial modification to the Italian legislation on water management. Thanks to an article of the so-called *Decreto Ronchi* (decree 135/09), the government and the parliament permitted a very strong presence of private actors in the water distribution and sewage

systems, ending the previous 'in-house', mainly public management of the resource as of 31 December 2011.

This action encountered the opposition of a very large network of social movement actors, mainly represented by the umbrella organization *Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua* (Italian Forum of Water Movements, hereafter FIMA), which quickly reacted to this privatization attempt. This network, which had mobilized two years before to promote a citizens' initiative for public water, chose to oppose the law by using the ambitious tool of direct democracy: a call for two referendums, which aimed at abrogating the newly introduced article, and some previous norms that were permitting the participation of private actors to control the management of water. The network emerged from the collaboration between national organizations of the left and independent local water committees. During this campaign, the FIMA infrastructure coordinated (in a very loose way) the efforts of highly different political organizations. Environmentalists, trade unions of public service workers, leftist and Catholic cultural associations, organizations linked to the Social Forum experiences, activists of competing political parties are only some of the groups that successfully collaborated during the referendum struggle.

In spring 2010, FIMA gave life to a first wave of mobilization, promoting an extensive collection of signatures, a step that is legally required in Italy to ask for a referendum. Relying on very 'mundane tools' (Nielsen 2011) of digital and face-to-face communication, such as national mailing lists, blogs, leafleting, and debates, the referendum promoters succeeded in gathering about 1,500,000 signatures in two months. In particular, the presence of the water activists in the entire country and their well-designed strategy of coordination between centre and periphery contribute to explain the success of this first phase of mobilization.

One year later, in spring 2011, FIMA designed the referendum campaign that preceded the vote relying on a highly different communication strategy. Trying to enter into contact in a very short time with the majority of the Italian population, the activists gave life to mashup sites that combined locally produced content, they connected their physical actions in online spaces, and they started to adopt Facebook as their main platform of interaction and communication. In May 2011, the referendum proposers reached a very high level of visibility on social media. On the one hand, this new visibility encouraged the emergence of spontaneous grassroots groups, which supported in creative ways the campaign in its very last phases; on the other hand, it attracted the attention of other media, which started to consider the referendum as a newsworthy political event.

The extensive use of social media – together with the fact of entering into a phase of intense campaigning – influenced the practices of communication and to a certain extent the models of internal organization of the referendum supporters. For instance, the very small office that coordinated the work of the numerous independent FIMA actors increased its relevance, but at the same time succeeded in elaborating a strategy of decentralized digital communication. Furthermore, several professionals (fundraisers, graphics and web specialists) entered into relationships with the campaign organizers and sometimes the solutions that these actors proposed influenced the interactions between the activists, organizations, and centres of coordination of the campaign. Social media campaigning seemed to require, on the one hand, a stronger coordination of the activists' actions, and, on the other hand, a contemporaneous decentralization of the communication efforts.

Thanks to this successful campaign, on 12 and 13 June 2011 about 57 per cent of the Italian citizens participated in the referendums, voting in about 95 per cent of the cases in favour of the two proposals of FIMA.¹ After sixteen years of failed referendum attempts, for the first time in the Italian history a committee of proposers exclusively made of social movement actors succeeded in winning the vote.

Connected Activism: loose interactions on social media and their possible effects on campaigning

In studying the evolution of web communication during a referendum campaign, I situate my work within the very broad and 'fashionable' discussion regarding the relationship between digital technologies on the one hand, and activism, campaigning and political behaviour on the other. Nevertheless, the analysis of similar relationships can follow several divergent paths: the use of the term 'relationship' permits the retention of a certain level of theoretical ambiguity because it does not oblige the author to declare which one of the two elements (digital media or campaigning) is influencing the other.

¹ Together with the referendums on water privatization, the voters approved two other motions on the same day: the first one opposed the reintroduction of nuclear power in Italy, while the second granted a special prerogative to Italian ministers that served to decelerate legal actions against them while they held office.

In general, researchers tend to adopt, at least in the years that immediately follow a media innovation, a more restrict and clear focus: they try to observe how the newly introduced media is influencing society, and, in particular, how it affects the way people mobilize. This framework of research, implicitly linked with technological deterministic assumptions, periodically tends to generate a debate between optimistic and pessimistic visions.²

For what concerns the effect of social media on the ability to mobilize, numerous authors see more risks than opportunities arising from these new forms of communication. In particular, two different kinds of criticism emerged: first, regarding issues of privacy and control of the users (Andrews 2012; Trottier 2012; Morozov 2011; Fuchs 2011); second, regarding the possibility of substituting real-world activism with less efficient, short-term online surrogates (Morozov 2011). In contrast with this view, other scholars have suggested that social media could empower political communities (Effing *et al.* 2012; Tufekci and Wilson 2012; Howard and Hussain 2011 for instance, supporting new forms of online protest, or quickly increasing the number of mobilized people (Earl and Kimport 2011).³ Furthermore, numerous studies that analysed the international wave of mobilization of 2011, and, in particular, the Arab Spring, the Spanish 15-M, and Occupy, implicitly adopted a positive view on social media use in activism.

While the main research questions in this field still regard the possible positive or negative impact of technologies on political activities, and the connected idea that digital and social media promote some models of activism instead of others, a growing number of scholars are framing the discussion on the topic in different ways, following at least three models. First, some scholars increasingly assume a neutral point of view on the issue, observing 'what kind of activism [social media] encourage' and how these media change 'what it feels like to be an activist' (Marichal 2012a: 111). Second, other authors introduce elements of complexity within the previously presented theoretical model, suggesting that the digital technologies have different and sometimes contrasting effects on different kinds of organizations, or models of activism (e.g. Garrett 2006; Diani 2000; Mercea 2013). Third, a growing number of scholars is paying less attention to the 'classical' research questions on the effects of social

2 Roughly simplifying a complex debate on science and society, I can say that a technological deterministic hypothesis states that a new technology tends to produce a well-determined effect on society, because of its intrinsic features: in this approach, scholars consider less relevant the active role that people play while they adopt technological innovations.

3 See Tufekci (2017) for the negative aspects of this rapid growth.

media on activism, focusing instead on what people do with the web (e.g. Hine 2000; Pickerill 2003; Mattoni 2012; Gillan *et al.* 2008), and on the coexistence of different models of online action and communication (e.g. Bennett and Segerberg 2012b). In this last approach, researchers investigate how activists elaborate different strategies of communication, adapting digital tools to their purposes. Therefore, they invert in their analyses the terms of the relationship between technologies and activism, observing how different kinds of activism can differently shape the experience of using the web, social media, and other online tools. In this view, scholars often describe how social movement organizations with different communication cultures tend to produce different types of content and strategies in the new media environments, replying on the web space and in their use of social media their previous political characteristics (Kavada 2012).

In this book, I combine some of these partially contrasting perspectives on how researchers should study digital activism and campaigning. To a certain extent, I suggest that social media can have some effects on the ability of people to mobilize, introducing a new, in part placeless, environment of interaction. However, I show throughout the chapters how the characteristics of the different organizations involved in the water referendum played a crucial role in mediating a possible effect of digital communication and social media. These media offered very different kinds of opportunities, for instance, to the semi-professional team coordinating the campaign, to the water committees, to the isolated sympathizers, and to the numerous grassroots groups that engaged during the last months of mobilization.

Moreover, I follow the idea that organizations with different political cultures can adopt social media in divergent ways, in particular, because most social media environments permit the adaptation (at least in part) of individual experience of use. In particular, I show how the activists' perceptions of online spaces can influence their actions on these media. However, a similar perspective – centred on the actors and on their practices – implies a risk: research can become a classification of the always-divergent uses of the online platforms, which seem to depend in an exclusive way from the different cultural characteristics of the organizations that adopt them. To avoid this limit, I try to individuate in the variety of uses some recurrent models and strategies that appear particularly successful, showing the ways in which social media seem to facilitate the emergence of different models of activism, at least for some kinds of political organizations.

Methods to Investigate Large-Scale Campaigns: a challenging object of study

Political campaigns are complex forms of communication and participation: while in most cases a central organization coordinates them, they are increasingly assuming decentralized forms; contemporaneous events occur in numerous separated places, requiring the work of independent groups of activists. Furthermore, the use of different methods of digital communication to connect the activists and their public augmented this complexity. For instance, campaigners adopt social media spaces to interact among themselves (giving life to online-only relations), they use the web to contact large communities of sympathizers (creating forms of online-only propaganda), and they connect on different digital platforms to organize their local or national actions (supporting interactions that are both online and offline). To analyse these phenomena, scholars should experiment with new methodological solutions, which combine previous existent methods and adapt them to the investigation of online interactions (Owen 2014). At the same time, researchers should extend the experimentation to the epistemological level (see Rogers 2004), proposing different ways to conceive the digital spaces as objects of study, and the social phenomena that partially happen online.

In this book, I trace a picture of the Italian referendum on water property relying on a combination of very different methods, which help me to capture (from divergent points of view) how the campaign developed. In particular, the research relies on a form of social network analysis of the web, on the ethnographic observation of the interplay between digital and offline spaces, and on 42 interviews with the activists. Furthermore, I observed how the campaign grew on Facebook, relying on a daily analysis of the notifications that I received from about 200 water groups and activists. Finally, I wrote a software program in Python to detect the presence or absence of certain keywords in the sites that were supporting the campaign. In particular, this book devotes particular attention to two of the previously presented methods, social network analysis and the ethnography of digital connections, aiming at contributing to a further development of these approaches.

Due to the relational nature of most digital media, social network analysis is one of the most applied methods that researchers adopt to observe the web, social media, and online phenomena. Numerous authors have represented as networks the online interactions between chat users, blogs, sites, or personal social media accounts (e.g. Park and Thelwall 2003; Bruns 2007; Rogers and Ben-David 2008; Bennett and Segerberg 2012a). In most cases, these

researchers mainly conceived the collected online data, and the network that they traced, as a source of information that is useful to understand the characteristics of an offline event. For instance, Caiani and Wagemann (2009) traced the connections between websites of the Italian and German extreme right, aiming at depicting the structure of movements that were particularly difficult to approach offline. However, in some cases social network analysis has helped to investigate large-scale digital phenomena *per se*, observing them as different, independent networks of communication that were mainly happening on the web. In this book, I focus, in particular, on this second approach: tracing a network among the sites that supported the 2011 referendum campaign. I aim at obtaining a bird's-eye view of how the mobilization was structured on the web. In particular, I consider a series of broad online 'maps' of the water campaign – focused on the traditional web instead of on the social media environment – as a preliminary guide to understand the referendum struggle. In order to identify the intricate relationships that happened on social media during the campaign, I mainly rely on the use of qualitative methods, and, in particular, the ethnographic approach.

Ethnographic research is increasingly observing the interplay between online and offline phenomena (Hine 2008).⁴ According to Gabriella Coleman, digital media are an interesting object for ethnographic research, due to their 'diversity and pervasiveness' in our society (2010: 488). Moreover, mainly starting from the offline/online dichotomy, she interestingly distinguishes different research 'paths' in ethnography. According to her, some works investigate how cultural identities are remade with digital media, others observe 'practices, subjects, modes of communication, and groups entirely dependent on digital technologies for their existence' (*ibid.*: 492), and a third group investigates 'the lived experiences of digital media, discussing the conditions in which they are made, altered, and deployed' (*ibid.*: 495). In my initial plan of research, I mainly aimed at following the third path that Coleman indicates: I wanted to explore how activists used computers, produced social media content, and gave life to the online 'public water' sphere. However, events shifted my attention to the first model of ethnography that Coleman describes: above all, I explored how water activism changed due to the use of social media and other forms of digital communication.

To conclude, a relevant aim of my research has been to test and combine different methodological and scientific traditions that tend to follow independent paths of development. By mixing them, I suggest that it is

4 See Coleman (2010) for a review.

possible to achieve a better understanding of the dynamics that characterize large-scale phenomena – such as campaigns – that are happening both online and offline. In particular, by combining forms of social network analysis of the web, digital ethnography, and a focus on media practices (see Mattoni 2012), I achieved my goal of observing how social movement actors interact on, interact with, and create digital communication in a phase of intense campaigning.

Structure of the Book

Social media campaigning, and every social phenomenon that happens in part on a digital environment, is an object of study that is difficult to delimit and conceive. In some cases, researchers tend to oversimplify the interplay between online and offline relationships, most of all at the theoretical level, mixing causes, effects, and symptoms of a semi-digital mobilization. The aim of the first chapter, therefore, is to present the theoretical approaches that constitute the basis of my research in order to present to the reader the ways in which I conceive the digital environments that I observed. At the end of the chapter, I introduce the research dimensions that emerged from my data, and the research questions that I decided to investigate.

The second chapter is an overview of a set of methods that can help to investigate diffused, loosely connected web phenomena, as the Italian referendum campaign on water property surely was. Even though I describe in detail, at the end of the chapter, the methodology that I have adopted in this research, the readers can approach this part of the book in a different way, considering it as an independent introduction to some creative techniques of analysis of web and social media-related phenomena. The first sections of the chapter discuss the main problems that research centred both online and offline can face. Then, I present four methodological approaches that inspired my research: two of them are centred on the idea of the network and on the online forms of social network analysis, while the remaining two are forms of ethnographic research dedicated to the analysis of digital phenomena. Finally, the last section of the chapter describes the combined methods that I adopted in the book.

I discuss in Chapter 3 – the less ‘digital’ of the book – the issue of water privatization in Italy, the emergence of FIMA, and the evolution through time of the Italian referendum campaign. In particular, I present the 2011 campaign as part of broader conflicts, on different scales. First, the chapter describes how the Italian case is part of a global opposition movement.

This global network promotes the idea of considering water as part of the commons or as a human right, opposing in this way to a market-oriented view that sees water as an asset with an economic value. Second, the chapter presents the rise of an Italian water coalition in the years that preceded the 2011 referendum campaign under analysis. Finally, I describe the main phases of the referendum mobilizations, and the relationships that the water referendum committee established with other political actors, and with the media.

The fourth chapter observes the mobilization as a network. Maintaining a very broad point of view, it presents the results of a social network analysis of 441 websites that supported the referendum struggle while maintaining a close relationship with FIMA. Blogs of committees, sites of the main organizations, individual activists, but also political parties and news hubs are part of this relational representation of the web. In particular, I concentrate attention in this chapter on the centralization/ decentralization of the communication efforts, on the role of the local water committees, and on the different characteristics of the main sites that acted as communication hubs during the campaign. Finally, using a specially created software program, I explore the presence or absence of different keywords in two areas of the network, in order to understand how communication circulates within this portion of the web. For readers who are particularly interested in the digital versions of social network analysis, the entire chapter can constitute an introduction to this family of methods.

I adopt a more detailed focus on single activities, initiatives and patterns of communication in Chapter 5, where I observe in detail how activists evolved their communication strategies during the campaign. First of all, I present how the Italian water activists passed from a model of online communication based on mailing lists and websites to a model that included Facebook, YouTube, and completely revised sites. I describe this evolution as a passage from an instrumental view towards digital technologies to a representation of digital spaces as complex environments. Secondly, I observe how the referendum promoters looked for new communications and technical skills during the campaign, with a particular attention on the role of the external experts who volunteered for the water coalition. Thirdly, I observe online communication as part of a broader media environment (cf. Mattoni 2012), where digital strategies interacted with content and choices that were related to television, newspapers and other media. Finally, I show how the two main websites that coordinated the campaign emerged from different social interactions, and different perspectives on digital communication.

In the sixth chapter, I focus on a single social media platform, Facebook, and I investigate the impressive wave of communication that emerged on it during the last month of the campaign. This analysis mainly derives from the very large number of water-related Facebook notifications that I received in the weeks that preceded the vote, which I listed in an ethnographic diary. The first sections of the chapter describe this experimental form of ethnography, and the ethical issues that arose as a result. In the following sections, the chapter explains how activists slowly decided to communicate on Facebook, observing the numerous patterns of communications that emerged during the campaign. In particular, I focus on the interactions that happened within an online group, on the use of images, on the circulation of viral events, and on the relationship between online communication and actions that were happening offline. Finally, I show how different ways of perceiving Facebook coexisted during the campaign, strongly influencing how activists used this platform.

I dedicate the concluding chapter of the book to discuss the different communication strategies that the activists elaborated, to evaluate the methods that I adopted, and to present my proposals for further research.

1 Models of Online-Related Activism

In a post on his blog, the press agent of the Italian Forum of Water Movements described the relationship between activism and digital communication that preceded the referendum victory of June 2011. While most news sources were depicting the electoral success and the campaign that I describe in this book as Facebook and Internet phenomena, he explained how water activists were using the online media, stressing that 'the real influences the virtual, which in turn influences the real' (Faenzi 2011). Moreover, according to him:

Behind the accounts, behind the avatars and behind the Facebook groups there are real people who become active, apart than on the web, on their job, at school, in the squares and in the streets; they talk, raise the awareness, study, inform. Social mobilization generates virtual mobilization [...]. Facebook was helpful, but without the distribution of flyers, the initiatives, the activation of the territorial committees and of the organizations supporting public water and against nuclear power, the *quorum* would have been impossible to reach. (*Ibid.*)

Digital technologies and online communication are very interesting spaces to observe in relationship with activism, but they are at the same time a particularly complex object of study. As the previous quote shows, different plans continuously interact during a campaign that widely adopts social media to communicate. Increasingly, online and offline actions intertwine: the rising relevance of social media, in particular, contributes to situate online communication in other, previously existent practices. Other dimensions, such as the different forms of online interaction, the scale of action of who communicates online, or the very different ways of using web tools, similarly complicate the observation of social processes in a digital environment. As a result of this complexity, contrasting ways of conceiving and studying online-related phenomena emerged in social research.

In this chapter, I explore in part these conflicting approaches to digital-related research, with a particular attention to the perspectives that can help to discuss the relationship between social media and campaigning. Furthermore, I present the dimensions that I adopted in my research to overcome this complexity.

Well before the advent of social media, when information and communication technologies (hereafter ICTs) – alternatively grouped using slightly different concepts, such as new media, digital technologies, computer-mediated

communication – started to become widely adopted tools of communication, social movement scholars have been very interested in understanding how these media interact with activism and with various social movement communication dynamics. Very different perspectives emerged through time, with the aim of examining, among other things, the impact of new technologies on activism, the online behaviour of social movement actors, and the interactions among online and offline forms of activism. Activists adopt various online technologies as communication tools to organize their actions or to reach broader audiences, they use ICTs to interact online, and they in some cases slowly modify their behaviours, the characteristics of their organizations, and their communication strategies.

In this work, I conceive the relationship between social movement actors and digital technologies, focusing, in particular, on three assumptions. First of all, I consider this relationship as mutual, refusing to limit my investigation neither to the classical research question ‘How does a technology affect a particular social movement property?’, nor to the opposite question, ‘How do activists adapt and shape the online technologies they use?’ Second, I consider the web (and every social media sphere) as a structure that social movement actors create in their everyday activities. Starting from a reflection on the concept of the network, and linking social movement research with part of the studies regarding Internet, I observe how the activists connect their local, online-related activities in a broader, connected environment. Third, I combine a view on digital spaces with a view on offline activities, conceiving social media campaigning as something happening in hybrid environments. Even if I do not ‘resuscitate’ the idea of virtual activism, I observe how the introduction of a particular digital environment (Facebook) modified how activists interacted with geographical distances and scales of action.

The chapter is divided in three sections. In the first section, I present a very brief literature review on the most relevant contributions that frame the relationship between social movements and ICTs: since this research touches highly different topics, more detailed literature reviews are presented in the following chapters. The second part of the chapter describes the numerous different research designs that a scholar can conceive to investigate online activism. After this presentation, I describe the core of my research design, positioning it in the previously presented spectrum of possibilities. Finally, in the third section I present my research questions and the key concepts that I apply to the exploration of social media and online communication during the Italian referendum campaign against the privatization of water.

1.1 Online-Related Activism: key concepts

In this section, I introduce a literature review dedicated to online-related activism, focusing, in particular, on three concepts that inspired the work of numerous scholars: the idea of the network, the hypotheses regarding an impact of online communication on activism, and the partially contrasting concept of a web communication that emerges and interacts with pre-existent social structures. Throughout the entire review, I enlarge the perspective to online communication and its relationship with movements, instead of only focusing on social media activism: in this way, I can guide the reader within a larger and long-lasting debate, where most of the concepts that scholars currently adopt to investigate social media emerged. The review that I propose is concise and treats online activism from a very wide perspective. More specific, short reviews on single topics treated in this book introduce Chapter 2, threatening online-related methodologies, Chapter 3, discussing the emergence of a global issue on water privatization, Chapter 4, introducing the exploration and the meaning of web networks, and Chapter 6, where I discuss Facebook and social media activism.

A broader perspective: ICTs and activism in literature

Since the end of the 1990s, various researchers have observed the web and other forms of digital communication in order to better understand or to represent the characteristics of social movements or mobilizations. Just to give some examples, researchers have studied the Chiapas Zapatista movement (Garrido and Halavais 2003; Russell 2005), environmental networks (Pickerill 2003; Van de Donk and Foederer 2001), and the global justice movement (Della Porta and Mosca 2005; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2004; Rosenkrands 2004) with these purposes in mind. More recently, scholars have initiated a new wave of contributions dedicated to this issue, observing how activism comes into contact with the most diffused, privately owned social media, such as Facebook and Twitter (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Comminos 2011; Neumayer and Raffl 2008). During the so-called Ukrainian Orange Revolution, for the first time the link between social media and activism started to attract the attention of both the academic community (Goldstein 2007; Kyj 2006) and the global media. However, the definitive impulse to explore this relationship in detail arrived in 2011. Following the almost contemporaneous emergence of the Arab Spring, of the Spanish 15-M (better known as the *Indignados*), and of the #Occupy mobilizations, newspapers and scholars (e.g. Gaby and Caren 2012; Howard *et al.* 2011;

Micó and Casero-Ripollés 2013) started to investigate the role of Internet and social media in protests, looking for methods and concepts to explore these new environments.

The wider relation between ICTS and social movements, however, has been a mainstream topic within social movement research in the last two decades, and the contributions to this field are extremely diverse. Each author focuses on different aspects of this relationship, proposing divergent interpretations of how and if ICTS can influence activism, organization, or entire movements (see Garrett 2006; Taylor *et al.* 2001).⁵ In particular, the literature stresses that ICTS may promote individual participation in collective action and protest diffusion (e.g. Garrett 2006; Myers 2000), sometimes bypassing the role of organizations. Moreover, researchers suggested that ICTS can sustain over long periods the communication between physically dispersed communities and organizations (e.g. Diani 2000; Howard 2002; Mattoni 2008), a characteristics that can strongly influence the internal structure of movements. Online media are also observed focusing on their abilities to create new 'spaces' for protest online (e.g. Della Porta and Mosca 2005; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2004), or to help to coordinate and quickly diffuse mobilizations (e.g. Earl and Kimport 2011; Gaby and Caren 2012).

Some authors attempt to systematize these hypotheses in a common framework as regards the relationship with social movements. Garrett (2006) and Mattoni (2008), for instance, observe the role of ICTS in social movements by relating these media with three well-known categories that McAdam and colleagues (1996) identified: mobilizing structures, political opportunities, and framing processes. For instance, Garrett situates it in the first of these categories (which is most commonly represented in literature), the studies that explore whether ICTS can foster the creation of new networks or help build communities. Focusing on the possible kinds of online-related activism, Della Porta and Mosca (2005) investigate the effect of digital technologies at four levels. First, at the instrumental level, online technologies are seen as new resources for resource-poor actors. Second, at the protest level, the authors consider the possibility for protesting directly through ICTS. Third, the cognitive level refers to the hypothesized increased ability to spread information or to raise new issues. Finally, the symbolic level describes for the authors the use of ICTS as a means of creating new identities among actors.

5 See Farrell (2011) for a general review of the topic.

Online communication: networks and relational phenomena

One of the recurrent ways for observing Internet-related social phenomena, and, in particular, activism, relies on the network concept, defined in very different ways. The idea of the network is closely related in a number of ways with that of digital technologies and social media. Firstly, because of the models of communication that most ICTS rely upon, since these technologies tend to permit more direct and relational communication if compared with the broadcasting and one-to-many model of television, radio and newspapers (see Myers 1994). Secondly, as technologies, because they are based on a reticular infrastructure, made of computers, wires or connected mobile phones. Thirdly, because numerous successful platforms and projects based online have developed solutions for promoting the creation (or online replication) of connections among people or content: social media, of course, are the most efficient and widespread platforms of this kind. Following these three premises, scholars often formulate the hypothesis that the widespread interaction with these networks of communication can alter or influence the structure of a mobilization, of a network between activists and organizations, or of a campaign.

This argument has been particularly relevant in the discussion on social movements, because these social phenomena are increasingly described in relational terms. In particular, Diani's definition of social movements as 'networks of informal interactions, between a plurality of individuals, groups or associations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity' (Diani 1992: 13) stresses that a movement is always composed of relations between actors, which are partially independent and heterogeneous. Starting from similar perspectives on social movements and activism, researchers have proposed that the use of ICTS may have influenced the way in which organizations and activists connect (see Postmes and Brunsting 2002; Garrett 2006). In particular, Kelly Garrett (*ibid.*), in her review of the topic, observes that several authors (among them, Diani 2000) have explored the link between the use of ICTS and the capacity for sustaining dispersed communities of activists who are in contact with each other, an aspect perceived as crucial for transnational actions. Similar observations emerged again during the 2011 wave of mobilizations, which included the Arab Spring, the 15-M movement and Occupy. In this case, scholars have conceived of social media as being able to accelerate the spread of protests, in particular, permitting activists to share content through their interpersonal connections (e.g. Gaby and Caren 2012; Comminos 2011).

Although the link between movement networks and ICT networks is not yet clear (e.g. Wellman *et al.* 1996; Diani 2000), these technologies – and, in particular, those based on the web – are increasingly being seen as organizational structures on which the movement networks are embedded (Bennet 2004; Tarrow 2002, cited by Kavada 2003: 4). According to this perspective, the Chiapas *Zapatista* movement and the global justice movements have been seen as movements with an electronic spine (Kavada 2005: 91) swimming ‘like a fish in the Net’ (Castells 2001: 142, cited by Kavada 2003).

At the same time, various authors have explored the similar effects that online technologies might have on a broader level, focusing on social phenomena other than activism, too. In particular, Castells (1996, 2001) considers ICTs as one of the basic elements of what he calls the ‘network society’. Similarly, Rheingold (2002) explores cases where digital connections ‘enable people to act together in new ways and in situations where collective action was not possible before’ (*ibid.*: xviii).⁶

Furthermore, within this broader literature has often emerged the idea that the observation of online connections and networks can be a useful source for understanding the characteristics of who was creating these connections (e.g. Adamic and Adar 2001; Rogers 2002). More specifically, researchers have assumed that there is a link between online networks, and social phenomena. Authors have, therefore, observed on the web and social media structure the emergence of debates or conflicts between political groups (e.g. Adamic and Glance 2005; Bruns 2007; Marres and Rogers 2005),⁷ but also the online formation of national boundaries (Halavais 2000) and diaspora communities (Van den Bos 2006; Diminescu 2012). Starting from similar premises, social movement researchers have included reconstructions of online networks in their work, in particular, of networks between websites.⁸ In general, these authors tried to reconstruct how social movements actors adopt ICTs (e.g. Garrido and Halavais 2003; Bennet and Segerberg 2011), or to understand how activism has developed and appeared by looking at its online trace (e.g. Biddix and Park 2008; Caiani and Wagemann 2009).

6 See also Rheingold (2000). For a critical perspective, see Diani (2000) and Della Porta and Diani (2006: 133).

7 See Rosen *et al.* 2011 for a review.

8 See González-Bailón *et al.* 2011 for an impressive study on Twitter.

Digital technologies as a new communication infrastructure for activism

Numerous authors have perceived the diffusion of ICTS as a radical change in communication. These scholars have interpreted the increased use of emails, the possibility for sending short text messages with mobile phones, to create websites or Facebook pages as 'revolutionary' events, which might have an impact on many aspects of society, as happened in past centuries with the diffusion of the printing press (Tarrow 1998; Garner 1999) and of professional journalism. In some cases, the main focus of researchers was, first of all, on how these technologies can enable activists and organizations to reduce the costs of communication (Earl and Kimport 2011; Della Porta and Mosca 2005). Authors have stressed the fact that ICTS seem able to provide new and useful tools for diffusing content relating to the protests, or to present the activities of social movement organizations without resorting to the mainstream media and their rules, as Lipsky describes them (Lipsky 1965, cited in Della Porta and Mosca 2005: 166). In some interesting cases (e.g. Diani 2000; Mercea 2013, Garrett 2006), scholars started to develop less direct interpretations of the technological impact of online communication on activism, hypothesizing different effects on different kinds of organizations.

Increasingly, the focus is currently shifting from a view that describes ICTS as an open alternative to earlier mass media, to a view that presents the digital technologies as a part – and not necessarily open and free – of a broader media environment (Mattoni 2012). In particular, researchers have begun to observe how activists build communication strategies in a situation where online media and traditional mass media interact (e.g. Padovani 2012; Uldam and Askanius 2013) and to find evidence that the technological distinction between old and new media is becoming blurred. The following quote well describes this tendency:

Media messages are more ubiquitous, scattered and less dependent on the technological objects from which they originate. Individuals live in a 'convergence culture' following cultural and technological shifts with regard to how media messages are produced, diffused, received and then recombined again. (Jenkins 2006, cited in Mattoni 2012: 44)

At the same time, scholars are increasingly focusing their attention on the variety of models of online communication that social movement actors develop – that is to say, on how they communicate online – more than on the 'pure' technological effects of online communication on activism.

Among other things, they interestingly focused on the different strategies of online communication (Bennett and Segerberg 2012a; Mattoni 2012; Howard and Hussain 2011), or on how organizations with different cultures tend to develop different websites (Kavada 2012; Ward 2012).

Online communication as a product of society

In order to understand the relevance of digital communication for activism, it is necessary to combine these elements with another crucial factor, the role that individuals and organizations play in using these technologies. The global growth of web and social media, together with the increased quantity and relevance of their content, are hard to explain without taking into account the autonomous work of millions of independent producers, who publish digital content and in this way 'weave the web' (Berners-Lee 1999). As its inventor points out, the web is a collaborative medium, and 'more a social creation than a technical one' (*ibid.*: 123).

In order to understand this point of view, the perspective of the 'social shaping of technology' theory is particularly useful (e.g. Lenert 2004; Marvin 1989; Bijker 1995; Hine 2000). This approach states that a 'technological change takes place within society, rather than outside of it' (Lenert 2004: 240), and that the uses and interactions between people influence the form that a technology takes. While this theory focuses on how people shape technologies, the interaction between societies and technological innovation is conceived as mutual (see also Pickerill 2003: 19). I believe that the 'social shaping of technology' theory is particularly powerful when the observed technology is a distributed form of communication with low entry barriers, that is to say, a medium through which many social actors can communicate and participate. The printing press, in comparison with handwriting (Tarrow 1998), and online communication, if compared with the mass media, surely are technologies of this kind.

More specifically, the web and the main social media are tools that different kinds of actors can somehow internalize and adapt to their perceptions or intended uses. The public access to relevant or interesting content has convinced an increasing number of information seekers to 'surf' the web. Similarly, everyone with Internet access and very basic computer skills can now communicate online. Furthermore, social media further lowered the entry barriers to online communication.

At the same time, the market has also played a determining role in shaping the web (and even more the most famous social media platform). Giant corporations, more than single users, have been able to support the main

web projects, while the presence or absence of economic resources (or the capacity to attract investments) has usually been critical for determining the life or death of the most important web-based services. Thanks to the communication needs it answered, and also to the rapid changes caused by the market, the web grew quickly and almost independently from its first creators, and it became to a great extent a product of society. A clear example of this social shaping is the fact that the web structure tends to follow cultural and national borders (Halavais 2000; Enteen 2006; Diminescu 2012), and that somehow social phenomena can be observed looking at how they modify the structure of communication on different online platforms. Moreover, this focus on the web structure, described as the result of the agency of separated social publishers, is in my opinion particularly interesting to observe when the object of study is a 'segmentary, polycentric' and 'networked' social phenomenon, as Gerlach (1971: 289), among others, describes social movements or campaigns. A similar observation can reveal various aspects of both how social movement actors communicate, and of how the web is a medium embedded in society.

1.2 **Overlapping Plans: research on online phenomena and its complexity**

Recurrent research design models in the field of online activism

Due to the intricate nature of web communication, scholars have investigated online activism focusing on a large number of variables and theoretical concepts that regard the interactions between people and technologies. Within this wide variation, however, they have tended to adopt a relatively limited set of core research designs, which have differently conceived the relationship between activism and online technologies. In this section, I briefly introduce the debate that regards these contrasting structures of research, without pretending to propose a complete (and objective) review on the topic. Starting from the models presented in this preliminary introduction, I dedicate the following section to situate my investigation within this broader theoretical debate, laying in this way the foundation to present the core of my research design.

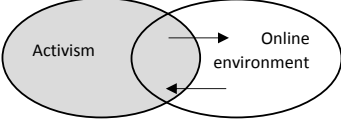
The most diffused way of observing the relationship between activism and the use of ICTS is to consider online technologies as a relatively new factor in society, and to explore how this factor is influencing activism, social movements, and organizations in numerous different aspects and

through different mechanisms (see the first model in Figure 1.1). Adopting this model, researchers follow a sort of 'classical path' that is particularly common in the investigation of technological innovations. Obviously, when a new technology emerges, the first set of questions that social scientists tend to explore regards if and how this newly introduced element modifies previously stable elements of society. This is particularly true for innovations in the field of media and communication. The radical changes that followed the introduction of the printing press and of the mass media in the political sphere are surely contributing to focusing attention on the impact of ICTs on social relationships and, more particularly, on activism. Within this general theoretical framework model, of course, researchers can explore numerous and contrasting hypotheses. For instance, authors can suggest that the use of online technologies promotes new forms of participation not mediated by traditional organizations, or they can affirm, in contrast, that social movement organizations will persist as crucial actors. In both cases, the research design and questions consider ICTs almost as an independent variable, testing if this element produces a social change, which is conceived as a dependent variable.

This very basic research structure is intuitive, it tends to emerge in a spontaneous way, and it has led to the formulation of numerous key questions in the field of online activism. However, it poses some risks, which slowly supported the emergence of alternative ways of exploring social movement communication on ICTs. Hine (2000), intervening on the general epistemological discussion on how to study social phenomena happening online, identifies two of these risks. Firstly, authors that focus their attention on the impact of ICTs tend to concentrate on the inherent technological aspects of online media, expecting to observe social changes that somehow replicate these technical innovations. For instance, authors might expect to observe an increased relevance of transnational activism due to the low cost, apparently place-less communication channels that email and other ICTs permit. Secondly, researchers that formulate their questions in terms of ICTs impact run the risk of underestimating – or oversimplifying – the complexity of both online communication and social movement activism. While hypothesis testing, solid research and reliable data can help to overcome the first of the two risks identified by Hine, the oversimplification problem generally requires the elaboration of a completely different, less linear research design in order to investigate the relationship between activism and ICTs.

A second effective way of dealing with the complexity of the relationship between online communication and social movements is to show possible

Figure 1.1 Recurrent research designs applied to the study of online activism

<p>1st Model: Impact of technologies</p>	<p>New characteristics in online communication</p>	<p>Social Movement characteristics (e.g. speed of diffusion, organisational change)</p>
<p>2nd Model: Differentiated impacts</p>	<p>New characteristics in online communication</p>	<p>≠ models of organisation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Effects on type A → Effects on type B → Effects on type C
<p>3rd Model: 'Social shaping' of online communication</p>	<p>Organisation/ Movement characteristics</p>	<p>Characteristics of online communication (contents of site, adopted tools...)</p>
<p>4th Model: Online Communication as complex environment</p>	 <p>The diagram consists of two overlapping ovals. The left oval is labeled 'Activism' and the right oval is labeled 'Online environment'. The overlapping area in the center is shaded grey. Arrows point from the text 'Activism' to its oval and from 'Online environment' to its oval.</p>	
<p>5th Model: Online trace as a source of data</p>	<p>Online data on social phenomenon A</p> <p>↓ inform about Social phenomenon A</p>	<p>Online data on social phenomenon B</p> <p>↓ inform about Social phenomenon B</p>

different effects of ICTs on different types of organizations, activists, or protest repertoires (Garrett 2006) (see the second model in Figure 1.1). For instance, Diani (2000) hypothesizes different the impacts of ICTs on some recurrent models of social movement organizations: even though the author conserves a focus on technological impact and on inherent technological features, he expects to observe different transformations for organizations that rely on professional resources, organizations that privilege the involvement of grassroots militants, and transnational organizations. Similarly, Earl and Kimport (2011) differentiate the possible influences of ICTs and of social media on a wide variety of forms of protests, and Bennett and Segerberg (2012) suggest that the introduction of social media can have different effects on movement networks that adopt two contrasting types of logic of action.

Another alternative to the research design focused on the impact of ICTs on social movement characteristics is to revert the terms of the relationship, concentrating attention on the role of activists and organizations as active players in the online media (see the third model in Figure 1.1). As in the previously presented design, the authors describe different types of social movement organizations and activists, but in this case they consider online communication almost as a dependent variable: in other words,

in this model of research design scholars observe that social movement actors differently shape online communication, according to their internal characteristics. Kavada (2012), for instance, provides a clear example of similar research designs. Focusing her attention on a set of organizations that promoted the G20 protests in London, and on their websites, she describes how organizations with divergent cultures (strategic, organizing, and decision-making) tend to produce different types of online content and websites.

Furthermore, a growing number of researchers is currently starting to investigate online activism, adopting perspectives that 'recognize the environmental role of media in contentious politics [and] encompass the totality of media and communication practices in a holistic way' (Cammaerts *et al.* 2012: 3). This category (see the fourth model in Figure 1.1) includes different contributions, which might be focused on the interactions in online environments (e.g. Choi and Park 2013), or on the connections between online and offline activism (e.g. Mercea 2013; Farinosi and Treré 2011; Mattoni 2012). In both cases, online communications are not only observed as an element that can influence society – though the impact of the online technologies on activism remains a crucial issue – but also as complex communication environments of action. The focus, in this case, is on what the activists do online and in relationship with ICTS.⁹ Activists and organizations are observed, for instance, while they communicate among them on the web (in particular, on social media platforms) while they adopt ICTS as tools for action, while they deal with new, external powerful actors emerging online. Most of these contributions tend to elaborate their theoretical concepts starting from the observation of isolated cases, or from comparisons of a limited number of forms of online activism, privileging detailed and deep observations of complex environments to predetermined hypothesis testing. Furthermore, authors who apply this kind of research design tend to organize their investigation conceiving the interaction between activism and the online communication as mutual. On the one hand, ICTS are observed as able to modify numerous aspects of social movement actors' practices, while on the other hand, these actors are (to some extent, with other actors) shaping in different ways the space of web communication.

To conclude, a final perspective influenced my research. In some contributions, not yet very diffused in the investigation of online activism,

9 The concept of activist media practices, as elaborated in Mattoni (2012), is particularly useful to group together what the water activists did with, on, or in relationship with social media.

ICTS and the web are simply observed as a source of data to understand social phenomena that are not necessarily focused on the online sphere (see the fifth model in Figure 1.1).¹⁰ Authors can trace Twitter interactions, for instance, in order to distinguish among the different roles that the activists played during a diffused and very large protest (González-Bailón *et al.* 2011). At the moment, authors tend to adopt this kind of research design in conjunction with the previously presented ones (see *ibid.*), using the web as a source of data to study online and ICTS-related processes. However, it is important to differentiate this approach from the previously presented one: in other words, it is necessary to remember that researchers can investigate numerous aspects of activism through online data, without necessarily aiming at studying online activism.

Core research design choices in this book

The present work combines elements derived from the last four recurrent models of research design presented above, with a prevalence of the holistic and mainly inductive scheme that considers web communication as a complex environment. In most cases, these partially conflicting models are adopted in separated chapters and sections of the book, aiming at investigating different research questions regarding the online and offline mobilizations that characterized the 2011 referendum campaign.

As I have just said, a holistic, mainly descriptive and inductive research design (see the fourth model in Figure 1.1) that considers activism, online communication and the instrumental use of ICTS as interacting complex plans provides the broader, generic framework for the entire work. This model permitted me to investigate in detail divergent dimensions and concepts that I was not able to conceive and to define as relevant before entering into the field; therefore, my differentiation among causes, effects and environments mainly emerged from the analysis, instead of preceding it. Adopting this approach, my first aim is a descriptive one: as a result, I have been able to reconstruct the interactions of plans as different as the activists' perceptions and strategies, the use of social media in different types of organizations, and the connection with the offline space. This approach and the dimension of the observed campaign obliged me to focus on a single and not generalizable case. However, these choices permitted me, for instance, to explore in detail two of the interesting research questions that Kelly Garrett proposes in her literature review on social movements

¹⁰ See Rogers (2013) for an introduction.

and ICTS: firstly, under which circumstances and how activist use ICTS to 'increase participation and commitment by facilitating the aggregation of small contributions or actions'; secondly, how they develop through the help of the ICTS 'messy hybrid organizational forms, combining hierarchical and non-hierarchical structures as fit their needs' (2006: 217). This research, in particular, Chapters 5 and 6, describes the complex processes that permitted the aggregation of small and dispersed actions of micro activism as well as the emergence of online and offline organizational forms whose characteristics depended to a large extent on the use of social media and on participation in a common online campaign.

Within this broad descriptive framework, I included elements of what I described as the 'differentiated effects' and 'social shaping' models of structuring a research into online activism (see the second and third model in Figure 1.1). In particular, I tried to show how the massive introduction of Facebook during the second phase of the campaign affected the numerous involved organizations differently, according to their characteristics. In particular, Facebook allowed local communities of loosely organized activists to maintain their activities over time, while it enabled the organization of a successful, large-scale, one-to-many flow of messages to the most powerful online actors (resource rich and central organizations, professionals, early comers in the use of this platform). Similarly, in regards to the almost opposite 'social shaping' model of research, I observed how the highly different perceptions and interpretation of the activists strongly contributed to give life to opposite uses of ICTS and to divergent ways of experimenting with the recently adopted social media.

Finally, in Chapter 4 I mainly apply the last research design scheme (see the fifth model in Figure 1.1) in order to conduct a network investigation of the patterns of communication that characterized the campaign. In this model, the online sphere is mainly observed with the aim of gathering useful data, and to find information on a social phenomenon. Even though I observed a large network made of websites and links with the main aim of understanding how numerous separated organizations contributed to structure the online campaign – focusing therefore on an ICT-related phenomenon – the results of this analysis also provided a good description of the power, connections and strategies of the offline organizations involved.¹¹

11 For a conceptual discussion on the different possible meanings of web networks as proxies or as independent object of study, see Chapter 4.

1.3 Recurring Questions

Evolution of concepts and questions through time

During my research on the online communication that characterized the Italian referendum campaign on the water issue, I consistently re-elaborated my initial research design. On the one hand, I modified it by following new suggestions and opening questions that I encountered in the literature; on the other hand, the observation of the activists' behaviour shifted my attention to new aspects of online campaigning that I did not initially conceive of as relevant. This shift regarded at the same time the general research design, the concept adopted, and the definition of my field of research.

In particular, I consistently moved attention to the communication strategies and choices elaborated by numerous isolated organizations, because I observed that the uses of web and of social media were extremely different depending on the organization (or the grassroots local network) observed. The already cited Diani (2000), Kavada (2012) and Garrett (2006) provided me interesting models and research questions to explore the campaign with this new focus. This attention on the organizations permitted me, at least in part, to observe the internal debates and the evolution of some of them, following the new need to adopt Facebook and to communicate in a different way during the last phases of mobilization.

Another relevant modification that I introduced, in part connected with the previous two, was the shift of focus from the everyday offline and interconnected interactions of people with ICTs, to the online interactions and to the characteristics of the activists' online initiatives. In other words, I concentrated more on social media as environments and spaces of interaction, and less on the process of offline creation of sites and social media pages, which should be observed concentrating on a smaller scale. This change required a modification of the ethnographic approach adopted in the second part of this book. Therefore, I substituted the 'network ethnography' model of Howard (2002), which situate the research in various different offline fields, with the 'virtual ethnography' model of Hine (2000), which focus the analysis mainly on the online space. However, taking into account some interesting recent examples of research (Mattoni 2012; Mercea 2013; Farinosi and Treré 2011), I corrected this last approach with a stronger focus dedicated to the context that surrounds online communication and the continuous overlap and fusion of online and offline milieus.

Similarly, the definition of web communication in relational terms, as applied in Chapter 4 of this book and very useful to trace the structure of

the 'traditional' web, proved to be difficult to apply in a precise way to the very complex and 'messy' network of communication that characterizes social media. Even though I maintained the idea of the network, at least as a metaphor, throughout the entire book, I decided to explore the variegated and complex interactions of activists recurring to different concepts. In particular, I focused attention on four ideas. First, I observed in detail the bridges between online and offline activism. Second, I investigated how the different ways of conceiving social media communication affect activists' initiative on these platforms. Third, I observed the very different features and content that appear on social media initiatives. Fourth, I describe how activists can use the same online platform differently – focusing an entire chapter on Facebook, in particular – instead of on the divergent characteristics of numerous online platforms (i.e., how Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, the web and offline actions are used in different ways).

Moreover, in this research I slowly abandoned the use of a sharp distinction between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0, two buzzwords that tended to precede the social media era, proposing instead different but overlapping and shaded ways to use online communication to organize and interact.¹² In particular, during the campaign two different models of communication arose and coexisted. On the one hand, some organizations adopted a centred, mass media-like model, where key activists tried to spread a common, homogeneous message to local activists and to the rest of the population. On the other hand, other actors applied a diffuse and less controlled model, where local activists reinterpreted and partially adapted the national campaign to their context. In Chapter 6, in particular, I indicate which actors adopted both of these models, and how these communication differences contributed to shaping the online campaign process.

Finally, I focused on how different typologies of activists contributed to the campaign using online media in divergent ways. During a campaign of this kind, the core activists already present within a social movement or a coalition need to involve new supporters, with a less defined political formation, and sometimes with less time to dedicate to the task (Baringhorst 2009).¹³ Therefore, a dialectical and complex connection between the communities of core activists and the groups of individuals or organizations

12 The social media 'era' seems characterized by new, ever-present buzzwords, from 'meme' to 'big data', which I tended to adopt a little less than usual in this research.

13 Even if I focused on the recruitment process and on the characteristics of individual activists, campaigns can modify the characteristics of the organizations, too. Throughout the book, and, in particular, in Chapters 5 and 6, I provide examples of how campaigning – and the connected focus on communication – can modify the activists' experiences and the nature of their network.

that joined the campaign at a second stage can take place. The idea of micro activism (see Garrett 2006; Marichal 2012b), made of small, effortless actions connected thanks to ICT-based solutions, explicitly emerged in my interviews and observation, and I tried therefore to describe and to trace how it integrates into traditional activism. Furthermore, describing the different patterns of use that very different categories of activists (external professionals, local sympathizers, early Facebook users...) elaborated, I tried to demonstrate the large variation that characterized the entire campaign. In my opinion, this internal difference makes it difficult to maintain a stable position in the vehement debate that opposes, on one side, those who conceive Facebook activists as empowered cyber militants and, on the other side, those who see social media activism as a surrogate for real forms of militancy.

Research questions: a final list

Taking into account the deliberately undetermined research design of this research and the holistic approach, in this book I mainly have a descriptive goal, focused on a single, very large campaign. Starting from a single case, even from a very large and internally fragmented one, statistical generalizations are impossible. This notwithstanding, I am convinced that very deep, conceptually open inductive descriptions are extremely useful to study online activism and the new models of political campaigning that are emerging nowadays. In particular, recurrent 'direct' hypotheses on the effects of online media on mobilizations can gain precision and can better adhere to the events, when researchers integrate them with the observation of the internal complexity of the online-related activism. My first question is, therefore, very descriptive: I aimed at exploring how activists interacted with social media, and, in particular, with Facebook, during the large-scale referendum campaign on water in Italy.

The network analysis of the web that sustained the campaign mainly served this descriptive purpose. It helped me to understand which actors were particularly relevant in supporting the online mobilization, with a focus on the long-lasting connections that characterize the traditional web. In particular, this analysis helped me to understand, at least in part, among other things, whether the web structure that sustained the campaign was centralized or horizontal, and which role and characteristics different 'communication hubs' played in the network. Furthermore, the network analysis combined with the use of a self-written software helped me trace the circulation of written content (slogans, keywords) online.

Other, less descriptive research questions emerged during the analysis. I derived two questions, already presented in the chapter, directly from the interesting review of Kelly Garrett. First of all, my research aims at investigating in detail how traditional activists and media professionals working and volunteering for the campaign were able 'to increase participation and commitment by facilitating the aggregation of small contributions or actions' (2006: 217). Websites, assemblies, and numerous Facebook initiatives were devoted to this goal: the book explains how this idea emerged, and describes the different kinds of activists (professionals, dispersed members of organizations, less engaged web users) who contributed to elaborate it. Interestingly, this mechanism, which might appear at first glance as a feature of social media able to influence activism, is first of all one of the possible communication strategies, present during the campaign in numerous variations, which only a restricted number of resource-rich activists (media professionals, designers) can initiate.

The second question that I derived from Garrett regards the transformation of the organizations during the campaign. The author, who cites the 'differentiated influence' model of Diani (2000), interestingly introduces the idea of new, 'messy hybrid organizational forms, combining hierarchical and non-hierarchical structures as fit their needs', sustained through the use of ICTS (Garrett 2006: 217). I explored, therefore, the interactions and the evolution of social movement organizations during the campaign, distinguishing very different ways of interacting with the online technologies, which mainly depended on the previous characteristics of the observed organizations. Among these characteristics, I remember here – following to a certain extent the typologies in Diani (2000) – the geographical scale of action (i.e. if it groups geographically dispersed activists or a local community), the organization's formal or loose structure, and the kind of activists involved. Furthermore, following Kavada (2012), I explored the different ways of adopting ICTS starting from the communication cultures of the organizations: in other words, from the communication models and from the perceptions of the users.

Another research direction – more than a proper question – regarded the evolution of the general communication strategy during the last phases of the campaign. This question was, therefore, mainly centred on the use of Facebook. In part, the organization of this large-scale campaign convinced most of the activists to privilege new, unexpected models of communication, following the pragmatic aim of increasing the visibility of the water issue. Interestingly, activists seemed to react to the need of reaching an enormous mass of citizens, slowly abandoning their first, mass media-like models of

communication, privileging dispersed online messages and less controlled forms of action.¹⁴

To conclude, my research has an implicit but recurrent methodological question: I tried to understand how researchers could successfully investigate the evolution of an online campaign, in particular, when it is based on decentralized communication strategies. Following the examples of Christine Hine (2000), Richard Rogers (2004, 2009, 2013), Elena Pavan (2012), and numerous other researchers, I adapted already existent methods to the new environment, proposing solutions that integrate social network analysis, computer programming, and relatively new forms of participant observation related to the online space. In the next chapter, I discuss these and other methodological solutions in detail.

Conclusions

During an online communications campaign organized within the milieu of social movements, numerous activists work with a simple common purpose, which in most cases is to spread a message to a large population of potentially interested people (Baringhorst 2009). In doing so, they collaborate on different scales, act without a central coordination, or follow the suggestions of an organization that represents the entire movement, adapting a central message to their local contexts. In order to organize these communication efforts, web and social media are crucial tools that enable the activists to coordinate, to share information, to build common messages, and to spread them without the help of the traditional media that they do not control. Furthermore, these online spheres are increasingly becoming a place that hosts communications struggles, where social movement actors compete and interact with institutional political actors, online mass media, and communications and web professionals. Finally, the web is a very relevant source of information for those researchers who wish to understand how social movement actors communicate.

Taking into account these different ways of conceiving online communication, in this chapter I built my research design and my research questions, which aim at helping me to describe the complexity of the interactions – on the thin border between online and offline – during the large-scale Italian

14 The idea of connective action elaborated by Bennett and Segerberg (2012b) seems very appropriate to describe the strategic change that characterized the communications of the Water Forum during the campaign.

referendum campaign against the privatization of water. In particular, after having discussed the numerous different possible ways of studying online activism, I decided to observe the campaign in a holistic and descriptive way. Furthermore, I integrated this approach with some questions about the effects of online communication on different kinds of organizations, and about how some organizations tend to exhibit their characteristics in their online communications. In every one of these questions, I often adopted online information as a source of data to reconstruct offline phenomena, too. After having clarified these choices regarding the research design, I elaborated my questions, which aim at describing the campaign, investigating the roles played by different activists, exploring the evolution of organizational forms, and understanding how the activists modified their strategic choices during the campaign. A final methodological question, which asks how to study in an efficient way an online-related campaign, will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

2 Methods for Investigating Online-Related, Large-Scale Campaigns on the Web

Multi-method, multi-platform analyses should be sought and rewarded.

– Tufekci (2014: 514)

Online spaces are simultaneously environments where people and organizations increasingly interact as well as privileged points from which to better observe and trace these interactions. Especially during a campaign organized on a national scale, activists, associations and normal Internet users create new connections or reinforce previously existing ones, for instance, when they create web pages dedicated to a local demonstration, post comments on an online mainstream article, share electoral videos and files reproducing leaflets on Facebook.

As this book aims to describe, during a large-scale campaign activists interact with social media and other Internet environments differently according to certain dimensions, such as the geographical scale of action, the characteristics of their organizations, and their previous political experiences. Furthermore, the Net is increasingly a sort of ‘electronic spine’ (Kavada 2003: 91) for various activities in a social movement milieu. Therefore, I am convinced that observing different forms of online interaction, and how they relate on a larger scale, can greatly help to understand how communication works in social movement campaigns and initiatives. Investigating online communication as networks, in particular, researchers can better identify how the individual agency of activists and the structure that they collectively form are linked, in which ways contrasting identities can coexist within the same movement, and how new forms of protest spread following geography or existing social connections. In other words, researchers who are investigating the interactions of social movement actors with the web can obtain a detailed image of how communication circulates within a social movement during a large-scale campaign.

This notwithstanding, while the structure of communication on the web comes into contact with and sometimes reproduces an increasing number of aspects of social life (see Rogers 2009, 2013), the complexity of web communication is increasing: it is today becoming more difficult to

reconstruct the patterns of online interactions, in comparison with four or five years ago. Issues as different as the availability of data on social media, the lack of well-established methods, and the geographical fragmentation of interactions with social media make it complicated to reconstruct the numerous characteristics that delineate an online campaign organized by activists on a national scale.

In this chapter, I describe the methodology that I developed in order to investigate the very complex online communication sphere created during the 2011 water referendum. Probably hundreds of thousands of activists and sympathetic citizens collectively gave life to this particular 'wave' of social media communication during spring 2011, attempting to establish the paradigm of water as a common good in contrast to the political and legal efforts aimed at privatizing this resource. Three different elements, or difficulties, contributed to directing the methodological choices I made during the research. First of all, the lack of a standard model and of well-established methods when it comes to observing multifaceted Internet phenomena, in particular, for investigating new forms of communication, such as those hosted by the most widespread social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter). Second, the complexity of the studied phenomenon, a polycentric and extremely diffused political campaign organized by various independent but connected actors. Third, my choice was to focus on various different levels and aspects simultaneously, aiming to understand how these levels and aspects are connected, rather than trying to compare different cases. Four main aspects guided my methodological choices: first, the possibility of individuating online-related actions through a different geographical scale of the actions; second, the interactions through offline and online boundaries; third, the differences between individuals, organizations and broader networks of organized actors; fourth, the different online platforms that the activists used.

To summarize briefly, the methodology that I proposed combines an ethnographic investigation between online and offline space, including interviews with activists, and a network analysis of the web domain of the water referendum. I integrated this last approach with the 'digital methods' (Rogers 2009) perspective, created to investigate the social meaning of aggregated web data. The ethnographic point of view helped me to recognize and describe new and unexpected phenomena regarding activists' web communications. In particular, it allowed me to reconstruct the connections between online and offline actions, to observe the context of web production, and to focus the investigation on the local practices that the activists produced. Moreover, the use of digital methods and the reconstruction

of web networks allowed me to combine the different traces that users and producers left online during the campaign. These last methods thus helped me to obtain descriptive images of the online campaign, adopting a point of view that is broader than the one that an ethnographic researcher usually adopts. By relying on these network approaches, moreover, I was better able to understand the hidden, aggregated structure of the online communication, a level that activists are generally not able to observe and that they do not describe, therefore, in interviews. In order to present in detail the methodology that I decided to adopt, I discuss the methods of Internet research that other researchers have developed in recent years, and describe the specific characteristics of my object of study, which directed my methodological choices.

The first section investigates the main problems that the phenomena that I seek to study pose from a methodological perspective. In particular, I concentrate on the problematic aspects of the four analytical dimensions that I instrumentally adopt in my research: the geographical scale of action; the organizational level; the use of different online platforms; and the dichotomous opposition of the online/offline spheres.

In the second section, I examine in further detail some complex methodological approaches that constitute, to different degrees, the foundations for my personal methodological choices. The first 'families of methods' that I present have guided the ethnographic part of my work: they are 'network ethnography' (Howard 2002) and 'virtual ethnography' (Hine 2000). The second family focuses on the relational structure that characterises most online platforms, providing me with useful suggestions for investigating the referendum campaign from a broad point of view. In particular, I describe the online forms of social network analysis, the so-called digital methods and the connected 'issue network' approach (Rogers 2009), and the analysis of web spheres (Foot and Schneider 2002; Schneider and Foot 2004).

In the last section, I present in detail the methodology that I adopted to investigate the water referendum campaign. First, I provide a broad overview of my methodological choices, linking them with those previously presented. Second, I list the methods that I used during my research in a more precise way, presenting the kinds of data that I was able to gather and analyse. Third, I briefly discuss the methodological differences that I had to introduce in order to analyse the different communication platforms (websites, Facebook, real-world interactions) that I observed. Finally, in the conclusions I highlight the methodological difficulties that I encountered during my research, suggesting possible solutions to these problems, in order help other scholars in their potential future research.

2.1 The Italian Referendum Campaign on Water: methodological opportunities and difficulties

During the spring of 2011, Italy hosted a long-prepared referendum campaign on three issues: against attempts to privatize water supplies, against the reintroduction of nuclear power plants, and against a criminal procedure that partially exempted ministers from prosecution. For the first time since 1995, the referendum consultations held on 12 and 13 June 2011 passed the legal quorum of 50 per cent plus one voters, resulting in a sound victory for the committees that proposed them. Even though the main political parties, the mainstream media, and the activists who lived through the campaign interpreted this result differently, they tended to agree on one point. During the Arab Spring and the Indignados mobilizations in Spain, which took place a few months before, a new way of using the Internet, and, in particular, social media such as Facebook, seemed to have fostered a major change in the forms of communication used by social movement actors, permitting them to influence the national agenda in different ways. As many commentators observed, through Facebook, Twitter and other web platforms, the pro-referendum activists were able to share content and symbols with a larger audience, without the help of television and newspapers, opening up unexpected and direct channels of communication with sympathetic but less active people.

Unfortunately, the large wave of political communication that the activists created during the referendum campaign is very difficult to investigate in detail, due to the complexity of the phenomenon and to the large number of activists and organizations that contributed to its organizing. In particular, four dimensions seem to pose problems for a detailed investigation: the geographical scale of action, the differences between the actors involved, the simultaneous use of different online media platforms, and the strong interaction between online and offline spaces during the campaign. In this section, I briefly present these four aspects, in order to outline the methodological problems that they pose, while the next sections are dedicated to proposing possible ways of investigating them.

Scale of action

The first reason why it is very difficult to investigate the evolution of the online Italian referendum campaign on water privatization concerns geography and space. Even though different types of online content are available everywhere – and therefore seem to be located outside the

boundaries of a geographical dimension – they surge from an extremely wide set of variegated environments: digital communication at the same time connects these environments, and it is deeply rooted in every one of these milieus. In order to understand the activists' communication, it is necessary to take into account the fact that they organized their campaign while acting at the same time on a national scale (for instance, by distributing a unique leaflet throughout the entire country) and on a local scale (for instance, by organizing events in their own cities or towns). Additionally, their initiatives sometimes crossed and linked these two scales (for instance, to promote on a common Facebook page similar images that a crowd of numerous local sympathizers independently produced).

In every investigation of social movements, scholars tend to start their research by deciding at which scale they want to observe the mobilization. In general, this decision demands a trade-off choice, between the possibility of examining local events or situated relationships through qualitative methods, and the possibility of investigating a movement in its entirety, resorting at least in part to sampling techniques, surveys, protest event analysis, and other quantitative methods.

In my case, the answer to this trade-off can seem obvious: I am dealing with a national-scale phenomenon, and a national, large perspective should be the one to adopt. However, I am convinced that by choosing a large-scale point of view I would be unable to observe how people communicate on social media, and, in particular, on Facebook. In this campaign, most online and online-related initiatives derived from the work of small groups who are part of local organizations, and on most social media an increasingly relevant part of content is produced in order to be read by very small local communities of people and friends.

Moreover, even though the referendum campaign partially developed online, and it addressed a national issue, the *Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua* (Italian Forum of Water Movements, hereafter FIMA) always adopted a highly decentralized strategy of action. At least since 2007, FIMA declined every national campaign in numerous locally rooted actions and sub-campaigns, which it delegated to committees acting at the city or the regional level that were highly different among regarding their compositions (Cernison 2016). A similar strategy – in part derived from the Cochabamba Water War (see Chapter 3.1) – probably helped to include in the Forum actors that were often in conflict at the national level, and some local committees arrived at the conclusion that national coordination was ineffective and undesirable. Therefore, a local focus

on the campaign is highly relevant to determining the methodological level, too.¹⁵

The alternative perspective of limiting the observation to local groups, for instance, comparing how some of the local organizations gave life to their initiatives on and thanks to social media, is probably more effective. Nevertheless, adopting only this point of view, a researcher risks being unable to perceive how communication circulates online, how groups are connected, and how they organize together. Furthermore, this perspective makes it more complicated to observe the online communities not linked with a particular territory. Therefore, I made methodological choices that permitted me to observe the online campaign in its entirety, and at the same time to reflect on how activists locally produced it. Briefly summarizing, I can resume the problems connected with the geographical dimension in two methodological questions, which guided my research:

- On what geographical scale does an online campaign mainly occur, and where, therefore, can an external observer examine it?
- If an online campaign involves numerous different places and geographical scales, which methods are best suited to explore the interactions between these points/geographical dimensions?

Different actors

The referendum campaign against water privatization was the result of numerous joint efforts on the part of actors belonging to a range of different categories. Some examples of these actors testify as to how wide and complex this spectrum of individuals and organizations was. During the mobilization, for instance, numerous young people started to participate in pro-referendum bicycle rides, although they had no previous experience of political activism. At the same time, communication and marketing professionals dedicated part of their time and skills to the water issue, in order to produce viral campaigns, YouTube videos, or better planned events. Moreover, small sports-related associations, such as groups of fishermen or teams of kayakers, were involved in local water committees. Alongside this, large trade unions and national organizations, involved in numerous political issues, asked their members to participate and support the referendum initiatives. Finally, FIMA enlarged its central office, giving to

15 For instance, at the local level some sections of the Democratic Party collaborated during the water campaign with activists of the *Movimento 5 Stelle* (Five Star Movement) and with the networks of the radical left, a collaboration impossible to obtain at the national level.

this structure the tasks of coordinating the communication among the plethora of individuals and organizations supporting the campaign and of creating some of the national events that characterized it.

As can easily be understood, it is very difficult to compare these actors, and their contributions influenced the development of the referendum campaign in very distinct ways, both online and offline. Organizations, informal networks of friends, veteran activists and young neophytes acted differently during the months that preceded the referendum, interacting among themselves, and partially modelling the online tools to their own aims. These differences and interactions are extremely relevant to my research, and I consider them as being a useful dimension that can contribute to explaining how social movement actors differently shape the communication on various online milieus.

However, this complexity can give rise to new methodological difficulties. This is particularly true when the researcher does not aim at comparing well-defined, small realities (such as two local committees, a certain number of events, or specific organizations and their use of the web), but instead observes how these realities interact and contribute to creating a common political and communication-related effort. In this case, the researcher is obliged to trace the connections and the existing paths between the actors involved, also taking into account that they are different according to numerous criteria. The ethnographic approach can provide a partial methodological solution to this difficulty. However, at first glance it seems very difficult to apply ethnography to a large-scale field, which extends both online and offline, and with undetermined boundaries. As in the previous case, I can summarize the methodological problems connected with the differences between the actors involved in two questions:

- In order to investigate the development of an online campaign, should I focus on a single kind of actor, such as individual online users or the organizations, or on the relationship between these actors?
- If I wish to explore various categories of actors, which type of methodology can help me to deal with their differences in my research?

Contemporaneous use of different online media

The third problematic dimension that I had to take into account while developing my methodology was the use of numerous online media platforms during the referendum campaign. The activists published messages and coordinated their efforts on social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, on platforms such as YouTube, on traditional blogs, on dedicated websites, and via internal mailing lists. Furthermore, they intensively linked these

platforms, creating complex communication networks that are particularly difficult to investigate. As Tufekci and Wilson (2012) remember, 'the connectivity infrastructure should be analysed as a complex ecology rather than in terms of any specific platform or device' (*ibid.*: 365). While ten years ago researchers could explore the development of online campaigns and Internet phenomena by focusing only on a single tool and practice (for example, the creation of websites), nowadays examining a large-scale mobilization requires dealing with platforms that are different, connected, and in continuous interaction with offline activism. Every one of these platforms, of course, follows its own rules, sees the emergence of particular communication models, and provides to researchers data that are different.

From a methodological point of view, the fragmentation of online communication into several spheres poses, in my opinion, two different dilemmas for the researcher. The first and main dilemma regards the quality of the data that scholars can collect. Researchers may decide to focus on a single online 'sphere' or platform. In this way, they can obtain data that are homogeneous (for instance, the number of 'hits' on various YouTube videos) and easy to compare. However, following this path researchers will obtain an oversimplified image of the mobilization, and, as a result, are unable to understand the campaign in its entirety. In contrast, scholars may decide to focus on more than one online platform. In this way, they theoretically can obtain a complete image of the online campaign, but must deal with fragmented data, which are impossible to aggregate. Therefore, they become almost obliged to investigate these data through qualitative methods: a paradoxical situation, since the boundaries of the object of study and the quantity of data that needs to be collected are larger than in the previous case.

The second dilemma regards the issues of privacy, availability and the properties of the data. While researchers have created numerous sound methodologies to observe the static web or emails, the analysis of social media is still very exploratory. The novelty of these media, the fact that their content is only in part publicly available, how platform administrators continuously reorganize the structure and the application programming interfaces contribute to make it difficult for researchers to develop stable methods to observe social media.

Considering these dilemmas, I formulated two questions to guide my methodological choices:

- How should I treat in my research the fragmentation of web content and web activities over numerous different platforms?
- How can I explore online communication on social media platforms, where the content is not always open and well structured for research purposes?

Offline and online spaces

The fourth and last problematic dimension that affects the methodological aspects of my research concerns the divisions, differences, and relationships between the online and the offline milieus of action. As with the dimensions already presented, the online/offline dichotomy strongly guided my research, permitting me to examine how actors' behaviours respond to or change within the online sphere, and how different activists and organizations link in various ways to local contexts and online spaces. Moreover, since the first diffusion of Internet-related technologies, the connection between online communication and physical actions has been at the centre of theoretical debates, elaborations of research paradigms, and divergent methodological choices. When online communication emerged, scholars mainly focused on the emergence of virtual spaces of interaction. In particular, during the 1990s, they tended to observe online communications as an independent sphere, without referring to the offline context: consequently, ideas of virtual realms for protest have therefore emerged. Alternatively, researchers have sometimes investigated online communication as a product of a particular offline context: in this perspective, digital interactions can appear as a replica or as an online extension of the offline ones. In recent years, the idea of stable connections between offline and online contexts clearly prevails. Authors increasingly describe protests and online campaigns as happening in a sort of digital augmented reality, where activists immediately share or remix content that they created on the ground. Therefore, in 2018 Poell and Van Dijck can write that '[a]s much current research shows, the distinction between the "online" and "offline" can no longer be made. Since many protestors carry smartphones and have continuous access to online platforms to share their content and observations, protest simultaneously unfolds on the ground and online' (Poell and Van Dijck 2018: 2).

In the case that I study here – a campaign that is at the same time geographically broad, and rooted in local territories – an approach that considers online communication as the product of numerous connected offline contexts is probably the most appropriate. In this way, I can avoid the risk of conceiving digital communication as a virtual space, independent and detached from their creators, examining at the same time the online connections between the numerous contexts where the campaign developed.¹⁶ However, I concede in this research something

16 For an exploration in detail of the idea of the 'end of virtual', see Rogers (2009).

to the virtual aspects of social media activism. In the initiatives that I describe in Chapter 6, in particular, the activists play with the online sphere differently. For instance, sometimes they make communities that share a common geographical location yet mainly interact online; in other cases, the activists adopt the 'virtual spaces' that digital communication creates in order to spread on broader scales initiatives that they created at the local level.

I consider the idea of the 'electronic elsewhere', adopted by, among others, Zizi Papacharissi (2015: 69-73) to describe Occupy Wall Street, as a particularly useful concept that can help me to maintain a certain level of conceptual separation between offline forms of protest and the emergence of partially independent online spaces of action. According to Papacharissi, social media platforms 'do not simply represent places that already exist but actually become the means for producing places that traverse the boundaries of home, community, work, and play' (*ibid.* 68). The author describes these 'elsewheres' as 'geo-social, hybrid, and mediated environments', terms that strongly separate the concept from the idea of virtuality. Similarly, my research investigates how activists adopted social media in hybrid online/offline initiatives, where new characteristics of action seem to emerge.

However, a perspective that links several connected geographical contexts is difficult to put into practice from a methodological point of view, for two reasons. Firstly, scholars of the field conceived most of their research methods in order to investigate in a separate way online and offline spaces, dedicating less attention to the relationship between them. Furthermore, digital communication and offline interactions tend to offer to researchers highly dissimilar data. Secondly, the offline context of the production of digital content (and, in particular, of most social media posts) can be private, difficult to reach, and geographically fragmented.

To conclude, the online/offline dichotomy gave rise to the following two questions that I considered when deciding which methods to adopt in my research:

- Which methods would better permit me to trace the online development of the referendum campaign, without losing the contact with the local contexts that produced it?
- Since I decided to follow the campaign both online and offline, in which cases should I investigate online spaces, and in which others should I observe offline activities? In other words, where should I place the boundaries that define my field of research?

2.2 Online-Related Social Research: some inspiring methods

Methodological experimentations in a changing environment

It is very difficult to present in few pages the numerous methodological approaches that authors from different disciplines have adopted in order to investigate the complex relationship between social phenomena and online technologies. The multifaceted nature of online media, the continuous changes they undergo and their numerous points of contact with different aspects of everyday life have contributed to generating not only rich and diverse theories, but a probably even more diversified exploration of methods, which try in different ways to depict how people and online environments interact.

For what concerns web-based communication and social media, scholars have developed tools and methodological approaches that they have tended to dedicate to specific web platforms. Of course, the first researchers to explore the relationship of these technologies with society adapted traditional methods to the new online context (Weare and Lin 2000; Wellman *et al.* 1996), sometimes combining previously existing techniques (Pickerill 2003; Garrido and Halavais 2003; Howard 2002). In later phases, authors conceived and experimented with new techniques, in most cases adapting tools of analysis that were already present online, for example, types of Google research (e.g. Rogers and Marres 2000; Foot and Schneider 2002; Foot *et al.* 2003; Hine 2000). Various methodological labels slowly appeared to indicate the new or adapted techniques, while a large number of methodological approaches had only a very brief life, due either to their exploratory nature, or to the fact that the web technologies (and, in particular, social media) create constantly changing environments, which require a continuous adaptation of the techniques of research.

Due to this complexity, in this section I do not try to produce a complete overview of the methodological perspectives that authors have proposed in order to investigate the web from a social point of view. My aim is more limited: I wish to briefly present some recurrent methodological patterns that appeared in literature, inspiring my research. Furthermore, I pay particular attention to those techniques that helped me to develop a comprehensive methodology to observe the interaction between activism and online platforms during the 2011 water referendum campaign. Therefore, I mainly focus on methods with three characteristics. First, they helped me to deal with large-scale phenomena, centred on both the local production of digital content and on the structure that this content contributed to create.

Second, I focus on methods that consider the web as a space that is deeply rooted in the social milieu that uses and produces it. Third, I concentrate on methods that propose interesting ways for dealing with the traditional online and offline dichotomy.

In the following sections, I present some methodological paths that inspired my research. First, I present a family of methods that are in different ways linked with the ethnographic approaches to research. In particular, I describe the differences between 'network ethnography' and 'virtual ethnography'. Second, I present some methodologies that analyse online communication from a relational perspective, as I mainly did in Chapter 4 of this book. After having quickly presented the first protocols that observed the web as a network structure, I introduce the digital methods perspective and the 'issue network' protocol of analysis that emerged from it. Finally, I briefly discuss the so-called 'web sphere' approach.

Online-related ethnographies

Digital ethnographies of different kinds tended to slowly emerge during the last two decades, trying to describe the complexity of the online interactions and their intertwinement with the offline milieu that created it.¹⁷ In the following two sections, I introduce the two versions of digital ethnography that mainly inspired my work, focusing, in particular, on their divergent ways to conceive the online milieu and its relationship with the offline environment.

Network ethnography

Network ethnography is a relatively 'old' approach to web studies, mainly linked to the work of Philip Howard (2002). In his studies, Howard adopts a broad focus: he observes digital technologies, and their role in permitting the existence of 'physically decentralized social networks made up of individuals who form a community but are not members of the same formal organization' (*ibid.*: 553). In particular, this author has sought to find a method that will allow the investigation of what he calls 'Hypermedia organizations' (*ibid.*), observing how much these groups are embedded within technological networks of communication. Howard argues that an ethnographic approach is the best solution for exploring the emergence of these structures. He also claims, however, that traditional ethnography cannot help researchers to understand a geographically diffuse network

17 See Coleman (2010) for a complete review.

structure: wherever they situate their field of research, they risk seeing just the internal organizational paths rather than the relevant interconnections that online communications might permit. At the same time, Howard refused to limit the research only to the 'virtual' online environment, a 'place' where, in his opinion, an ethnographic immersion is impossible.

As a solution, Howard proposes a combination of social network analysis and ethnography. The first technique is used to define the boundaries and the structure of the analysed community, and then to understand the presence of relevant nodes within the network. The second technique, instead, is used to analyse these nodes in depth, entering the field and participating within a community of practice. This solution, complex and time demanding, allows the mapping of the process of evolution of the network, and the relevance of the information and communication technologies (ICTS) in its organization. Since it permits investigating in detail large structures that are composed of both online and offline relations, I consider this approach as particularly adapted to the observation of diffused, large-scale campaigns.

Virtual ethnography

A sort of online transposition of numerous ethnographic indications, virtual ethnography is probably the most comprehensive among the methodologies used to investigate online phenomena that I met in my research. As often happens with the ethnographic approach, it is reductive to consider virtual ethnography only as a method, because this approach incorporates very complex theoretical and epistemological choices. These choices aim at determining, in particular, how researchers can observe online phenomena, how they can conceive the boundaries between online and offline spaces, and what they can consider as a field. Christine Hine (2000, 2008) has proposed that virtual ethnography is a holistic approach for investigating online phenomena. Among its pillars, it suggests that we observe the Internet in two combined ways: as a culture, meaning a new online place where researchers can observe by focusing on online, virtual relations; and as a cultural artefact, meaning an object or a set of objects that are embedded in other interactions, for instance, in the everyday activities of web users. Furthermore, virtual ethnography proposes to researchers to observe the Internet by focusing not only on its technological characteristics, but also – and mainly – on how people actually use these features.

Although virtual ethnography can include numerous methods, and it does not determine *a priori* the data that a researcher should observe, or the techniques that she/he should use, I consider it to be a useful methodological perspective for my research, for two reasons. Firstly, because it combines

different points of view on online phenomena, in order to reach a deep and complete description of them. Secondly, because it shifts attention from a single, materially bound place to a network of relations. At the same time, this approach presents a limit that Christine Hine contributed to correct in its recent contributions: initially focused on virtual spaces, this form of ethnography has increasingly recognized that online phenomena are usually rooted in the offline places that produced them.

Relational approaches

Social network analysis of online phenomena

Several research methodologies investigated web communication as a network: in almost every case, these methods adopt techniques derived from social network analysis, adapted to the online environment. Scholars represent sites or social media accounts as nodes and ties in a network, which they investigate in order to obtain information on the social actors that developed them. These forms of network analysis – often grouped under the label ‘hyperlink network analysis’ (Park 2003) for what concerns the traditional web – are based on two assumptions. First, that ‘as the Web is one giant network, it makes sense to approach it from a network perspective’ (Hogan 2008: 147). Second, the web structure is considered to have a social meaning. Authors conceive this meaning in different ways, but in general they share the idea that every site, social media user, or Facebook page does not connect to other resources in a random way. Rather, the presence or absence of connection between online actors attests to a unilateral relationship, a pattern of recognition (Adamic and Adar 2001; Park and Thelwall 2003; Foot *et al.* 2003; Rogers 2004). The social relation that a link seems to indicate is a relation of relevance: for example, a blogger who includes a link to Greenpeace on his website, according to this perspective, is indicating that this actor is important for him, either positively or negatively. Scholars perceive this web network both as a trace of the offline social relations of the authors that create it, and as a new, ‘electronic’ set of connections.

This perspective has been adopted, in particular, to describe social phenomena already perceived as networks, such as social movements (Biddix and Park 2008; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2004; Garrido and Halavais 2003). Furthermore, it has proven to be useful for investigating transnational connections, and the persistence of cultural boundaries on the web (Halavais 2000; Adamic and Glance 2005; Van den Bos 2006; Caiani and Wagemann 2009). However, this approach displays two main limitations. First, the meaning of online connections appears too vague to be indicated as a

social relation: it can refer to both opponents and collaborators, taking into account that the content authors create links according to a variety of different logics. Second, online actors (sites, or social media accounts/pages/groups) can represent various offline realities: behind a Facebook page, we can find individual activists, organizations, firms, and even initiatives. As a consequence, a network analysis of online content has in this case to deal with these heterogeneous actors.

Digital methods and issue networks

The label 'digital methods' refers to a series of experimental techniques that rely strongly on the work of Richard Rogers and his collaborators in the Digital Method Initiative group, based in Amsterdam. In particular, this team of scholars – helped by coders, artists, and web designers – proposes to adapt tools that directly emerged on the web (e.g. search engines, Wikipedia bots, online datasets) to serve research purposes, at the same time focusing on how to conceive of online spaces and digital information from an epistemological perspective. Furthermore, the group widely adopts the idea that the structure of online phenomena can provide cultural information regarding the social actors that gave life to it.

Rogers and his colleagues have deeply influenced my research, in particular, modelling the way in which I conceive online communication as an object of study. More specifically, they have proposed a constantly expanding set of tools with which to explore online phenomena, and to understand numerous aspects of society, starting from web-gathered data. In particular, their reconstruction of online 'issue networks' has strongly inspired my work.

In order to better explain this approach, I briefly present an example. Richard Rogers and Anat Ben-David (2008) investigated the Israeli West Bank barrier construction, and how transnational and Israeli non-governmental organizations (hereafter NGOs) were framing in different ways this theme on the web. The authors sampled two distinct populations of websites, created by NGOs that had contrasting views on the barrier project: the first group was comprised of the websites of transnational NGOs and the second of Israeli websites. The authors then reconstructed three different networks of hyperlinks starting from these NGO websites: one network combined the two populations, while the other two networks presented the two groups in a separate way. Finally, the authors controlled the presence or absence of some relevant terms within the content of the websites. On the basis of the results obtained in both analyses, the researchers argued that the Israeli organizations were isolated from the transnational ones. The hyperlink

network analysis showed that the Israeli NGO sites received only a small number of links from the transnational group, and this behaviour suggested that they were not recognized as relevant partners. The keyword analysis, moreover, showed that the two groups were framing the barrier issue using different terms: the Israeli NGOs used the official Israeli label 'security fence' to describe the barrier, while the transnational NGOs preferred the phrase 'apartheid wall', commonly adopted also by the Palestinian authorities.

From the methodological point of view, these researchers proposed a triangulation between a large-scale, computer-guided hyperlink network analysis, and a very basic form of content analysis, similar to the one used by search engines. Both network and content are investigated in an automatic way, with the help of software, without direct qualitative observation: the web is investigated by taking three snapshots of its structure, and the relationship between the sites and the 'real' NGOs creating them is not part of the analysis.

Web sphere analysis

A slightly different methodological approach is promoted by Foot and Schneider in their study of United States electoral campaigns on the web and is based on the concept of the 'web sphere' (Foot and Schneider 2002; Foot *et al.* 2003; Schneider and Foot 2004). In brief, the authors conceive of a web sphere as a set of web resources in particular sites which are dynamically connected through links and related to a central theme (Foot *et al.* 2003). The boundaries of this sphere – that is to say, the population of observed websites – are determined by the researchers' continuous investigation, and by the dynamic evolution of the sites and links through time. Starting from this definition, the authors adopt an extensive set of combined methods in order to describe the nature, the evolution and the components of the web sphere. For instance, they observe and compare the linking practice of sites, they qualitatively investigate their content, adding and comparing labels (or metadata) to them, they periodically archive data in order to conduct retrospective analysis, and they triangulate the online information with interviews.

This approach – deeply linked with the web before the advent of social media – reveals both limitations and strengths. One limitation is that this methodology observes web connections instead of networks. Furthermore, a web sphere does not represent a portion of the web taken as it is, but a controlled set of connections, sometimes selected relying on human interpretation and composed only of connections considered relevant for the observed theme. This choice can be interpreted as both a limitation (because

the representation of the web is somehow distorted) and as a strength (because the intervention of a researcher can help to select meaningful connections and to reduce the background noise created by unrelated resources in the network).

The network analysis that I present in this book relies on a methodology – the analysis of web domains by Jacomy and Ghitalla (2007), which I describe in detail in Chapter 4 – that shares several premises and techniques with the web sphere approach. The concept of domain, however, seems to me a ‘digitally native’ idea that better describes the structure of information that characterises web phenomena.

2.3 A Methodological Proposal for Investigating Large-Scale Online Campaigns

Combining different methodologies: online/offline ethnography, web domain reconstruction, digital methods perspective

Even though the various methodological approaches presented in the previous sections have many different characteristics, these perspectives still provided me with a useful methodological basis for studying a large-scale online phenomenon. Notwithstanding their differences, I believe that they share a common perception of digital communication, considered as the dynamic result of the work of numerous content creators. Furthermore, in most cases the authors increasingly propose to observe the offline social context that surrounds the online media; the digital method approach, in particular, aims to investigate offline phenomena, using web structures as a source of data. To a large extent, I elaborated my own methodology by drawing from the methodological approaches presented above.

In this research, I aim to observe digital communication in relation to an internally divided, network-shaped social phenomenon. Within various social movements, numerous individual or organized actors use online platforms in order to make public a point of view, to represent themselves, and to inform activists and sympathizers of their activities. Acting in this way, they situate their content in a broader network of digital communication. Even though every activist or organization can develop content in a very different and creative way, it is possible to observe how these messages form a broader, connected sphere, which this book tries to reconstruct maintaining at the same time a focus on the small practices and initiatives that contribute to its creation.

The evolution of methods through time: dealing with social media and their evolution

As happens with every piece of research that includes an ethnographic point of view, the methodology that I have adopted has evolved significantly during my investigation. Three elements mainly contributed to these positive modifications. First, I entered in direct contact with activists during my research, participating in their initiatives and observing their local contexts of creation. This contact helped me to understand that I was adopting a naïve, methodologically driven point of view as to how they were organizing their campaign. Second, during the research I started to observe new and continuously changing data, which were less easy to structure but richer in content than I initially believed. Third, I started to shift attention to the complexity of practices that characterized activism on social media platforms: due to the lack of solid tools for examining these online spaces (and, in particular, Facebook) from a relational perspective, the ethnographic part of this work started to become more relevant.

During the research, I gradually shifted the focus from well-structured web data (links, nodes, social media friendships, likes) to less schematic elements and to offline practices, shifting the focus from the traditional web to the entire set of online forms of communication, finally privileging Facebook and the main campaign websites to observe the campaign development. This methodological, and theoretical, change of perspective derives from the fact that during the referendum campaign I noticed that the activists tended to connect the existing online technologies with each other. The same actors produced videos and published them on YouTube, posted links and images on Facebook, communicated with other core activists on a mailing list, and started to create web pages that hosted content created on social media. In doing so, they interacted with numerous online platforms differently, assigning different roles to them. Therefore, as Couldry (2004) and Mattoni (2012) have shown, I came to understand that a perspective centred on the activists' interactions on, about and with these media can contribute better to understanding the relationship between people and online technologies. When I finally decided to concentrate my attention on Facebook, my choice simply followed the one that the activists increasingly made privileging the communication on this platform.

Furthermore, my use of the concept of online network evolved through time, contributing to change the way I conceived the activists' relations, and the methods that I used to trace them. In particular, I started to understand that during a large-scale campaign it is almost impossible, at

least with my limited resources, to observe the fast-growing social media connections involving hundreds of thousands of activists by adopting the rigorous perspective of social network analysis. This methodology works at its best with relatively stable phenomena: therefore, I strongly adopted it to reconstruct a relatively stable online infrastructure, composed of traditional websites. For what concerns social media, I decided to privilege the adoption of qualitative techniques, in order to investigate the complexity of how people interact with these online technologies. Therefore, during my research I gradually abandoned the idea of concentrating attention on a single kind of information (the online connections), deciding instead to collect a larger set of heterogeneous data, in order to avoid oversimplifying the complex social media dynamics that characterized the campaign.

To summarize briefly, these changes of perspective convinced me to shift my research methodology more in the direction of a diffuse ethnography situated between the online and the offline spaces, integrating this qualitative observation with the reconstruction of large-scale, network images of the online campaign.

Data and methods: a final list

The web can be considered as a very broad archive of data, which partially inform us about the communication strategies, the interactions and the activities of the people who write or read online content. In my research, I combined an exploration of the data gathered online with the direct observation of the activities of the people who contributed to the wave of online communication during the water referendum campaign.

During my research, I relied on six kinds of data, two referring to the offline sphere, and four to the online milieu. As regards the offline environment, I based my research on interviews and on participatory observation. For the online techniques, I relied on digital forms of participant observation, the systematic collection of Facebook notifications, the reconstruction of networks between websites (based on the web domain research protocol), and data on the text within websites.

For what concerns the offline data that I collected, during this research I conducted 42 semi-structured interviews with different kinds of activists and supporters, in some cases repeating the interview in different phases of the mobilization.¹⁸ While I initially tried to propose to the activists a common set of questions, the actors that I interviewed proved to be so

18 See the complete list of the interviews at the end of the book.

different and experienced the referendum campaign in such different ways that I decided to leave them relatively free to discuss their own interpretation of the events. In most cases, the questions that I asked were related to behaviours of the actors, which I observed either online or offline. In order to select the people to interview, I decided to reach very different kinds of actors, groups adopting diverging communication strategies, and organizations proposing various ways of interacting online. In particular, I chose to interview, on the one hand, professional or semi-professional figures, such as webmasters, a press agent, designers and bloggers; on the other hand, some interviews with non-skilled activists, such as Facebook users at their first political experience, provided me a complementary perspective on the campaign. Similarly, I interviewed both informal leaders, who were deeply involved in the organization of the campaign, and people belonging to local and less relevant organizations. Finally, I always linked the interviews to some local milieu or initiative: therefore, I attempted to interview, when possible, more than one person for each context whom I considered interesting.

The second offline technique that I applied, participatory observation, proved to be more problematic than the organization and collection of interviews. In numerous cases, the creators of online content were very difficult to observe, because they tended to communicate from home, during their spare time. Furthermore, computers, emails or mobile phones mediated a significant part of the interactions. This notwithstanding, I observed the activities of the central office of FIMA for about one month. I had the opportunity to work within a group of media activists during an international event, and I participated in national assemblies, demonstrations, and a memorable electoral night with them. Finally, I participated in a highly relevant two-day meeting, aimed at collectively planning key media strategies that characterized the campaign. The field notes that I collected during these experiences helped me to understand the everyday routines of the media activists, their connections, and their collective or isolated elaboration of online communication strategies. This direct observation helped me to locate, at least in part, the online activities in specific offline places.

As regards the online methods, I decided during my research that online participant observation – rather than an offline, multi-located one – was the best choice for exploring a very broad and fragmented campaign in its entirety, which was taking place at the same time in very different online media. Therefore, I dedicated a large amount of time to simply observing the activities of the main campaign sites and Facebook groups,

the online communication between activists on the campaign mailing list, the creation of videos for YouTube, and the evolution of the most relevant hashtags on Twitter. I recorded this very long exploration process through traditional field notes, which I analysed in conjunction with the offline notes.

In particular, I have dedicated a special methodological attention to Facebook, the online space that the activists used more than any other during the referendum campaign. Adapting the virtual ethnographic approach to this platform, with a particular attention to the ethical problems connected with the exploration of a semi-private online space, I investigated the activity of about 200 groups. Collecting on a daily basis the notifications related to the campaign, I recorded an important and distributed – even though not statistically representative – part of the very numerous activities related to the referendum that this platform hosted. Even though the data that I collected were, necessarily, online content, I adopted them to reconstruct the everyday online and offline interactions of the activists during the campaign, in an uncommon kind of digital ethnography.¹⁹ In this way, I have been able to observe from inside a constantly evolving sphere of communication, comparing events happening in different parts of Italy, and collecting symbols, leaflets, unexpected practices that the activists were performing both online and offline. The choice of following Facebook derived from my very first steps in the field. The activists and the campaign development through time indicated me that this platform was becoming, in a somehow unexpected way, a crucial resource in this mobilization, convincing me to partially move the focus from the web, the networks of links and the offline interactions surrounding single websites, to the Facebook environment.

In order to link the data collected offline (which tended to be focused on single organizations) with the online data (relatively more focused on the large-scale initiatives), I adopted two techniques to reconstruct web networks. First of all, I selected a particular way in which to trace the structure of the web through the distribution of links among websites. This technique, linked with the software Navicrawler and sometimes labelled as a ‘reconstruction of web domains’, proved to be more effective in tracing in very precise ways large-scale online networks. In particular, I reconstructed with Navicrawler a network of 441 websites linked to the referendum campaign, which I investigated using two social network analysis software programs. Finally, I linked this network analysis of the

19 See Mercea (2013) for a similar approach.

water referendum web domain with a basic investigation of the content of the analysed sites. Using scripts that I had elaborated (on Python and for the Linux tool Wget), I controlled whether numerous keywords were present or absent from the main campaign websites. In this way, I partially reconstructed how content circulates differently at the core and at the periphery of the water web domain.

3 Water Commons

Global movements and the Italian campaign against water privatization

The Italian referendum campaign that opposed the privatization of water services in 2011 was part of a broader, long-lasting process, which pitted two distinct and conflicting paradigms against each other: a market-oriented, neoliberal view on essential resources and services, and an anti-neoliberal view, which considers water as a public good, as a human right, or as part of the commons.

The Italian referendum campaign that I observed is nested in mobilizations that are broader in three ways. Firstly, the referendum campaign is part of a struggle that is more extended in time: a national, single-issue mobilization on water that emerged in 2003, mainly as an Italian ramification of the European Social Forum. Secondly, this long-lasting Italian action is part of a global effort to contrast international processes of water privatization. In particular, the Italian activists developed strong connections with similar struggles in South America and in other European countries, and they participated in well-structured international processes, such as the Alternative World Water Forums or the campaign to convince the United Nations to declare water as a human right. Thirdly, the activists considered water privatization as an extreme example of neoliberal, market-oriented policy. The core of FIMA frequently linked the issue of water privatization to more generic themes, and, in particular, to the privatization of other public services, to the increased influence of the financial sector on the economy and society, to the impact of large-scale water-related projects on local communities.

In this chapter, I describe in detail the successful national referendum campaign that pitted the *Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua* (hereafter FIMA) against the main Italian parties during the spring of 2011. This referendum campaign proved to be one of the most surprising and relevant events in terms of communication and politics in Italy during the last decades, mainly thanks to the very large number of activists that the proposers succeeded in mobilizing, and to the experimentation of new combinations of online and face-to-face campaigning strategies. However, it is impossible to understand the political innovations experimented with during this campaign without broadening the perspective both on the international processes that emerged from the opposition to water privatization attempts,

and on the long-lasting Italian mobilizations that anticipated the emergence of the 2011 referendum. My description, therefore, starts from this broader geographical, historical, and political context.

During the last 20 years, local administrations, states, corporations and intergovernmental organizations have attempted several times to introduce private investments and models based on private intervention into the distribution and management of water, both in Western countries and in the Global South. During the 1990s in particular, these actors often presented the collaboration with private capital and a market-based model as a solution to numerous perceived critical aspects of water management.

Some recurrent concepts guided this perspective. First, the idea that 'water has an economic value in all its competing uses and should be recognized as an economic good' (*Dublin Principles* 1992: Principle 4). Second, the notion that politicians and public enterprises were following goals that differed from the principle of economic efficiency, and therefore tended to fix low prices (see e.g. Savedoff and Spiller 1999). Third, the idea that a profit mechanism could attract private sector investments in the water sector, raising in this way the quality of the service. These ideas went relatively unchallenged for about ten years; gradually, they gave life to policies thanks to significant support from the liberal parties in many Western countries, and to international loan clauses in developing countries.

However, the particular symbolic value of water, its importance for human life and agriculture, and the fears connected with a private and profit-oriented management of this resource led to strong reactions from numerous sectors of society, which organized forms of resistance that in some cases proved to be effective. At the local level, communities as diverse as Cochabamba (Bolivia), Aprilia (Italy), Paris and Berlin opposed water privatization at different moments, adopting a large spectrum of forms of protest, including referendums, unilateral reduction of bills, actions taken by local institutions and – in the crucial case of Cochabamba – successful urban guerrilla action.

These local struggles contributed to developing and diffusing alternative views on water. In particular, activists started to elaborate a complex theoretical framework that proposed considering water as a common good, in this way creating an alternative not only to the neoliberal water policies, but also to the previous public model of water management. Moreover, the issue of water led to the creation of connections between numerous social movement organizations, at different levels. For instance, water became one of the most important themes discussed in social movement processes that already existed, such as the European Social Forum, helping at the same

time to create new national, continental and global networks that opposed water privatization and neoliberal policies in other sectors.

I have structured this chapter to demonstrate how the Italian campaign is part of this general framework, although at the same time developing its peculiarities through time and through continuous dialectical relations with the national context and its political actors.

The sections of this chapter move, therefore, from the broad scale of action to the particular case under study. In the first section, I dedicate my attention to the global struggles around the issue of water, aiming at understanding how the opposed paradigms of private management and of water commons emerged and came into conflict in numerous geographical contexts. I will first describe these different paradigms and their evolution through time. Secondly, I briefly present some of the most important international contexts that influenced the Italian case in a more profound way, focusing on Latin America and the rest of Europe. In particular, the mainstream neoliberal solutions and the alternative models of water management gave life through the years to two opposite international processes. Following the model of the World Social Forum, which first emerged to contrast the World Economic Forum meetings, the water activists gave life to a series of events labelled 'Alternative World Water Forums', which aimed at delegitimizing the meetings of the private-oriented World Water Forum.

The second section of this chapter examines the evolution through time of the Italian water struggle, and of the network of organizations that is working on the issue of water privatization. This evolution strongly depends, in a kind of dialectical opposition, on the continuous privatization attempts that Italian political and economic forces have proposed in recent years. Therefore, I first discuss these legal attempts to privatize or change the forms of water distribution and sewage services, presenting in this way the external framework within which FIMA emerged. Secondly, I describe the rise of FIMA, and its links with earlier or contemporaneous social movement processes, such as the European Social Forum.

The third section presents the main object of my research, the Italian referendum campaign centred on the issue of water privatization. In the first part of this section, I describe the political context and the policies that convinced FIMA activists to engage in a difficult and long-lasting referendum campaign for public water. The second part of the section presents a timeline of the campaign: from November 2009 to June 2011, I observed four phases of mobilization, distinguishing moments of mass participation as well as moments of less diffuse activity.

In the fourth and final section, I trace the system of alliances, collaborations, and conflicts that the organizations involved in the campaign created entering into relations with other actors. The referendum promoters established connections that in numerous cases evolved during the campaign, giving life to new and unexpected forms of cooperation or – less frequently – tensions. I focus attention on the relationship between FIMA and three different actors. First of all, the referendum promoters interacted with the main political parties, which in numerous cases gradually became willing to offer external, conditional support to the campaign. Second, the activists of the Forum increasingly collaborated with groups that were proposing two additional referendums, held on the same dates as the water ones. Third, I describe the role of some mainstream media during the referendum, and their positions towards the campaign. On these media, and, in particular, on the national televisions and in the main newspapers, activists and opponents entered in conflict, but also performed and reinterpreted part of the campaign.

3.1 The Global Context

Water marketization or water as a common good: two paradigms

The mobilization around the issue of water, on a global scale, constitutes one side of a vehement conflict between two models. The first of these models sees water as a commodity, which the market should contribute to distribute in an efficient way. The second model emerged as a reaction to the expansion of the first one, and it considers water to be a human right and as part of the commons.

The fierce debate in which these two frameworks and the policies connected with them take opposing sides is complex and multifaceted, and started at least 20 years ago. Furthermore, it concerns numerous fields of research, from law to economics, and connected themes, such as environmentalism, human rights and globalization. In this section, I give a short overview of these two models, focusing on how they emerged and came into in conflict.²⁰

20 Since this book focuses only in part on this debate, I refer to other works for further information. See Harris *et al.* (2013), Morgan (2011), Prasad (2008), Liotard (2009) and Bakker (2007). From the movement perspective, see Shiva (2003), Petrella (2001), Altamore (2006) and *Public Citizen* (2003).

As numerous authors connected with the public water positions stress (e.g. Petrella 2001: 71; *Public Citizen* 2003; Altamore 2006: 20), the pressure to privatize or to include private participation in the distribution of water is relatively recent. At least until the 1970s, modern capitalist states conceived of water management as a public service, instead of as an economic good, mainly due to its relevance for human life, to its importance for public health, and to the fact that water distribution is a natural monopoly. The private, market-based paradigm has slowly emerged over the last 30 years: even though France was, and still is, the country where private participation in water management developed, it is possible to link this evolution with ideas that emerged during the Thatcher and Reagan era, and with the privatization of other sectors (Liotard 2009: 123).

Ballance and Taylor (2005) describe these processes as a series of modifications regarding public services, and monopolies in particular. The authors define these new tendencies as:

Radical changes in the approach to public policy for infrastructure industries worldwide. Issues of natural monopoly, competition, regulation and the appropriate role for public and private sectors have been rethought leading to extensive industry restructuring and privatization, and often the establishment of new regulatory agencies. (*Ibid.*: 34)

To summarize briefly, the supporters of the privatization of water services (which is a framework that institutions and states apply in different ways) conceive of states and local authorities as unable to plan efficient investment in the water sector mainly due to two factors. First, they assume that public actors follow goals that are not economic, but political: administrators are, according to this view, privileging electoral consensus over the efficiency of the system. Therefore, public authorities are described as supporting a rise in the number of workers and in their salaries, at the same time fixing prices at a level that is too low and unsustainable (Savedoff and Spiller 1999: 1-31). The supporters of privatization have proposed, therefore, to increase the prices of water and to reduce the number of employees: according to this view, only full-cost tariffs can produce investments in the water services, efficient networks of distribution, and effective sanitation systems (Cosgrove and Rijsberman 2000: 31). Second, the supporters of the role of the private investments have depicted the public sector, in particular in countries in the South, as an actor that does not have the capital needed to plan necessary investments in the water systems. They present, therefore, the intervention of private actors as a way of solving water scarcity crises.

As a corollary, the idea of 'market environmentalism' (Bakker 2007: 39-40) or 'green neoliberalism' (Goldman 2006) emerged, too: here, the idea that water is a scarce resource with an economic value (*Dublin Principles* 1992) is seen as a better approach to protecting it. This view, which combines efficiency, industrialization, private investments, and the role of the market in the water sector, met with a large consensus during the 1990s, among both states and intergovernmental institutions. In particular, activists have pointed to the World Bank as the main actor that pushed (through its loan mechanism) for privatization or public-private partnerships in numerous countries (Shiva 2003; *Food and Water Watch* 2009; Petrella 2001).

Harris *et al.* (2013) interestingly describe the 'pro-private' framework as focused on three hegemonic concepts: the ideas of scarcity, market/privatization, and participation. Moreover, they observed that activists are creating a counter-hegemonic framework, elaborated through struggles, during forums, and in political manifestos. The most visible alternative perspective emerged within the global justice movement and the Social Forum process, in connection with numerous local struggles against the privatization of water services.

In the activists' view, privatization and the commercialization of water are an extreme case of neoliberal policies: they are seen as not only unable to provide water for all in a fair way, but as policies that can artificially create scarcity, expropriate resources from local communities in favour of corporations, and divert the use of water from essential purposes. In particular, activists contest that private investors act in a natural monopoly, and tend therefore to accumulate profits without the need to make investments in the service. Moreover, they stress the fact that the privatization of water services attracts just a few giant multinational corporations, which increasingly control this market and invest only in urban, economically prosperous contexts.

More specifically, activists have focused their criticism on three very powerful arguments. First, the fact that attempts to privatize water distribution have resulted in failure in many cases (Liotard 2009; *Public Citizen* 2003): private participation, they show, did not increase the quality and investments in the sector, but actually resulted in higher tariffs and exclusion from the service. Second, they assert that apparently neutral international organizations (such as the World Bank) and multi-stakeholder organizations (primarily, the World Water Council) had a relationship with or were even controlled by corporations active in the sector (Petrella 2001; Shiva 2003; Altamore 2006). The third argument is based on the idea that the privatization promoters consider this policy as good for ideological reasons, starting

from the neoliberal assumption that 'inherently greater efficiency of private competitive markets is an established fact' (Liotard 2009: 123).

At the same time, water activists participating in local and global water struggles have developed their own model and ideas on how to manage water, which does not coincide with the state-based model that the privatization promoters criticize. In particular, they have developed a proposal that goes beyond the traditional, uncontrolled public management model, and instead considers water as commons (Ciervo 2010: 12; Petrella 2001; Shiva 2003). This choice owes much to the research insights of authors such as Elinor Ostrom (Ostrom 1990; Ostrom and Keohane 1995) who criticize the 'classic' economic idea of the tragedy of the commons. Moving from this basis, the water activists maintain that citizens can promote a more efficient and green use of water than the one based on privatization and market-driven solutions. In the activists' view, the control over prices, decisions of the local authorities, environmental issues, and problems of corruption should rely, therefore, on citizen participation. Water activists thus strongly link the issue of water management with the idea of participatory democracy, conceived both as a tool for opposing privatization attempts, and as a prefigurative model that they attempt to apply in local contexts.

Even though these political and economic concepts constitute the core of the activists' proposals, other cultural elements distinguish their view from that of the supporters of privatization. One of these elements is the opposition (in most organizations) to large-scale, purely industrial models of water management. These organizations oppose large dams, the artificialization of rivers, and intensive use of water in agriculture not only because such projects are inherently related to the use of private capital and private investment, but also because they are too anthropocentric, and based only on the needs of urban populations. The public water coalitions gave life to a more holistic and ecological view, which perceives humans as part of their environment (Shiva 2003; Gutiérrez Aguilar *et al.* 2008). In particular, the Bolivian experience and other water mobilizations from the Global South contributed to the emergence of this last perspective.

Struggle and political processes at the international level

The attempts to privatize water resources are part of processes that mainly happen on a global scale: a small number of corporations that invest in this sector interact with cities, states, and intergovernmental organizations, giving life to privatization experiments in every continent. Similarly, social movement organizations have activated numerous different channels

through which they oppose these attempts, and to broader market-led solutions in the management of water resources. Initially, the activists involved in these experiences mainly faced institutions and corporations at the local level. Gradually, these experiences created connections among themselves, with broader movement networks that opposed neoliberal politics, and, in particular, with the Social Forum process. International trade unions and public service-related networks, environmental groups, organizations active in other water-related issues (construction of big dams, agriculture, fair land use), and networks defending the rights of indigenous communities began to constitute the basis for a long-lasting, global, single-issue mobilization.

In this section, I limit my focus for reason of spaces to two geographical areas that are particularly relevant for understanding the Italian case: Europe and Latin America. Furthermore, I describe the Alternative World Water Forum, one of the main international processes that opposes the penetration of the private paradigm within international institutions.²¹

Latin America: the Cochabamba case

Latin America is probably the area where attempts to privatize water have encountered the strongest resistance, and met their first failures. In particular, the continent hosted what can be seen as the most visible failure of a privatization attempt and the main turning point (Gutiérrez Aguilar *et al.* 2008: 18) for global mobilization on this issue, the Cochabamba Water War (Ciervo 2010; Martinelli 2011; Kohl and Farthing 2006; Assies 2003; Shiva 2003; *Public Citizen* 2003). This event proved to be crucial for the Italian campaigns on water, due to the frequent direct contacts between Italian and Bolivian organizations and activists, and to the influence that the Cochabamba experience had on the symbolic repertoire of the Italian actors.

To summarize briefly, the privatization of water distribution in Cochabamba mainly followed the suggestions of the World Bank to the Bolivian government, suggestions that quickly became policies due to the conditions attached to World Bank loans. Furthermore, both the privatization attempt and the protests in the city came immediately after the introduction of the water law, *Ley 2029* (1999), which paved the way for a marketization

21 Water activism has proved to be crucial in another high-level process: on 28 July 2010, the United Nations declared that water is a human right, in a resolution approved with 122 positive votes (Res A/RES/64/292). However, I do not focus in this book on the complex process that preceded and permitted this key vote (but see e.g. Petrella 2001; Bakker 2007).

of the Bolivian water systems. In particular, Kohl and Farthing (2006) observe that this law granted two rights to the concession holders, which had a strong impact on the mobilization. First of all, it gave 'exclusive rights within a given area, forcing all water users to enter contracts with the concession holder' (Assies 2003: 17, cited in Kohl and Farthing 2006: 163). In other words, it prohibited the use of alternative systems, such as direct rain collection, and 'privatized the use of natural springs managed by the *regantes*, the farmers who traditionally oversee water collection in the Andes' (Gutiérrez Aguilar *et al.* 2008: 18). Second, it created a national organ that 'could bypass local governments and water consumers' (Kohl and Farthing 2006: 163), allowing concessions to be defined at the state level, behind closed doors.

The national government privatized the water of Cochabamba on 3 September 1999, about two months before the introduction of *Ley 2029*. Water management passed into the hands of the consortium *Aguas del Tunari*, which included – among others – the American corporation Bechtel, the British International Water Limited, the Italian Edison, and the Spanish Abengoa (Altamore 2006: 29). *Aguas del Tunari* immediately met with a strong reaction in the area. In particular, Gutiérrez Aguilar *et al.* (2008: 35-40) identify three kinds of actors, coalesced in the local network *La Coordinadora*, who initiated the protest. These actors were the *regantes*, organized farmers who were already opposing in the previous year to local attempts to reorganize the water system; the *Federation de los Fabriles*, the local branch of a trade union of factory workers; and numerous environmental organizations and professional orders, united, in particular, in the Committee of Water Defence.

After months of massive and increasingly radical protests, and of violent reactions from local authorities, culminating in six days of urban guerrilla action from 4 to 10 April 2000,²² the *Coordinadora* succeeded in ending the privatization experiment, blocking at the same time *Ley 2029*. Through this struggle, activists showed the world the level of violence that a privatization attempt could reach, and pushed the issue of water to the global level (Assies 2003; Ciervo 2010; Kohl and Farthing 2006).

The echoes of this victory contributed to the creation of a political alternative to water privatization attempts in other Latin American countries. In Argentina, the private concession of the city of Buenos Aires was revoked in 2006. In 2004, the Uruguayan citizens approved with a referendum a constitutional reform that impeded private participation in water services.

22 For a complete timeline, see Gutiérrez Aguilar *et al.* (2008: 18).

Similarly, Bolivia and Ecuador introduced the right to water in their constitutions, while Colombian citizens asked for a referendum on this issue in 2010 (Gutiérrez Aguilar *et al.* 2008: 121).

Europe

While in Latin America an umbrella organization called *Red Vida* (Life Network) connects the actions on the water issue through numerous national contexts, constituting a well-established network since 2003, in Europe the initiatives against the privatization of water mainly emerged, for many years, on the local level. While in Italy the water mobilization relatively quickly passed from a region (Tuscany) to the national scale, connecting numerous territorial instances, this pattern remained somewhat uncommon in the rest of the continent. In France, for instance, the main conflict between the private/commons paradigms regarded single cities, and, in particular, Paris. In the French capital, the private giants GDF Suez and Veolia were controlling water distribution and sewage, the former on the left bank and the latter on the right bank of the River Seine. Through traditional forms of political pressure, the mayor and other institutional actors succeeded in ending the concessions to these private companies, promoting a completely public management of water as an alternative. In November 2008, the municipality decided to create a public, citizen-controlled water administration, named Eau de Paris: this change had a strong symbolic impact on other contexts, including the Italian one, mainly because both Veolia and GDF Suez are French corporations based in Paris (Pigeon 2012).

In Germany, activists similarly achieved in 2010 the end of private participation in the water management of Berlin, in this case through a local referendum. In Spain, a strong coalition of trade unions, traditional left-oriented organizations, and new groups linked to the 15-M protests fiercely opposed to the privatization of the Madrid water company Canal de Isabel II.

The European movements attempted to create a European Network for Water on two occasions: firstly, without success, during the European Social Forum in Malmö (2008); secondly, during a meeting organized in Naples in December 2011 and at the Alternative World Water Forum of Marseille in March 2012. During the last year, a European water coalition has finally emerged: 9 organizers and 140 networks have adopted for the first time a new tool for direct democracy, the European Citizens' Initiative, to promote the implementation of the Right to Water at the European level. On 23 September 2013, the promoters of this initiative presented 1,857,605

signatures of support to the European institutions, revitalizing the debate on water management at the European level.

The World Water Forums and the emergence of the Alternative World Water Forums

During the first wave of privatization attempts, the market-oriented proposals for water and its management appeared as neutral solutions, which most international institutions naturally accepted as valid. One of the main aims of the movements opposed to this discourse was, therefore, to propose an alternative view towards water, and to portray commonly accepted solutions in a different light, presenting them instead as openly neoliberal policies.

The anti-privatization networks attempted to achieve this result by following a strategy that strongly drew from the previous experiences of the Social Forums. The water activists identified the international political processes where corporations and institutions were interacting and developing water-related proposals, and started to oppose these processes by building a parallel series of counter-events.

One of the political events that the activists pointed to as a source of neoliberal discourse on water is the World Water Forum, a meeting that has taken place about every three years since 1997, and is currently on its seventh round. The World Water Council, an international umbrella organization that groups water corporations, institutions and organizations, is the main organizer of these forums, which also host private, institutional and social actors to discuss water-related policies. The World Water Forum hosts informal ministerial meetings that have produced certain political documents supporting the participation of the private sector in water distribution, such as the so-called 'Bonn Keys' (2001). In particular, authors describe the Council as 'a think-tank', or 'a curious amalgam of business-based NGOs and large corporations' (Morgan 2011: 6).

National and continental networks of organizations reacted to this process by creating the Alternative World Water Forums, initiated in 2003 and reaching its fifth round in 2012. Starting from the third round, in 2006, the activists organized the alternative forums in the same city that hosted the World Water Forum, with the aim of presenting themselves as a different possibility, opposed to what they recognized as a process entirely guided by multinational corporations and private capital. This strategy proved to be highly successful in 2009, during the fifth round of the World Water Forum hosted in Istanbul. On this occasion, an important gap started to emerge between the World Water Forum proposals and the views of the United Nations on water. In particular, the delegate of the United Nations, Maude

Barlow, a core activist in a Canadian network opposing to water privatization, read during the event a very critical statement from the president of the General Assembly of the United Nations. Among other things, the president of the 63rd General Assembly directly criticized both the notion of water as an economic good, and the structure of the World Water Forum:

We must challenge the notion that water is a commodity to be bought and sold on the open market. [...] [T]he World Water Forum is currently structured in a way that precludes partnerships with the advocates of the principles mentioned above. The Forum's orientation is profoundly influenced by private water companies. This is evident by the fact that both the president of the World Water Council and the alternate president are deeply involved with provision of private, for-profit, water services. (President of the General Assembly of the United Nations 2009)

The Alternative World Water Forums never limited its activities to the initiatives that could be undertaken for opposing the World Water Forum process. Instead, these meetings became a place to elaborate and diffuse a new water paradigm, based on the 'water commons' principles, to discuss policies, and build partnerships. Furthermore, the alternative forums enabled activists to connect with other struggles, spreading common issues and symbolic elements. During the Alternative Forum of Marseille 2012, for instance, water activists coming from indigenous contexts were able to describe their alternative models of water management. Trade unions from the public sector discussed new models of public-public partnership, in opposition to the public-private ones. Activists shared and watched dozens of documentaries and films on water conflicts, contributing in this way to build a common cultural background. Networks that oppose the construction of large dams in countries of the Global South were able to interact with European organizations, centred in the countries where the corporations planning the dams were based.

3.2 *Acqua Bene Comune*: the growth of the Italian water coalition

The political and legal context: attempts to privatize water in Italy

Following a trend that has characterized numerous national contexts since the 1990s, in Italy various governments have slowly attempted to transform

the distribution and sanitation of water from an entirely public municipal system, to a private or partially private service.²³

Among the numerous national and regional laws that contributed to this change, two authors involved in the Italian water movements, Margherita Ciervo (2010) and Luca Martinelli (2011), have pointed to three crucial legal steps in this process. They are the reform of the water system included in the so-called *Legge Galli* of 1994,²⁴ Article 23-bis of Law 133/2008, and the modifications to this last article included in the so-called *Decreto Ronchi*.²⁵ The legislators introduced the first law as a complete reform of the water system, in a context where the movements against water privatization had not yet emerged and the issue was not, therefore, a conflictual one. In contrast, the other two legal interventions arrived almost fifteen years later, in order to sustain private investments in the water sector, and to directly oppose water mobilizations that were already beginning to demonstrate their strength.

The so-called *Legge Galli* introduced a complete reform of the legal principles regarding water management, which previously had been regulated through a chaotic and large number of laws. In particular, the *Legge Galli* introduced the concept of the Integrated Water Service, incorporating water distribution, sanitation, water waste and pollution treatments into a single legal and administrative system. Inspired by both market and environmental principles, the law contributed to delineating the future privatization attempts in three ways. Firstly, it reduced the number of administrations dealing with water from about 8,000 municipalities to fewer than a hundred authorities, known as the *Autorità d'Ambito Territoriale Ottimale* (Optimized Territorial District Authority, hereafter AATO).

While the water activists generally considered this part of the reform as positive, the AATOs tended to follow the boundaries of the local water basins, facilitating in this way a large-scale, industrial management of water distribution that generally requires similarly large investment (see

23 This section should be considered as an introduction to a topic that is mainly of interest to legal scholars. For a more detailed account, I refer the reader to other works (Altamore 2006; Martinelli 2011; Ciervo 2010; Oddi 2008; Canitano *et al.* 2008), which I adopted as my main sources for this overview.

24 The journalistic expression *Legge Galli* refers to Law 36, 5 January 1994, '*Disposizioni in materia di risorse idriche*', then included in Law Decree 152/2006.

25 The expression *Decreto Ronchi* refers to Article 15 of Decree 135/09, converted into Law 166/2009. In Italy, journalists and activists tend to identify controversial laws with a simplified label, starting from the name of the law proposers. I decided to adopt these simplified labels, when available, because they are much more widespread in public opinion than the corresponding legal terms.

Oddi 2008: 256).²⁶ Secondly, the reform openly permitted different models to commission the actor responsible for the water management, without excluding private companies. In particular, the public administrators could directly assign this service to a public company, or they could commission an external actor – public or private – through a call for tenders. Thirdly, this law introduced in Italy the full-cost principle in water management, including in this cost not only the expenses for increasing the quality of water and reduce after-use pollution, but also the so-called financial remuneration of the invested capital. This last label indicates an extra cost (at least an additional fixed 7 per cent in the bills) that local water companies had the right to charge to the consumers. The legislators, in this way, introduced an economic modification in the water sector, determining a fixed and granted profit in order to stimulate investments.

In practical terms, the modifications that the *Legge Galli* introduced contributed to produce two effects. Firstly, this law permitted the birth of numerous large companies that started to provide water services in the main Italian urban areas. Even if some of these companies were entirely public, they were present on the stock market, and merged several times with other similar companies or with other groups related to urban services. According to the activists, the resulting groups – usually called ‘multi-utilities’ – slowly became difficult to control for both the public authorities and for the citizens of the area. Secondly, this law facilitated the entry into the Italian market of very large multinational corporations specialized in the water sector. In particular, the French corporations Veolia/Vivendi and GDF Suez participated in the water distribution of numerous Italian cities, often adopting local Italian multi-utilities as a sort of ‘Trojan horse’ to enter into the national market).²⁷ The mobilizations against water privatization and the rise of the Italian Forum of Water Movements emerged with the aim of opposing both this legal framework and the resulting penetration of private capital and private management in the water sector.

A second wave of legal proceedings regarding the water service and its privatization arrived almost fifteen years later, firstly through Article 23-bis of Law 133/2008, and then through the modifications to this article included in the *Decreto Ronchi* (Article 15, Law 166/2009). These two connected legislative interventions arrived in a context in which the water movements were

26 A press release of the Tuscan Forum states, for instance, that: ‘Among the positive elements of the Law Galli of 1994 [...] there is the definition of the Optimal Territorial District’ (*Acqua Bene Comune* 2011a).

27 See e.g. Oddi (2008: 260) and Ciervo (2010: 99) for a description of these transactions.

already very active on a national scale, and were already proposing a citizens' initiative campaign to introduce a law based on the 'water as a common good' principle. During the previous two years, these movements had made serious objections to the parliament, putting pressure on the centre-left majority to stop privatization attempts, and to support their alternative view regarding this resource.

Article 23-bis and the *Decreto Ronchi* intervened during a very different phase: in April 2008, Berlusconi led his right-wing coalition to victory, giving him the opportunity to become prime minister for the fourth time, easily controlling the two chambers of parliament. Furthermore, none of the left-oriented and Green parties was present in the parliament, and the main opposition party – the *Partito Democratico* (Democratic Party) – was divided regarding the water issue, with many of its top members openly supporting neoliberal or industrial management of this resource. Therefore, Berlusconi's coalition decided to encourage the entrance of private actors in the water services, building a legal framework to support this idea. The advocates of privatization perceived these new laws as necessary, especially considering the rising opposition that their attempts were encountering among society, as well as the fact that most AATOs were still opting for the public management of water (Martinelli 2011).

To summarize briefly, Article 23-bis and the *Decreto Ronchi*, respectively, proposed a call for tenders as the normal procedure to selecting which actor could better manage the local water sector, and required the participants in these calls to have at least 40 per cent of their stock in the hands of private investors. Furthermore, the *Decreto Ronchi* stipulated that the in-house, public water services should end their activities before 31 December 2011. In order to justify this procedure – a *de facto* forced privatization – the legislators always referred in the text to the entire set of public local services, and claimed that these modifications were explicitly included in a European Union directive.

As can easily be understood, the water activists immediately perceived these two articles, and, in particular, the one of the *Decreto Ronchi*, as an attempt of the government to ensure that it would win the conflicts over water privatization, imposing the private management – or the mixed private-public management – as the only possible framework. Furthermore, by imposing a well-defined deadline at the end of 2011, the right-wing majority forced the water activists to immediately act against these laws and oppose their implementation.

Starting from this context, the Italian Forum of Water Movements decided to directly oppose this legal framework, choosing the most important

instrument of direct democracy in Italy, the national referendum, as a tool to abolish the 7 per cent fixed quota dedicated for repaying the invested capital, and the compulsory calls for tenders included in the *Decreto Ronchi* and in previous legislation.

The evolution of the Italian Forum of Water Movements

In Italy, about ten years of mobilization on various scales preceded the victory of the water referendum campaign. This mobilization, of a very long duration for an action on a single issue, coincided to a great extent with the creation and development of the *Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua*. Acting as an umbrella group and as an autonomous political organization, the FIMA process stimulated the building of connections between the local water struggles and other, very different kinds of organizations, the promotion of initiatives on water on a national scale, and the transformation of the water issue into one of the main topics on the Italian political agenda.

As the name of this network suggests, the Forum of Water Movements directly descends from the World Social Forum. Within this broader process, activists already saw the water issue as a particularly relevant one. This is especially true for the Italian activists involved in the World Social Forum, who strongly contributed to getting the water theme on the agenda and supported the creation of global networks of water-related movements. In particular, Riccardo Petrella, one of the founders of the Italian branch of the organization *Comitato Istituzionale per il Contratto Mondiale dell'Acqua* (Committee for the Institution of the World Water Contract) was very active on this issue. Among other things, he launched a Water Manifesto (Petrella 2001), and organized the main seminar on water as a common good during the second Porto Alegre Social Forum.

In particular, FIMA has its roots in two international meetings, which were held in Florence in 2002 and 2003. One of these gatherings was the first European Social Forum. During the event – held in November 2002 – Florence hosted about 60,000 delegates over three days, and a group of activists decided to create an internal platform dedicated to water. Starting from this experience, some international organizations and Italian networks promoted the second event, the first Alternative World Water Forum, entirely dedicated to water and held on 21 and 22 March 2003 in Florence. The main aim of this Forum was to act on a global scale, in order to oppose private water corporations' control over the World Water Forums. A first nucleus of core Italian water activists emerged from this experience: these activists were very central in the Italian movements connected with the Social

Forum process; furthermore, some of them were members of powerful Italian organizations or networks. These actors mobilized by starting from the assumption that through water, they could present to the rest of the society the ideas of participatory democracy, commons, alternatives to privatization and, in general, a new social paradigm opposed to the dominant neoliberal one.

Different kinds of organizations were part of this initial core, testifying to both the internal differences among the actors that participated in the Social Forums in Italy and the number of actors interested in the water issue. These included organizations dealing with alternative views on the economy, cultural organizations linked to the Italian leftist milieu, environmentalist networks, organizations already focusing on the water issue, associations for consumer rights, groups dedicated to different agriculture models, and a Catholic, eco-pacifist network.²⁸ Over the following years, most of the organizations and numerous activists who organized the event maintained a central position within FIMA and in the various waves of water mobilizations.

Nevertheless, the campaign on water privatization quickly evolved into a process that was largely autonomous from that of the Social Forum. Starting from the Alternative World Water Forum of Florence, numerous local organizations involved in this event decided to coalesce into a stable regional network dedicated to water, initially called the *Tavolo Toscano dell'Acqua* (Tuscany Water Panel). This network – by now called the *Forum Toscano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua* (Tuscan Forum of Water Movements) – presented and launched a first large-scale campaign in summer 2004, during two regional Social Forum events held in the towns of Stia and Piombino (*Corriere Etrusco* 2004). The campaign was a regional citizens' initiative, which aimed at supporting the introduction of a regional law for a different form of water management in Tuscany. Actually, the issue of water was a particularly relevant theme in this region, which hosted the first Italian cases of water privatization, following a private-public partnership model that the centre-left party *Democratici di Sinistra* had strongly encouraged.

28 According to the programme of the first Alternative World Water Forum, for instance, the following Italian actors contributed to give life to this event: CEVI, ARCI, ATTAC Italia, Comitato Italiano Per il Contratto Mondiale dell'Acqua, ADUSBEF, Altragricoltura, Forum Sociale Firenze, Tavolo nazionale contro la privatizzazione, Forum Ambientalista, Legambiente, WWF Italia, Rete Lilliput, Associazione Consumatori Utenti, Associazione culturale Punto Rosso, Tavolo nazionale contro la privatizzazione, Campagna contro la Banca mondiale, Cantierisociali-Carta, SlowFood, AMREF (1st Alternative Water Forum 2003). For the acronyms, see the 'list of abbreviations' in the preface of this book.

Between February and August 2005, the *Forum Toscano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua* rapidly gained the support of numerous local administrators, workers in the water sectors, political parties and other organizations, which helped to spread the campaign and to quickly collect 42,932 signatures supporting the regional law proposal. Even if the law was finally dismissed with the negative vote of the main centre-left and right-wing parties in November 2006 (*Acqua Bene Comune Toscana* 2006), the activists regarded the *Forum Toscano* and the citizens' initiative as a successful experiment in mobilization, and the water issue as one able to gather an unexpected level of support from citizens and organized social actors. Therefore, this campaign constituted a model that the activists decided to replay on a national scale, following very similar steps.

As its name attests, the Italian Forum of Water Movements recognizes its roots as lying in the Tuscan Forum of Water Movements. The activists started to conceive of and organize FIMA with five national meetings, held between July 2005 and January 2006 in five cities in central and southern Italy (Cecina, Florence, Roma, Napoli and Pescara). During these meetings, numerous types of actors interacted: delegates coming from the experience of Tuscany, representatives of organizations involved in the aforementioned Social Forums of Florence, activists from local committees formed to deal with water privatization conflicts. At this stage, delegates of sympathetic political parties were also present and active, sometimes with key roles. In this preliminary phase, around a hundred core activists decided how to frame the main sub-issues of the Forum, and produced a map of the Italian conflicts over water, also trying to involve the local actors in the constitution of FIMA.

The Italian Forum was officially born at a three-day event, held in Rome between 10 and 12 March 2006. In numerous seminars, organizations jointly framed the water controversies, and decided to connect the various local struggles regarding water privatization into a national, joint initiative. From this moment, FIMA became an actor on the Italian political scene: it acted in the name of numerous organizations and territorial networks, and it formed complex dialectic relationships with these local contexts, with other national political actors, and with the Italian institutions and legal system.

Before embarking upon the complex referendum campaign that is the main object of this research, the main national action undertaken by the Forum was a citizens' initiative, which followed the successful experimental strategy in Tuscany and demonstrated FIMA's great ability to mobilize thousands of citizens on a national scale. Numerous delegates collectively discussed the text of this legislative proposal (*Acqua Bene Comune* 2006),

reaching a definitive document in October 2006. In the first seven months of 2007, FIMA and a growing coalition of organized actors started to collect signatures to support the initiative, finally reaching 406,626 signatures. From this point on, the Forum and its local branches began to support the legal proposal in two ways, in both parliament and the regions. In the parliament, they both presented the initiative to various commissions, and asked the left and green parties supporting the campaign to represent the Forum's ideas within the institutions. In the local territories, they launched a first national demonstration for water on 1 December 2007, a second Italian Forum of Water Movements in November 2008, and undertook numerous other local protest initiatives (*Acqua Bene Comune* 2010).

This citizens' proposal did not succeed in changing the legislative framework on water. Initially, the parliament reacted to the mobilizations and petition by approving a one-year suspension of new water privatizations. This notwithstanding, on 6 August 2008 the newly elected parliament, with a large centre-right majority and a complete absence of the radical left and green parties, approved the already presented Article 23-bis of Law 133/08, which strongly encouraged privatization attempts. Finally, the citizens' initiative started to be discussed in the parliament on 29 January 2009, but the two chambers definitely decided to follow an opposite direction, promoting a framework that supported the extensive privatization of water-management services through the so-called *Decreto Ronchi*.

The creation of FIMA and the long-lasting petition campaign of 2008 gave the organizations working on the water issue the opportunity to experiment with initiatives for direct democracy. Moreover, it enabled the activists to observe the high level of consensus supporting their campaigns, creating deep roots for the FIMA network in the Italian regions. Trade unions, local administrations, and volunteers from the organizations or the local branches of numerous political parties developed forms of rapid collaboration that they later adopted in the 2011 referendum. Furthermore, the constitution of FIMA and its campaigns enabled this network of organizations to engage in a widespread and direct communication with the citizens, and to represent for many of them a model of political activism perceived as different from the one of the main political parties.

To conclude, the long process that started at the Florence Forums and eventually led to the water referendum campaign profoundly transformed the social movement actors who promoted these actions. Even though this transformation has numerous dimensions, one is in my opinion particularly relevant: that numerous activists gradually transformed a single, very practical issue into a theme that was able to produce a partially independent

element of identity. Within the broader social movement networks that sustained this campaign, a large group of ‘water people’ created flags, websites, songs and documentaries. In this process, the continuous contacts with external citizens surely influenced this transformation, because it encouraged the water activists to simplify their proposals, and to present themselves as a unified, immediately recognizable political actor.

3.3 The 2011 Referendum Campaign against Water Privatization in Italy

Obstacles and facilitating factors in the choice to held a referendum

The Italian referendum campaign on the issue of water privatization was a process that involved from 2009 to 2011 different kinds of political actors and millions of Italian citizens and voters, deeply affecting the evolution of the Italian politics in the following years. The idea of proposing three national referendums emerged within FIMA at the end of 2009, with the aim of legally challenging the attempts to privatize water-management services in Italy, and of promoting the idea that water is a common good.

The referendum proposal openly attempted to change the entire legislation regarding water, and to definitely abolish the legal principles that permitted different forms of water privatization since 1994. However, the campaign was mainly born in order to oppose a single legislative act, the aforementioned *Decreto Ronchi*, which the activists perceived as a definitive decision of the government to openly support the private water paradigm. As I explained in the previous section, when the parliament approved this decree there was already in Italy a large coalition of social movement actors gathered around the water theme, and this coalition was ready to react to the government decision.

However, the Italian Forum of Water Movements and the organizations supporting it proved to be very ambitious in choosing to start a referendum campaign as their way of opposing the new law. In 2009, numerous political parties and most of the media saw the referendum – the most important instrument of direct democracy that the Italian constitution permits – as an ineffective tool. Since in Italy a national referendum requires a minimum quota of voters (50 per cent plus one of the citizens with the right to vote, the *quorum*) to be valid, and the participation in elections has declined during the last decades, in 2009 most political actors considered the referendum campaigns as almost impossible to win. During the fifteen years that

preceded the water campaign, none of the referendums that parties and civil society actors proposed had been able to reach the legal limit of the *quorum*.

Furthermore, the Italian political forces that had opposed these previous referendums elaborated a very effective strategy to make the consultations fail, using the *quorum* limit to their advantage. Instead of promoting a parallel campaign for a negative vote, they invited their supporters to abstain from voting in the referendum, and they attempted to divert the attention of the media from the consultation. Since these strategies enabled the 'no' supporters to group together the normal rate of non-voters, the percentage of citizens boycotting the referendum, and the population who lacked information due to scarce media coverage, they proved to be successful numerous times. Consequently, these practices slowly tended to discourage political actors from asking for a referendum.

In addition, the water referendum proposers chose an even more difficult path, because they decided to refuse the presence of political parties within the committee of promoters: while some parties immediately backed the consultation, they had the right to participate only through an external committee of support, or relying on the independent involvement of their militants.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, numerous aspects can explain why FIMA decided to ask for a referendum. Among them, I believe that two 'external' factors, related to the Italian political spectrum, and an 'internal' one, related to the characteristics of the movement, were particularly relevant. As regards the political situation, in 2009 numerous well-organized parties, which were openly encouraging the FIMA actions, for the first time were not present in the Italian parliament (in particular, *Rifondazione Comunista*, the Federation of the Greens, and *Sinistra Ecologia Libertà*), or had not yet participated in a national political election (the *Movimento 5 Stelle*, or Five Star Movement). At the same time, the ambiguous positions of the two main centre-left parties regarding the water issue, the *Partito Democratico* (Democratic Party, hereafter PD) and the *Italia dei Valori*, determined an almost complete absence of wholly sympathetic and supportive forces able to back the FIMA actions in parliament. This lack of stable channels of communication with the institutions, combined with the high level of organization of the Forum and of the parties sustaining it, contributes to explain why the FIMA actor decided to rely on a risky and difficult referendum campaign to oppose the privatization of water. As regards the characteristics of the mobilization, the Forum had already demonstrated on numerous occasions its capacity to coordinate wide sectors

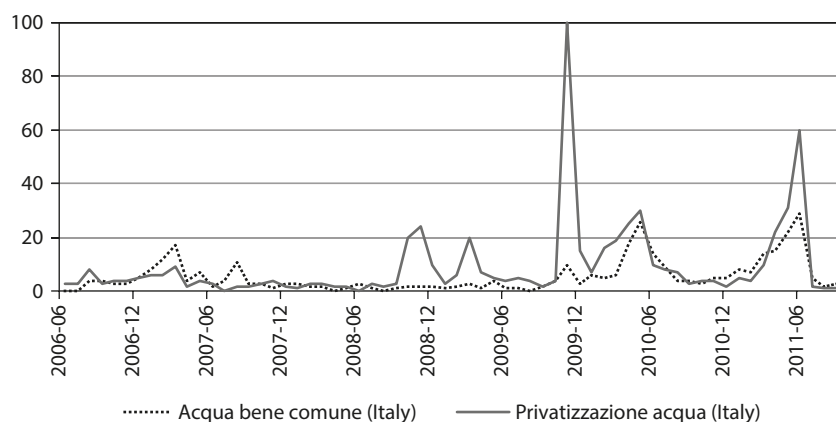
of society in order to facilitate their access to the tools of direct democracy. It had collected incredibly large numbers of signatures during the previous years, and the activists had already accumulated the necessary knowledge to launch a national legal process to sustain their projects and proposals.

The evolution of the referendum campaign through time

Even though numerous organizations are still active in demanding a complete implementation of the vote results, the Italian referendum campaign against the privatization of water lasted for approximately eighteen months, from November 2009 to the days of the vote, in June 2011. It is possible to distinguish within this period two main phases of mass mobilization, when activists attempted to convince as many citizens as possible to call for the referendum or to vote, and two phases of preparation, when only the core organizers continued to sustain the issue, and carried out the necessary legal steps to support the referendum call.

Using Google Trends, a rough but helpful tool that shows how many web users searched for certain keywords in a given period, it is possible to build a reliable timeline of the events. In particular, I performed a Google Trends search using this tool for two sets of keywords. The first, *acqua bene comune*, is the most widespread slogan of the water activists, and can indicate, therefore, how many users were looking for information on the

Figure 3.1 Frequency of the terms [acqua bene comune] and [privatizzazione acqua] in Google Trends



Google search volumes for the expressions [acqua bene comune] and [privatizzazione acqua] in Italy, June 2006 – November 2011. Normalised data (on a scale 0-100) from <http://trends.google.com>, retrieved in August 2017.

water groups and organizations; the second, *privatizzazione acqua* (water privatization), can indicate the level of attention, and of concern, over possible privatization attempts. Figure 3.1 shows the resulting timelines, including the years that preceded the referendums. As can be seen, the *acqua bene comune* graph (dotted line) well indicates the phases of intense mobilization. It has three peaks: the first, during spring 2007, corresponds to the citizens' initiative campaign described in the previous section; the second, in spring 2010, indicates the collection of signatures that preceded the referendum; the third, in spring 2011, represents the campaign that preceded the vote. The continuous line that indicates the keywords *privatizzazione acqua* tends to follow a similar path, but in some cases, this indicator of the general awareness regarding water privatization is higher than the one relating to the water coalition. In other words, this suggests that web users were looking for information on the issue, instead of looking for the actors working on the issue. The very high peak of searches for *privatizzazione acqua* in December 2009/January 2010, in particular, seems to suggest that web users quickly reacted, with intense interest, to the privatization attempts included in the *Decreto Ronchi*.

November 2009/March 2010: preparing the field

During the first four months of the campaign – from November 2009 to March/April 2010 – only the most important organizations and activists involved in the Italian Forum of Water Movements started to mobilize. During these months, they planned the structure of the referendum campaign, started to prepare their strategies of action, and defined their alliances and relationships with other institutional or non-institutional political actors. The Forum activists chose to propose three different referendum questions to the voters. The first asked the abolition of Article 23-bis of Law 133/2008, as amended by the *Decreto Ronchi*. In this way, activists could stop the imminent project of forced privatizations that Berlusconi's government had in mind. The second question asked for the amendment of a law that indicated private actors or public companies listed on the stock market as the main actors in the water sector: the activists indicated this amendment as a way of supporting the role of public administrations in water management, instead.²⁹ The third question aimed at removing from the water tariffs the 7 per cent quota dedicated to the financial 'remuneration of the invested

29 The modification refers to Article 150 of Legislative Decree n. 152/2006 (the so-called '*decreto ambientale*' or '*Codice dell'Ambiente*').

capital', the fixed profit that legislators had conceived as economic leverage to attract private investments to the sector.³⁰

During this phase, moreover, the water committees took the decision to request the political parties to take a 'step back', inviting them to participate in the campaign only as external supporters. Furthermore, the activists decided to concentrate their efforts only on the theme of water, rejecting the idea of enlarging the coalition of the proposers to include other, unconnected referendum questions in the campaign. These two choices opened up a serious conflict between FIMA and the party *Italia dei Valori*, which initially was relatively sympathetic towards the referendum initiative. This party, and, in particular, its leader Antonio Di Pietro, refused in March/April 2010 to support the referendum and to be part of the external committee of supporters. Furthermore, it chose to start a contemporaneous yet different referendum campaign, opposing three subjects: the reintroduction of nuclear power, the forced privatization of water (focusing on different aspects of the issue), and the so-called *legittimo impedimento* (legitimate impediment), a particular prerogative of government ministers that allowed them to avoid criminal prosecution while in power.

March/July 2010: collecting 1,400,000 signatures

During the second phase of the campaign, the activists started a period of four months of intensive mobilization, from March to July 2010. This phase begun with a demonstration in Rome on 20 March, two days before World Water Day, to launch the referendum campaign in the media. Nonetheless, the period of mass mobilization started one month later, when the activists started to coordinate at the local level in order to collect the large number of signatures that is required in Italy to call for a referendum. The collection of signatures was, therefore, the main practical purpose of the referendum proposers during these months.

The threshold fixed the Italian law requires at least 500,000 signatures to call for a referendum. However, the organizations involved in the Forum were able to collect and validate 1,402,035 signatures, a record in the history of the Italian Republic. This phase of mobilization strongly reassured the organizations involved in the Forum of their capacities. In particular, the committee collected a very large number of signatures at the very beginning of the mobilization, during two days that are particularly relevant for the democratic and leftist Italian milieu: 25 April, the commemoration of the end of World War II, and 1 May, Labour Day. For the first time in

30 This third modification refers to Article 154, Legislative Decree n. 152/2006.

this campaign, FIMA experimented with forms of internal organization that were smartly combining tendencies towards centralization and tendencies towards decentralization of the actions. On the one hand, the signature collection required a highly coordinated bureaucratic effort at the national level, which a key militant of the most powerful Italian trade union (*Confederazione Generale Italiana Lavoro*, or CGIL) helped to organize. On the other hand, the local committees involved in the campaign had the opportunity to launch independent and very creative initiatives, sometimes elaborating their own strategies to inform and involve the citizens, or to coordinate the activists' actions on different geographical scales. In some cases, the activists were able to group their independent initiatives giving life to diffuse national events, which they grouped under a shared brand: the most important example of this kind is *H₂Ora*, a series of highly different small events held at the same hour in different parts of Italy.³¹

August 2010/January 2011: waiting for the decision of the Constitutional Court

After the mobilization for the collection of signatures, the campaign entered a long phase of preparing for the vote; active participation of the activists at the local level and initiatives aiming at direct communication with sympathetic Italian citizens were less important in this period, which started in August 2010 and ended in January 2011. During this phase the referendum proposers mainly waited for a legal decision from the Italian Constitutional Court, the legal authority that has the power to accept, or dismiss as not constitutional or legal, referendum proposals. In order to prevent the numerous local privatization attempts that were already beginning, to maintain a certain level of action within the network, and to give continuity to its relationship with the citizens, the Italian Forum of Water Movements organized a short campaign at the beginning of December 2010, asking for a suspension of the decisions regarding water management. This campaign culminated in 20 coordinated demonstrations, simultaneously organized on a regional basis. In this way, FIMA could respond to the internal pressure exercised by numerous local committees and territorial organizations, too. These territorial actors were expressing a certain level of concern about the national focus that the water campaign was assuming. Since its first steps, FIMA assigned a fundamental, almost

31 The title of the diffused event '*H₂Ora*' combines the chemical formula for water, H₂O, with the Italian word for 'Hour'.

sovereign role to the local water committees, which constantly asked to counterbalance the national campaigns with initiatives centred on the local level (Cernison 2016).

This phase of apparent stasis ended with the decision of the Constitutional Court, which approved two of the referendums that the water committee proposed. At the same time, the Court accepted two of the referendum proposals of the *Italia dei Valori* party. The water campaign, therefore, had to share part of its political space and of its media visibility with two other contemporaneous campaigns, focused on nuclear energy and criminal procedure.

January-13 June 2011: preparing for the vote

The last phase of the referendum campaign was the one of intensive communication and mobilization preceding the vote. This phase grew into a sort of crescendo, which slowly activated very large sectors of the Italian society and of its media. From January to March 2011, the activists started to programme their strategies for the following months. In particular, they began to put an accent on the relevance of communication for their purpose of convincing at least 25,000,000 Italians to vote. Furthermore, they planned new websites, put pressure on the public broadcasting service in order to gain visibility, and involved local activists in the campaign, for instance, by allowing them to select the referendum logo through an online poll. Among the initiatives that gained more visibility, there was a new way to finance their activities: the secretariat of FIMA asked sympathizers to support the campaign through 'temporary' donations. Through a website, supporters could fix the amount of their contribution, and the referendum committee assured them that it would return the entire donation in case of victory.

On 26 March the referendum campaign officially opened with a demonstration, held in Rome. As in the previous year, the date was very close to World Water Day. After this demonstration, the activists started to concentrate their communication efforts on the web and in disparate offline activities, taking into account that the public TV broadcaster appeared less prone than expected to offer visibility to the referendum promoters. Furthermore, during March and April the water referendum committee slowly linked its struggle with those of the other referendum proposers, in particular, establishing links with the anti-nuclear committee, whose struggle gained importance after the Fukushima nuclear disaster.

Finally, the campaign reached its maximum peak between the second half of May and the last day of voting, 13 June 2011. During this last month, numerous factors helped to boost the referendum initiatives, and to pave the way to the success of the vote. Firstly, coalitions of left or centre-left parties won numerous local administration elections in May, in some cases with candidates coming from the milieu that supported the referendum. Secondly, the PD changed its official position and started to openly support the vote, probably seeing in it an opportunity to strongly attack Berlusconi and his government. Similarly, some local sections and leaders of the right-wing party *Lega Nord* declared their support for the vote, refusing to accept the political line of their party. Thirdly, the referendum campaign started to appear in the mainstream media, although in ways different from how the proposers were expecting. For instance, the newspaper *La Repubblica*, which had formerly opposed the referendums, started a media campaign asking the people to vote, under the generic slogan *Io vado a votare* (I'm going to vote).³² Similarly, the singer Adriano Celentano, a celebrity who is able to attract high audience levels on Italian television, openly supported the referendum during a popular political talk show. Nonetheless, other factors impeded the proposers' aims. Among them were the still strong control of the government over the media and the difficulties in reaching and informing the vast communities of Italian voters resident abroad.

These phases all culminated on the days of the vote, 12 and 13 June. During these two days the activists used the web to bypass the compulsory 'silence period' that precedes the vote: they organized online further local propaganda actions, and national digital initiatives, for instance, collaborating on Twitter to monitor the voters turnout in various part of the country. The vote ended at 3:00 PM, 13 June. About 57 per cent of voters participated in the consultation, and 95 per cent of them voted according to suggestions the of the referendum proposers. Notwithstanding the marginal role of political parties in promoting the referendum, national television channels did not invite the representatives of the winning committees to their studios, but well-known party representatives. The nuclear and water committees instead celebrated victory with a joint party in a square in Rome, under the yellow and blue flags of the two campaigns.

³² *La Repubblica* supported the referendum adopting the slogan *Io vado a votare* (I'm going to vote), which does not specify any suggested position to voters and simply invites them to participate in the consultation.

3.4 Alliances and Conflicts during the Campaign

Relationships with other political actors

During the referendum campaign, the committee of promoters and the organizations involved in the mobilizations against water privatization entered in the political arena, relating in different ways with most of the national political and social actors. In many cases, these relationships evolved and changed during the campaign, enabling the promoters of the water referendum to enlarge their alliances, to use to their advantage some of the internal divisions among the referendum opponents, and to gain a new role – at least for a brief time – on the Italian political spectrum. In some cases, the advantages were bilateral: some parties, for instance, supported the referendum campaigns in order to establish a new link with their electorate, to avoid internal divisions, to oppose the government, or to support a cause that they perceived as a winning one.

In this section, I briefly present the relationship between the proposers of the water referendum campaign and three other kinds of political actors. First, I describe the complex links between the referendum promoters and the parties, with a particular focus on the PD and the *Italia dei Valori*, which were internally divided between supporters and adversaries of the referendum. Second, I depict the relationship of the water activists with the other referendum committees, which slowly succeeded in linking the struggle on water privatization with other issues. Third, I illustrate how the referendum campaign influenced different media outlets.

Political parties

When the referendum campaign was at its beginning, the Italian Forum of Water Movements appeared as a broad and growing coalition of organizations, which most Italian parties of the left tended to support. During the first demonstration that launched the referendum, on 20 March 2010, the entire spectrum of the internally fragmented Italian radical left was present, but the flags of the centre-left force *Italia dei Valori* were similarly easy to distinguish. The most important party of the Italian centre-left space, the PD, refused to participate in the demonstration, although numerous of its sections were already active within the local water committees, and in some cases local PD militants constituted the backbone of these local groups.

When the referendum proposers decided to prohibit the presence of political parties on the official referendum committee, and instead asked these parties to take a step back and to sustain the water struggle by forming

an external committee of support, the situation changed. While the main parties not present in the parliament (in particular, *Rifondazione Comunista*, *Verdi*, *Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà*, *Movimento 5 Stelle*) accepted this external role and continued to support the campaign, the two main centre-left forces distinguished their positions from that of the Forum organizations, and refused to support the referendums.

The leader of the *Italia dei Valori* party, Antonio Di Pietro, openly attacked the choice of the organizations involved in the Forum, and his party thus started a contemporaneous referendum campaign, opening in this way a conflict with the water referendum proposers. The position of the *Italia dei Valori* changed slightly during the following phases of the campaign, and they gradually deciding to end this fragmentation and support the water referendum, too. In particular, Di Pietro started to nominate members to the water committees during his public interventions in spring 2011, and he openly recognized the extraordinary efforts of the referendum promoters in launching the campaign. While this party only partially shared the anti-neoliberal premises of most of the Forum organizations, their views regarding water tended to be compatible. Furthermore, Di Pietro and his party strongly wished to use the water issue as a way of promoting their own contemporaneous referendums, in particular, the question on the *legittimo impedimento*, a sort of ministerial immunity that Berlusconi and his allies had introduced during the previous years.

The position of the PD similarly evolved in the two years of the campaign and followed a path that is similar to the one of the *Italia dei Valori*. This notwithstanding, the evolution of the PD attitude was mainly the result of an internal dialectic, which opposed local leaders, sections and political areas within the party. At the end of April 2010, during the first phases of the campaign, PD leader Pierluigi Bersani declared that his party sympathized with the water movement and its campaign, but that the referendum was not the right legal instrument to obtain a change in water management. However, there was another reason that convinced Bersani to choose a similar diplomatic exit strategy. The PD – a party that was combining liberal and social democratic tendencies – was very divided on the issue of water privatization. On one side, numerous local leaders, the majority of the activists in 2011, part of the youth organization *Giovani Democratici*, and some regional sections were strongly in support of the idea of promoting water as a public or common good, and actively participated in the previous campaigns of the Forum. On the other side, other national and local leaders were involved in privatization experiments, and tended to support neoliberal initiatives in this and other fields. Some high-profile members of the PD

contributed to launching the initiative/website *Acqua Libera Tutti* (Free Water for All), which opposed the referendum and supported a solution based on private participation in the water sector.

Notwithstanding these divisions, the PD gradually accepted to support the campaign, starting, in particular, from its local branches. Numerous local sections and a regional one (Veneto) officially allied with the committee of the proposers, and, by the end, the entire party officially invited its voters to participate in the four referendums: without doubt, the work of the rank-and-file PD militants and the participation of the PD voters contributed to the success of the campaign. Nonetheless, immediately after the victory the party leaders readopted the ambiguous keywords that they had tended to use before. Their focus moved from the issue of water privatization, to a milder opposition to attempts of '*forced* privatization of water'.

On the other side of the political spectrum, the right-wing and secessionist party *Lega Nord* experienced one of its first internal divisions due the issue of water privatization, even though its deputies and senators had contributed in formulating the laws that the referendum promoters were attacking. During the petition campaign, the Forum activists were able to collect very large numbers of signatures in areas of northern Italy that *Lega Nord* controls politically. Probably for the first time since its creation, the electoral base of the party seemed to revolt against its leaders, deciding to participate in a campaign that they perceived as less political, and less left-oriented. Following this underground, internal dissonance, some weeks or days before the vote various *Lega Nord* leaders decided to declare their support for the referendum, opening an internal division with their national leader, Umberto Bossi.

Other referendum committees

When the party *Italia dei Valori* decided to promote three referendums contemporaneous with those proposed by the Italian Forum of Water Movements, this choice deeply disturbed the organizations and activists of the Forum. At the same time, the presence of these contemporaneous referendums started to appear at a certain point of the campaign as a clear opportunity to support the water struggle, to build alliances, and to increase the possibilities of winning. These two opposing tendencies determined a behaviour on the part of the water referendum committee towards the other referendum proposers that could appear as ambiguous and not well defined, but that very slowly moved from a strong opposition to a relative collaboration, and in some cases to an alliance.

For this tendency, I distinguish two separate phases. The decision of the Italian Constitutional Court to accept only four of the six proposed referendums, on 8 January 2011, provides the marker dividing these two phases. The court refused one of the referendum proposals of the Forum as well as the *Italia dei Valori* question on water, which the Forum activists perceived as too vague and evasive. This decision eliminated, therefore, a visible point of conflict between the party and the water referendum proposers. Furthermore, the referendum campaign entered into a period of intensive mobilization, during which the two types of referendum proposers shared the very difficult objective of communicating with a large population of voters. Finally, numerous local and national actors, not directly involved in the referendums committees, started to create initiatives of propaganda in support of the entire set of referendums, focusing in this way more on the vote than on the issues at stake.

During the phase that preceded the decision of the Constitutional Court, the Forum actors often perceived the *Italia dei Valori* and the referendum committees that it supported as being one of their main opponents, or at least as their direct competitors. Participating in the activities of the FIMA secretariat in 2010, I noticed, for instance, that the water activists tended to monitor the web communication strategies of this party, to intervene in a critical way on the *Italia dei Valori* Facebook pages dedicated to the referendums, and to delete the messages of the party supporters from their own social media pages. The water activists tended to express this conflict mainly by stressing two dimensions. On the one hand, they claimed that the *Italia dei Valori* was creating ambiguity among the citizens, who started to become confused about the two groups of proposers. On the other hand, the water activists also interpreted the conflict between FIMA and the *Italia dei Valori* under the lens of a larger political opposition between two models of political participation: party politics (characterized according to them by vertical structures and a certain distance from the citizens), and social movement activism.

The extraordinary amount of signatures that the water referendum committee was able to collect in 2010 partially confirmed the exceptional ability of the involved social movement organizations to enter into contact and interact with the rest of society. As a consequence, the Italian Forum of Water Movements acquired a greater status in the Italian political spectrum, and the centre-left parties started to consider the water issue as being crucial if they were to gain consensus.

During the second phase, the *Italia dei Valori* decided quite quickly to support the water referendums, in order also to promote their own consultations at the same time. The water committee adopted a different strategy,

and refused for several months to support, or even to talk about, the other referendums. While the media, the centre-left parties and numerous local committees started to simplify the political discourse by asking to the citizens to vote 'Four Yeses', FIMA continued its campaign with a symbol proposing 'Two Yeses for Water as a Common Good'.

This notwithstanding, the water referendum committee gradually agreed to offer its external support for the referendum on nuclear power, and to increase the number of joint events with the no-nuclear groups. Among the factors that contributed to linking the nuclear and the water issues together, one of the most important was surely the fact that an increasing number of organizations started to jointly support both referendums. In particular, various green associations joined the anti-nuclear committee, giving to this referendum a meaning and an importance less related to the ideas of its initial political proposer. The same organizations were active in FIMA or in support of the water campaigns since the initial initiatives on this issue: due to these numerous links, it was impossible to maintain the two struggles as separate. As I explore in detail in Chapter 5, I am convinced that this process tended to start at the local level, where small groups of persons were involved in both campaigns at the same time.

Nothing similar happened with the committee proposing the referendum on the *legittimo impedimento*, an issue mainly linked with the legal controversies and the trials that involving Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. On the one hand, the water activists perceived this topic as too weak, too linked with the proposing party, and too much of a party-like way of engaging in politics. On the other hand, very few organizations were deeply engaged in this issue, limiting therefore the direct connections that facilitated the overlapping of the water and nuclear themes.

Relationship with the mainstream media

We won the referendum, not you!

- The media relations agent of FIMA, addressing Bianca Berlinguer, former TG3 director, during the TV live broadcast that followed the referendum victory.

The mechanisms used by the media, the relationship with mainstream media such as national television stations and local newspapers, and the consequent strategies that the activists chose in order to communicate deeply influenced the development of the referendum campaign on the issue of water (see Mattoni 2012). Sometimes, both journalists and the political actors involved perceived this relationship as a conflictual one.

In the hours that followed the referendum victory, the press agent of the water referendum committee appeared on an interview during a live broadcast dedicated to the consultation. As he declared afterwards, this was the first opportunity for him to appear on national television. In order to react to what he perceived as censorship, he refused to answer to the interviewer's questions, repeating instead the sentence '*We* won the referendum, not *you*'. He clearly indicated with the word *we* the referendum organizers, the numerous social movement actors that participated in the campaign, and the involved citizens; with the word *you*, he probably referred to the national television, and to the centre-left politicians invited in studios. Similarly, on the day that followed the referendum victory, numerous journalists dedicated their articles to the ability of the activists to manage new communication strategies, to bypass the silence of the traditional media, and to easily impose their message by reinterpreting and attacking the communication efforts of their opponents.

Indeed, the referendum proposers had to find their way into a very closed media environment during the greater part of their campaign. Moreover, during the referendum the mainstream media system appeared deeply linked to the party system. This notwithstanding, it would be too simplistic to describe the communication during the referendum campaign as a struggle between silent and unreceptive mainstream media on one side, and direct, network-structured, web-based communication on the other side. In contrast, it is necessary to underline that the referendum promoters always tried, without success, to access the national newspapers and television stations, to participate in the main talk shows, and to appear in numerous forms in the local newspapers. Similarly, some media – in particular, some left-oriented national newspapers – finally decided to support the referendum, and actively participated in the campaign by presenting the activists' initiatives, even if in an incomplete version.

Some examples will help me to present both the difficult relationship and the channels of access to the media during the referendum campaign. First of all, the relationship with the national broadcasting service (RAI – *Radiotelevisione Italiana SpA*, hereafter RAI) was deeply problematic during the entire campaign. In particular, the administrative council of the service waited much longer than expected to approve the electoral regulations that defines the criteria of access to television during the referendum campaign.³³ The referendum proposers perceived this choice as a way of

33 The RAI Administrative Council is an institution composed by nine members, elected by a parliamentarian commission or by the Ministry of Finance. Its link with the political power,

limiting their appearances on national radio and television, and as part of a broader strategy of silence around the referendum issue. Other elements support this interpretation. For instance, the electoral advertisements giving information on the vote appeared only during the last days of the campaign and during night-time slots. Furthermore, the most important RAI news broadcast communicated a wrong date for the referendum. Finally, the main talk shows, both those aligned with the left or pro-government, both on the public RAI or on national private television stations, never invited the referendum committees to appear and to express their opinions. The referendum supporters reacted to this perceived censorship mainly in two ways. Firstly, by approaching the national broadcasting service as a public institution, and therefore asking that it apply the electoral procedures in a better way. Secondly, by campaigning against these media choices, for instance, distributing parodies of the TV advertisements dedicated to the referendum.

A second example can better explain how the activists tried to access to the mainstream media, utilizing the internal mechanisms of these media to their advantage. In February 2011, they attempt to use the main Italian TV contest, the annual Sanremo song festival, to spread symbols and messages related to the referendum. To achieve this goal, they organized an alternative festival dedicated to water in the small town of Sanremo, during which they distributed leaflets and blue air balloons, organized flash mobs, and invited sympathetic artists and singers to exhibit in the town squares. Even though this alternative event did not succeed in getting much coverage during the main TV contest, the referendum supporters were able to convince some participants to the official festival to wear an electoral symbol, a blue wristband, during the live broadcast.

Similarly, the referendum promoters attempted to garner support for their cause during the traditional and very popular concert that the most important trade unions organize every year on 1 May, in Rome. In this case, most of the artists involved were also referendum sympathizers: some had already collaborated with the water committee in the past, and wanted to express their opinion during the concert. However, since RAI television was transmitting the event, the artists were obliged to avoid talking about the referendum during their performances. In this case, too, some of the musicians reacted by wearing a water-related symbol, an electoral badge.

A final example of how the activists interacted with the media environment is their large use of testimonials during the campaign. Numerous

and, in particular, with the main parties, is therefore direct and evident.

musicians, famous comedians, writers and actors agreed to appear in short spots promoting the water referendum or the public water issue, or to contribute with their own songs, texts or sketches. Even though these spots or videos circulated primarily online, in most cases these testimonials were famous thanks to their participation in TV programmes: this phenomenon, therefore, is only in part a digital one.³⁴ Furthermore, the single appearance of the singer Adriano Celentano on a famous talk show supporting the referendums probably reached more Italian citizens than the spots that were circulating online.

Conclusions

This chapter has described how the Italian referendum campaign against water privatization was a relatively short process that was, nonetheless, strongly linked to a longer mobilization in Italy as well as with a more general conflict on a global scale. While the main goal of the campaign and its activists during the referendum was to reach in a quick way the maximum number of citizens, and to convince them to vote, the Forum and its activists never abandoned their long-term goals. They attempt to present, whenever possible, their anti-neoliberal paradigm during the actions taken, opening channels of direct dialogue, publishing pamphlets, and stressing the differences between the relatively generic idea of *acqua pubblica* (public water) and *acqua bene comune* (water as commons). It is important, therefore, to bear this distinction in mind, in particular, when attempting to understand why alliances with political parties and the conditional support from some of the media during the campaign proved to be ephemeral. In my opinion, the other actors could easily supported the referendum and the vote, even though they seldom shared the anti-neoliberal ideas of the referendum promoters on water.

For reasons of space, I have described the campaign in a simplified way, too, presenting the water coalition as a unique, homogeneous actor, and its communications choices as something planned and uniform. In the next three chapters, I investigate the referendum mobilizations in greater detail, with a focus on digital media and online forms of communication. The

34 In some rare cases, testimonials emerged and acted online: in particular, it is the case of the video *YouTube stars contro il nucleare* (YouTube stars against nuclear power) (*The Jackal* 2011), where numerous famous Italian YouTube contributors supported the referendum against nuclear power.

internal differences and the pluralist nature of the water coalition better emerge from this detailed analysis, showing, in particular, how highly different communications strategies coexisted and connected during the referendum campaign.

4 The Web of Water

A trace on the links structure

When activists and organizations produce a political campaign, almost by definition they have to create complex communication infrastructures to attract the attention of the citizens. In this attempt, they can adopt a wide set of contrasting strategies of communication. For instance, activists can create a single, highly visible media source, or they can rely on a plethora of sympathetic blogs that communicate in an almost independent way. Moreover, the campaign organizers can open connections with political or media organizations active on other themes, or they can rely on a network of single-issue committees.

In this chapter, I observe how the Italian water activists shaped their digital communication infrastructure to support the referendum campaign of 2011. While observing a political campaign, researchers probably aim at understanding how much it is centralized, which extent small organizations and independent activists contribute to its development, and which previous movements collaborate on the campaign's development. The social network analysis methodological toolset, when combined with reliable network representations of the campaign, can help to investigate in detail the previous research questions. In this chapter, therefore, I explore with similar questions in mind the network of actors that supported the referendum campaign of 2011 on the web.

During the months that preceded the vote, the water activists collectively created a very complex communications sphere, which permeated different media platforms and real-life arenas. However, the greater part of their communication efforts was directed to the web, where activists and organizations produced content on a large scale with the two main aims of sharing messages and symbols, and of coordinating their initiatives.

Even though the water coalition established its official bureau in Rome, numerous independent organizations produced and diffused media content to support the referendum. The referendum-related communications sphere tended to reflect, in this way, the pluralistic and multi-centric nature of the mobilization. Different organizations and different categories of activists used the referendum as an opportunity to experiment with new forms of propaganda. Furthermore, they created new connections with other engaged actors, with a public of sympathetic citizens, and with the media environment. As a result, several communication networks emerged, in

particular, on the online space and on the various web platforms. Email exchanges, connection between social media groups, and profiles, and website links comprised the most relevant of these networks.

In particular, I focused attention on one of these communication platforms, the traditional web, describing the 'community' of websites that directly supported the water referendum. Centring attention on a wide structure made of links and websites, my focus and methodology here differ from the ones that I have adopted in the other empirical sections of this book. In the following two chapters, for instance, I present how individual activists and organizations related to the digital technologies, and how they perceived the online environment in different ways: my main methods are, therefore, interviews and the ethnographic collection of online and offline data. In contrast, in this chapter I observe the referendum for public water from a broader point of view. Adopting this larger perspective, I aim at situating the research that I did at the micro level into a wider context, obtaining a map-like description of how the water mobilization appeared on the web structure.

While most Internet scholars are currently shifting their attention from website networks to social media data, I decided to maintain in this chapter a focus on the connections between sites, for two main reasons. First, researchers elaborated through the years a set of solid, well-tested, and established set of approaches and methods of research to explore web networks, while the investigation of social media relationships is still in its experimental phase. Indeed, some analysis of the connections on Twitter are reaching very high levels of complexity (e.g. González-Bailón *et al.* 2011). However, I still consider the networks between websites – where data are easier to access in an open and complete form, without mediating the access with actors that own the platform – as the best digital environment to introduce and review for the reader the main versions of digital social network analysis. Second, in this research I aim to examine the emergence of relevant, organized communication centres during the campaign, and these organizations were easier to find in 2011 – for a single researcher with relatively limited resources – on the 'traditional' web. In the months that preceded the vote, thousands of organized or individual actors colonized social media (and Facebook, in particular) to support the campaign, but they appeared on these platforms in highly different ways, such as groups, pages, events. Social network analysis probably is not the appropriate tool to explore this complex sphere of communication, which I investigate in detail in the following chapters, relying on qualitative methods of research.

Various scholars have experimented with and theorized approaches for investigating the web as a network structure. In their efforts, they have adopted numerous labels and variations, with a preference for the ‘hyperlink analysis’ model and the ‘co-link analysis’ approach (Rogers and Marres 2000; Marres and Rogers 2005).³⁵ In general, these authors find inspiration in both the traditional social network analysis techniques and in the ‘digital native’ idea that following link patterns is a useful way for finding authoritative resources on the web.³⁶

Within the field of social movement studies, authors have adopted these techniques, in particular, to represent how organizations create online connections (Garrido and Halavais 2003), as a proxy for investigating groups where better network data were not easy to collect (e.g. Caiani and Wagemann 2009), and to investigate communication strategies of different coalitions (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). In other fields, these methods have helped provide an understanding that online connections partially overlap with offline cultural divisions, such as national borders (Halavais 2000), diaspora communities (Van den Bos 2006; Diminescu 2012) or political factions (e.g. Adamic and Glance 2005).³⁷

In my case, I introduce and experiment with a particular form of link analysis – the Navicrawler research protocol (Jacomy and Ghitalla 2007) – which permitted me to combine an automated process of link archiving with a non-automatic, deep observation of hundreds of websites. Reconstructing the connections among the most relevant of these sites, I traced the referendum campaign infrastructure on the web, which is the object of analysis for the entire chapter. Observing its properties, I examine whether this network tends to internally fragment into subgroups, and I identify the attributes of its main communication nodes.

I consider the network that emerges from this analysis as a thematic fraction of the web, focused on a single issue (water) in a single country (Italy). As it is easy to observe in our everyday experience, a portion of the web is not only characterized by links, pages, or sites, but also by different online content, such as photos and text. The second aim of the chapter is to investigate the web network related to the 2011 referendum campaign by combining the previously observed relational data with information about

35 For a literature review on hyperlink analysis, see Park and Thelwall (2003). To situate this approach in a broader methodological context, see Chapter 2.

36 Following Richard Rogers (2013), here I adapt the term ‘digital native’ to ideas and methods, instead of to persons.

37 See Rosen *et al.* (2011) for a review.

the text that the websites host. In this way, I trace a tentative image of how keywords and slogans circulate differently in sectors of the network. Using a self-created method, I combine the Navicrawler approach with scripts written in Python and for Wget (a very flexible Linux software that permits the downloading of sites), obtaining in this way a large archive of the sites' text.³⁸ After having searched for keywords within these portions of text, I combined the outcomes of this research with the previously created network of links. As a result, I present how the core of the web structure of the water campaign adopts a vocabulary that differs in part from the vocabulary used by the most peripheral websites that adhered to the mobilization.

I divided the chapter into three parts. In the first part, I discuss the potentials and the limits of different kinds of hyperlink-based network analysis, and I present the Navicrawler approach that I adopted in my research. The second, main part shows the results of the link analysis of the water referendum campaign, with a focus on the overall network structure of this web environment, on the characteristics of the most central actors, on the different web milieus that can surround and support the central web hubs. The last part investigates the presence of communities in the network, and observes the distribution of keywords in one of these communities.

4.1 Investigating the Web as a Network of Links

Web networks in literature

Since the early years of the diffusion of online technologies, various social researchers have studied the information and communication technologies (hereafter ICTs) and their relationship with society by adopting approaches linked with the concept of the network, mainly following the idea that ICTs are based on a reticular infrastructure and on a relational model of communication. In many cases, the concept of the network has influenced Internet research on a theoretical level, fostering the creation of hypotheses based on the properties of networks, or of network-based forms of communication (Castells 2001, 1996; Rheingold 2002, 2000; Kavada 2003, 2005).

In other cases, scholars have proposed the study of these communication technologies through the adoption of network-related methods, largely derived from the social network analysis approach. Initially, these scholars

38 I must give heartfelt thanks to my friends Jonathan Bright and Cyprian Gracz for their suggestions about the development of the software.

shifted their attention in this direction because ICTs seemed to provide new sources through which to obtain large sets of relational data – relatively easy to gather and process – on the social actors who were communicating online (thus considering the online infrastructure as an online trace of offline phenomena). In other cases, they initially conceived of the Net as a communications space that some forms of network analysis could help to map (conceiving of the Internet, consequently, as an independent object of study). These two conceptions, often combined and slightly modified, are still present in the literature: they have fostered stimulating methodological experimentation in the field, and an interesting epistemological discussion regarding the trustworthiness and the meaning of the networks traced online (e.g. Rogers 2009).

In this section, I would like to present part of this debate. In particular, my aim is to trace how scholars adapted the previous network analysis models in order to investigate the web. As a matter of fact, other digital technologies – such as email, chats and commercial social media – directly connect individuals, who create interpersonal relationships through them. On the contrary, the web structure is a network of sites and links with a social meaning that is less easy to interpret. This notwithstanding, various contributors have studied the web as a traditional social network, where a particular kind of actor, the website, connects through a particular type of social relationship, the link. The main assumption, in this case, is that these nodes and their connections tend to represent, respectively, the tissue of organized actors and their relationships. Within the social movement field, for instance, Garrido and Halavais (2003) have observed in this way the structure of websites composing the galaxy of the Zapatista movement. Similarly, Van Aelst and Walgrave (2004) have proposed an investigation of the role of new media within social movements by observing a network of seventeen anti-globalist websites, while Biddix and Park (2008) have applied a systematic hyperlink analysis approach to describe the structure of student protests online.

Similarly, Caiani and Wagemann (2009) compared the web networks of Italian and German extreme-right organizations, but in their work they explicitly began to question the conceptualization of these networks, and propose a different value for the link as a social tie. They ‘treat the links as indicators of closeness, traces of communication, instruments for reciprocal help’ and stress that ‘the analysis of web links between organizations of the extreme right does not mirror the “real” relations between these groups’ (*ibid.*: 5). Since the social meaning of links and websites is ambiguous and difficult to determine, other researchers have focused their attention on a

more abstract level of analysis, trying to understand which kind of information the web networks transmit, and the ways in which these structures and the social phenomena producing them are mutually connected. For instance, Farrall and Delli Carpini (2004) widely discussed how to integrate the web networks within the frameworks of 'social network' theory, while Schneider and Foot (2004) investigated how to scientifically observe the web with a focus on the linking practices of the web creators, within a broader approach that they label 'web sphere analysis'.

One of the main contributions to this field probably comes from Rogers and Marres (Marres and Rogers 2005; Rogers 2004). These authors see web networks as adopting a different paradigm: they empirically observed that the web structure changes according to the debates happening on the ground, because various creators of web content simultaneously begin to connect their pages to similar resources. Consequently, Rogers and Marres see online networks as good indicators of the shape of the online debates that are taking place. Furthermore, they created a method – and a tool, IssueCrawler – to trace these network-shaped debates in an almost automatic way. They call these representations 'issue networks', giving a partially new meaning to an expression that Hecló (1978) adopted in a very different context. At the epistemological level, I apply in this research a conceptualization of the web networks that is strongly related to that of Rogers and Marres. Nevertheless, I decided to adopt a different methodology, the Navicrawler protocol. This approach is considerably slower and less automatized, but it enables better decisions to be made about which sites and which connections should be included in the analysis.

Navicrawler and the exploration of web domains

A French team of researchers – gathered around the group WebAtlas – has developed a methodology that contributes to overcoming various practical and theoretical problems regarding the exploration of the web as a network, combining suggestions from disciplines as diverse as computer science, social sciences and geography (Jacomy and Ghitalla 2007). In this chapter, I mainly apply the research protocol that these researchers have elaborated. In particular, I adopt Navicrawler, a software tool that this French team created to trace web networks, in order to trace the presence of the water referendum campaign on the web.

This software is deeply linked with a very well-elaborated theoretical perspective regarding the web structure, which Jacomy and Ghitalla (*ibid.*: 4) describe as the 'layer model'. Similarly to the IssueCrawler approach

presented in the previous section, these authors assume that websites tend to link with each other following thematic patterns, and forming particular types of groups that they call web domains. The main aim of their protocol is, therefore, to detect, trace and analyse these domains.

Furthermore, according to their model the web can be seen as a network divided into different strata, as a result of the highly unequal distribution of the 'celebrity' of the websites. Generic, famous mainstream websites (such as Facebook, the *Huffington Post*, and *The Guardian* website) receive links from every web domain, and at the same time tend to form a cohesive network among themselves. According to Jacomy and Ghitalla (*ibid.*), if a researcher adopts only structural criteria to map a thematic portion of the web (i.e. if he/she simply traces the shape of the connections among sites), this distribution of links deviates the analysis to this generic, higher level of relevant resources.³⁹ To give an example, a research effort that attempts to reconstruct the network of sites opposing the construction of a mine in Romania can deviate to the 'upper' level, and give as a result a generic international network of environmental institutions, or even a network among mainstream media websites.

While the IssueCrawler approach (Rogers and Marres) considers these deviations as an interesting element of analysis, the Navicrawler approach permits the researchers to exclude these hubs from the analysis, in order to better detect local thematic communities. With this perspective, the researcher can autonomously decide which websites to include or exclude, generally using nominal criteria more than relational ones: websites that are very central in the network can be considered as irrelevant, while small, isolated sites can be included due to their pertinence for the observed thematic domain.

The Navicrawler software is specifically designed to explore the web with the layers and web domain model in mind. Created as a small add-on for Mozilla Firefox, Navicrawler obliges the researchers to open the websites that they wish to include in the analysis, and to decide if they want to accept or refuse them as part of the observed domain. Even though it makes the analysis an extremely slow process, this option proved to be very useful for delineating the communication structure of the water campaign on the web. As can easily be argued, most of the websites represented organizations that tend to deal with a wide number of topics at the same time, and

39 Rogers and the Digital Methods Initiative called 'issue drift' this shift from specific themes to generic issues on the web, and tried to take into account (or correct) the phenomenon in the results that they obtained with the software IssueCrawler.

which include links to web resources that are not particularly connected to the campaign under study. In particular, articles to local and national newspapers, institutional partners, advertisements and video-hosting services could have shifted the analysis to different domains without the possibility of limiting their presence on the network.

Finally, I consider the Navicrawler approach as particularly interesting because it derives from a solid conceptualization of the nature of the web as a network: its creators suggest to researchers what might be interesting and useful to observe on the web communication infrastructure. Navicrawler proved, therefore, to be a useful resource to effectively trace the structure of a campaign on the web networks, and to isolate these thematic networks from the surrounding web.

4.2 Network Analysis of the Water Campaign on the Web

Research questions

In investigating the presence of the water referendum campaign on the web, I mainly seek to understand how the organizations that promoted the referendum contributed to the creation of a common sphere of communication, and the structural characteristics of this communication network. I do not consider, therefore, the online structure only as a proxy for offline connections. Instead, I examine it as a relevant object of study on its own, a structure of ties that are not only virtual: I see websites as nodes in a communication network, and their links as relevant communications choices, not as indicators of different types of offline connections.⁴⁰

Starting from this consideration, the analysis of a web domain connected with a campaign can answer different questions regarding, for instance, the online strategies of activists, the presence and the characteristics of communication hubs, and the fragmentation or the centralization of the communication in the observed cases. For this research, I derived some specific research dimensions from the methodology proposed by Jacomy and Ghitalla (2007) and from traditional social network analysis research. Four of the dimensions relate to the structure of the web domain of the 2011 referendum campaign, and are presented in this section. A fifth dimension concerns the relationship between web structure and the content of websites, and is addressed in the last part of this chapter.

40 See Schneider and Foot (2004) and Rogers (2009, 2013) for similar perspectives.

My first interest was in understanding to what extent the pro-referendum communication on the web was horizontal or, alternatively, centralized. In order to answer to this question, I observe the characteristics of the overall network, measuring, in particular, its centralization. Second, I seek to observe the role of the water committees (and of other organizations that are active exclusively in the water privatization issue) in the entire network. To understand whether these actors have some particular structural characteristics, I analyse water-related and generic websites as two separated subgroups. Third, the web tissue can help us to understand which websites are more relevant for the actors involved in the campaign, using their in-degree centrality as an indicator. Are these central nodes connected together, or did separate communication centres emerge? In order to answer this question, I investigated the ties between these central websites. Fourth, I traced the ego network that surrounds some of these central nodes. In this way, I adduced that a web hub can emerge from very different web milieus: by observing its environment, I can find hints relating to some of the characteristics of a web hub.

The process of network tracing

In order to detect and trace the structure of communication that connects the Italian websites that supported the water referendum, I started my analysis from a list of 38 web entry points. I included in this list every website related to the water issue among those present on the 'link' page of the site www.acquabenecomune.org, the website of the main umbrella organization behind the campaign, the *Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua* (hereafter FIMA). Since some of these sites were broken or changed their URL, I used Google to find a new version of them. Of course, I also included www.acquabenecomune.org in this initial list. Starting from these websites, I used a normal web browser and Navicrawler to find their connections with other sites. After having eliminated irrelevant nodes from the results, I repeated the procedure using the previously obtained population as a new starting group. In this last step, I obtained a very large list of about 2,000 websites. Luckily, most of them were evidently spurious results: internal Facebook and Twitter pages considered as independent websites, pages of international media and institutions, advertisements that I could erase without needing to see their content. After having eliminated these spurious results, I obtained a new list of 878 sites, which I slowly observed through Navicrawler and the browser in order to understand which nodes should be included in the final network.

Table 4.1 Categories of actors in the 2011 water referendum network

Categories	N. of websites	%
Water-related SMOs	60	14%
Other SMOs	222	50%
Political parties & local branches	31	7%
Personal websites	22	5%
Trade unions	17	4%
Media	60	14%
Religious institutions (≠ from SMOs)	9	2%
Campaigns, services, events	14	3%
Others	6	1%
Total	441	100%

In order to decide which sites were relevant elements of the water referendum network, I followed a very basic procedure. First of all, I always excluded mainstream media websites, social media platforms, web tools and services, sites written in languages other than Italian, and referendum opponents: in this way, I focused on a single country, on a thematic network, and only on the public water supporters. Second, I selected every Italian website that explicitly referred to the issue of water, or that hosted on its pages slogans and propaganda for the referendum.⁴¹ Evidently, I adopted nominal criteria to define the boundaries of the network. These criteria permitted me to isolate the water domain from numerous other issues and domains that partially overlap with it. Furthermore, they permitted me to trace a network that mainly represents the water referendum supporters. A different choice could have been to trace the entire online debate regarding the water issue, including opponents and mainstream media in it. Nevertheless, I considered it more useful to reduce the complexity and to concentrate on the activists.

As a result, in this process I collected a population of 441 relevant websites with their links. In Table 4.1 I divided them into nine categories, even though in some cases the sites hosted numerous functions at the same time. As it is easy to observe, most of the network is composed of websites that represent different kinds of social movement organizations, or committees. Of them, about one-fifth deals exclusively with the issue of water, while the remaining ones are active in numerous other issues at the same time. Interestingly,

41 In order to understand if a website hosted referendum-related messages, I searched for any slogan related to the water issue only within this website, using the Google 'site:' operator.

the websites of the category 'media' are relatively numerous, too: under this label, I included sympathetic and alternative news websites, online journals, web and conventional radio, and web television.

In order to analyse this network of websites, I adopted two software applications: the first is the visualization software Gephi, a tool that enables the use to graphically represent complex network datasets, to apply different filters to the visualized structures, and to quickly obtain basic statistical measures. The second software is Ucinet, a popular and complete social network analysis tool, which permits users to analyse in detail the mathematical properties of networks.

The web domain of the 2011 water referendum campaign: overall structure

Figure 4.1 depicts the structure of websites that directly supported the Italian referendum campaign against the privatization of water. This network is composed of 441 sites. Since I traced the water web domain following the connections that departed from an initial list of starting points, the structure that I present in these pages probably does not include some isolated and distant (in term of links) sites, whose authors sustained the referendum without creating connections with the numerous organizations that gave life to the campaign.

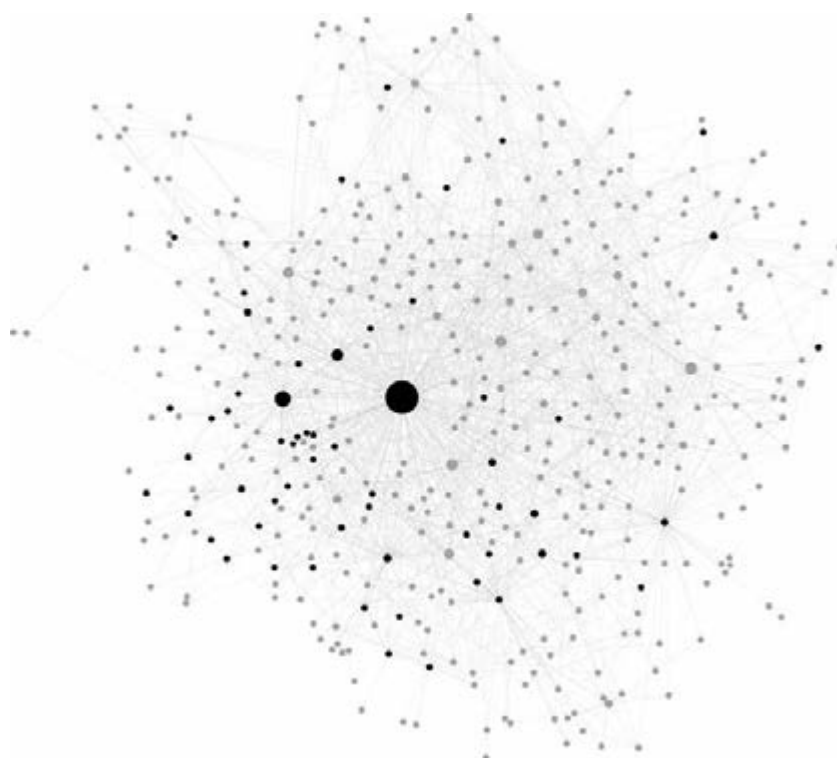
In the figure, every node represents a website, while every line represents a connection between these sites (i.e. a hyperlink).⁴² The dimension of the nodes is proportional to the number of links that the website receives from the rest of the network, and the websites that are linked together tend to be closer. I divided the nodes in two groups: the dark nodes pertain to organizations and projects dedicated only to the issue of water, while the light nodes refer to every other category of actors.

A first characteristic of this network is that it tends to be a centralized structure. In particular, as regards the received links, there is a large difference between a relatively small number of central hubs with a very high in-degree, and a periphery of not well-recognized websites. Freeman's in-degree centralization index, which measures the centralization of a network on a scale from 0 to 100%, is in this case 44.5%. This high value might be considered as expected on a web network, where hubs and anonymous sites

42 Web links are always directed relationships: a site includes a link to a second one, which might not host a link in the opposite direction. However, the direction of links is impossible to render in an effective way in a small-scale image that includes hundreds of websites. Therefore, in most figures presented in this chapter the lines that connect sites do not show a direction.

Figure 4.1 Web domain of the Italian referendum on water privatization

Self-traced with Navicrawler, finished in July 2012



Visualization using the Gephi algorithm Force Atlas. 441 websites, 1839 ties, directed network. Dark nodes represent sites and organizations mainly dealing with the issue of water privatization, light nodes are other, more generic websites and organizations. Statistical details: Average Degree: 4.17. | Density: 0.009 | Freeman's Centralization (In-degree) = 44.5% | Freeman's Centralization (Out-degree) = 13.4%

coexist. However, this domain appears considerably more centralized than other web structures with similar characteristics that appear in the literature, or that I observed. For instance, the extreme-right networks that Caiani and Wagemann (2009) traced for Italy and Germany have a centralization index of 19% and 21%. Furthermore, in 2011 I traced the web domain that represents the online Italian bicycle subculture, which included websites of workshops, of critical masses, and of other grassroots initiatives that aimed at promoting the use and reparation of bicycles in the country. This network has a very similar dimension (426 nodes), density (0.01) and average degree (4.47) to the referendum domain observed here. Furthermore, it similarly presents

a structure gathered around a single main hub. Nonetheless, in the bicycle network the centralization index for the in-degree is only 27%. In other words, the web network that sustained the 2011 water referendum appears as a relatively centralized one, and it indicates that the online campaign to support the vote mainly relied on some visible communication hubs.

The presence of two superhubs – the websites www.acquacomune.org and www.referendumacqua.it – combined with a relatively large number of local hubs partially explains the centralization of this network. Furthermore, the fact of being in a phase of intense campaigning probably contributed to increase the level of centralization of this web network: local web authors probably had an increasing need to include messages and links taken from very active sources, while the main hubs intensively worked to diffuse their articles to their smaller communication allies.

In contrast, the water network is less centralized as regards the out-degree: Freeman's centralization is very low, at 13.4%. The same indicator, in the previously cited bicycle network, is 25.1%. On the web, out-links indicate recognition and knowledge: a web author who includes in their pages links to hundreds of sites that are participating in the same campaign has a very high degree of knowledge about the rest of the entire campaign. In the water case, the low level of out-links centralization testifies to a relatively levelled knowledge of the network, where no actor recognizes the entire web domain, and relatively few actors send no links. In contrast, the bicycle network that I have adopted for a comparison presents some actors who 'map' on their link pages the rest of the sphere, and many other websites that publish web content without referring to (or feeling part of) the community.

A final characteristic that I observed in this overall representation of the 2011 water web domain is that this network is not very cohesive. The nodes constitute a single weak component (that is to say, there are no isolated websites if we do not take into account the direction of the ties). Instead, if we look for strong components (i.e. if we take the direction of ties into account) it fragments into 141 sections. One of these components groups about two-thirds of the network (297 websites), while the others mainly include single websites or very small groups, which are connected with the rest of the network only through links that go in a single direction. Furthermore, two other measures, the average distance between nodes at 6.2 and the diameter of the network at 11, similarly testify to this lack of cohesion.⁴³ However, I obtained similar results for the

43 I define the distance as the largest geodesic path between nodes, undefined distances excluded. In order to calculate the diameter, I considered the undefined distances as equal to the largest distance + 1.

'bicycle network' that I presented before (average distance 6.1, diameter 9). Therefore, this fragmentation might be typical and expected for web domains connected with social movement campaigns, or grassroots initiatives.

The role of the water committees and organizations in the network

One of the main questions that emerged at different points of my research regards the monothematic nature of the water coalition. Observing the actors that sustained the referendum, it was difficult to understand whether the campaign emerged from a network of organizations that were gathering around the theme of water commons (a sort of 'people of the water', with a shared identity), or as a single-issue campaign of a long-lasting, multi-thematic movement. To a certain extent, the mathematical observation of the characteristics of the campaign's web network can contribute to shed light on this question.

The network in Figure 4.1 shows that the websites of the organizations and committees active on the issue of water (dark circles in the picture) are spread over different parts of the structure, with different roles. Two of these water-related websites constitute the core web tools of the campaign (the aforementioned www.acquabenecomune.org and www.referendumacqua.it), but numerous other water sites are relatively small, and peripheral.

The first hypothesis that I tested is whether these water-related actors constitute an autonomous group, an independent thematic infrastructure of communication that is relatively separated from the rest of the network. Two pieces of data seem to confirm that the water committees form a cohesive group. First of all, building a smaller network with the water actors taken alone shows that only 3 of them are isolated from the remaining 57. Second, in this smaller group the percentage of reciprocal ties is 33%, higher than in the entire web domain (19%).⁴⁴ In other words, the water actors tend to recognize each other. However, these indicators only attest that the water websites form a solid community, with actors that are known each other.

The second hypothesis that I consider, therefore, is that the water actors and the other websites constitute two relatively separated groups, sharing links within the boundaries of their community more than outside of it. A similar result would attest that during the campaign a dense group of websites dedicated to water activism somehow formed an alliance with other multi-issue political groups, collaborating but without creating numerous

44 Every reciprocal link is counted twice, because it is the sum of two ties going in opposite directions.

Table 4.2 Average centrality indexes for water-related and generic actors, with and without the network core*

		Water	Generic	Total
With core	Av. in-degree	8.2	3.5	4.2
	Av. out-degree	9.1	3.4	4.3
	Av. betweenness	3534	300	741
Without core	Av. in-degree	3.2	2.9	2.9
	Av. out-degree	8.1	3.3	3.9
	Av. betweenness	1676	253	442

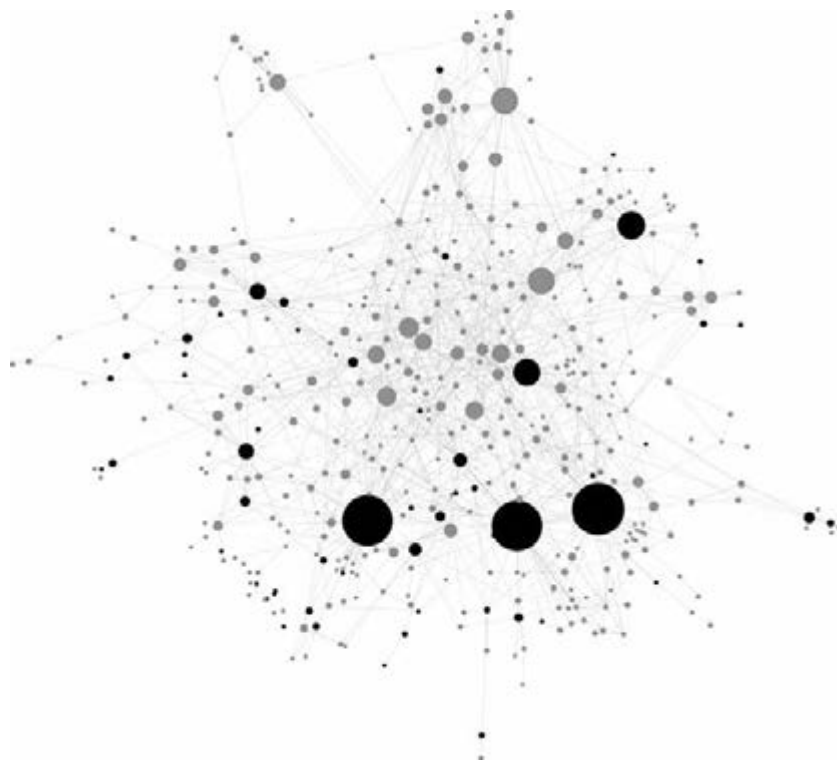
* Core = websites with in-degree > 18

intersections. A simple view of the network could suggest that this interpretation is true, because the ‘other’, generic websites (the light nodes in Figure 4.1) appear to coalesce on the left side. However, a better mathematical investigation, using the so-called E-I index, makes me reject the hypothesis. Taking into account the different dimensions of the two groups, the index should have been smaller than -0.52 to indicate a significantly predominant relationships within the group boundaries. Since the E-I index is -0.26 , it suggests a moderate propensity to establish more links that cross the boundaries among these groups than one could expect. In simple words, the numerous water websites that constituted the thematic core of the campaign established solid and independent relationships with numerous generic sources of communication. Starting from these characteristics, I can suggest that the actors pertaining to the coalesced water community were at the same time active parts of broader, more generic political networks, in most cases having stronger connections with these ‘generic’ actors than with the ‘water’ ones.

Finally, I hypothesize that the water websites and the other, multi-issue websites tend to differ among themselves for what concern their relevance in the network structure, and, in particular, for what concerns their average centrality. The idea behind this hypothesis is almost opposed to the previous one: since the ‘water’ committees and the ‘generic’ websites tend to link with one another without privileging sites with similar characteristics, I wanted to understand whether in their relationships the ‘water’ and ‘generic’ actors play different roles, or if their connections are symmetrical, instead. As I show in Table 4.2, in order to answer to this question, I used some basic social network analysis indicators of centrality: the average in-degree, out-degree, and betweenness centrality of the websites pertaining to the two groups. The results indicates that this difference of roles exists. The water-related

Figure 4.2 Out-degree at the periphery of the Web domain of the Italian referendum on water privatization

Self-traced with Navicrawler, finished in July 2012



429 websites, core nodes (in-degree > 18) excluded.

Dark nodes represent sites and organizations mainly dealing with the issue of water privatization, light nodes are other, more generic websites and organizations.

websites have on average a higher in-degree, out-degree, and betweenness: they are more central, and placed in crucial positions to connect other actors.

In the first instance, I hypothesized that these data depended on the fact that two hubs – the two official websites of the referendum campaign – are in the group of the water actors. Therefore, I controlled whether the results were changing by eliminating a core of twelve sites from the network. Without the centre, the average in-degree of water and of generic websites becomes very similar, with a difference of only 0.3 degrees. The nodes of the two groups are, therefore, almost equally ‘famous’ at the periphery of the web domain. However, water-related nodes maintain on average a higher betweenness and out-degree rate. In other words, the websites

of water-related actors (mostly local water committees) are crucial at the periphery of the network, too, to put the other actors in communication with each other, and to organize the water campaign. In particular, the higher average out-degree indicates that the water nodes tend to be more able and more inclined to ‘map’ on their pages the rest of the network. During the campaign, these actors probably traced in their links the groups and associations that were supporting them.

Figure 4.2 better shows this difference. It represents the investigated web domain without its central hubs. The dimension of the circles indicates, in this case, the out-degree of the nodes, that is to say, the number of links to other actors. As it is easy to observe, the three largest circles and numerous other relevant nodes are water committees or water-related organizations.

The core of the network: characteristics of the main communication hubs

By creating links, webmasters and bloggers involved in the water referendum campaign also collectively indicated the web resources that, for several different reasons, they consider relevant or useful. Observing the most linked websites (and the most central organizations that they represent) is, therefore, a useful way in which to understand what the entire network considered important, and which actors could influence to a greatest extent the online communication during the campaign.

By fixing the threshold at 35 received ties – a very high level for a web network of 441 sites – seven web hubs emerge from the domain (Table 4.3). The most relevant two are, unsurprisingly, the official website of FIMA and the site of the water referendum campaign. Other nodes, with a smaller in-degree, play the role of communication hubs. They are the blog of the political leader and former comedian Beppe Grillo, the site of the organization *Contratto per l’Acqua* (which probably contributed most to introducing the issue of water privatization in Italy), the websites of the two alternative magazines *Altreconomia* and *Carta*, and the official site of the contemporaneous referendum campaign against nuclear power.

The high result for the blog of Beppe Grillo is particularly interesting, and seems to anticipate the success that the *Movimento 5 Stelle* (Five Star Movement, the party he leads) obtained in the 2013 general elections. In its early phases, this party decided to consider the issue of water privatization as one of its five main subjects of action, one of the ‘stars’ included in its symbol. Nevertheless, the blog is very visible on the Italian web, and it is probably a central source in numerous online political domains. The presence in

Table 4.3 The core of the web domain of the water referendum

(Sites that receive at least 35 in-links from the rest of the web domain)

Websites	In-degree (domain)	Description
Acquabenecomune.org	199	FIMA website
Referendumacqua.it	72	Official site of the water referendum
Beppegrillo.it	41	Blog of Beppe Grillo, leader of the <i>Movimento 5 Stelle</i> (Five Star Movement)
Contrattoacqua.it	40	Relevant water organization
Altraeconomia.it	39	Alternative online magazine
Carta.org	39	Alternative online magazine
Fermiamoilnucleare.it	35	Official site of the campaign against nuclear power

this list of hubs of the website *fermiamoilnucleare.it* – the official website of the referendum campaign against nuclear power – helps to understand why the mobilizations on water property and on nuclear energy tended to merge during the last months that preceded the referendum. Evidently, a large number of organizations were supporting the two issues at the same time, and this double interest is visible in the websites and in the recognition patterns that these links attest.

The high in-degree of these hubs shows to what extent the entire web domain recognizes them as authoritative sources. However, an additional and deeper analysis of how these hubs relate with each other can reveal that different ways of being a hub coexist in the water web domain. In a network, the most central nodes (according to the in-degree) can form a unique, well-connected ‘community’, or they can be unconnected, isolated centres of communication. In the first case, the network has a unique recognized centre, composed of numerous nodes: in this condition, it is probable that they communicate among them sharing messages and political ideas, which they then spread to the rest of the network in similar forms. In the second case, instead, different cores coexist, which probably diffuse different symbols and ideas to the rest of the network. With these two extremes in mind, I tried to investigate the structural characteristics of the connections among the hubs of the water web domain, tracing a new and smaller network that includes only these websites and their links.

The network in Figure 4.3 demonstrates that a group of well-connected actors constitutes the core of the network, but that at the same time some isolated hubs emerged, too. Five nodes – the two official websites of the campaign, the two alternative magazines, and the organization *Contratto*

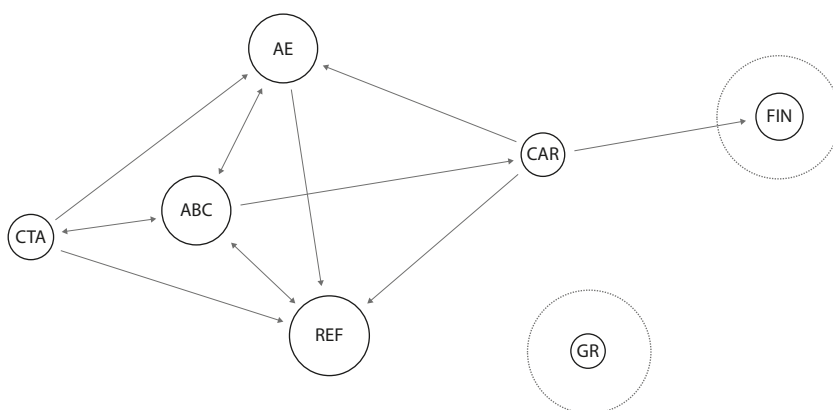
per l'Acqua – compose the main group at the centre of the domain. The large number of ties (12, density = 0.6) attests that there is a diffused recognition within this group: taking into account what emerged from the interviews and from the participant observation, I can affirm that the organizations connected with these hubs are closely tied offline, too, and that they pertain to well-linked areas of Italian activism. However, it is also interesting to note that the website with the higher in-degree in this network is not the superhub acquabenecomune.org, but the more recent referendumacqua.it, which is considerably less recognized in the entire web domain. During the campaign, numerous key FIMA activists tried to promote this smaller and relatively new website as the centre of coordination and propaganda for the referendum. Interestingly, they seem to have succeeded in this purpose at the core of the network, but only to a lesser extent in the rest of the web domain.

Outside the boundaries of this group, the separation of fermiamoilnucleare.it and beppegrillo.it clearly shows that these actors received much more attention and recognition at the periphery of the water web domain than at its core. Here, they constitute two independent strong components, and beppegrillo.it is completely isolated from the rest of the core sites.⁴⁵ In the case of the anti-nuclear campaign website, this lack of mutual recognition is probably due to the fact that both the core water organizations and the anti-nuclear committee tended to produce online communications mainly focused on their own issue. This result suggests, nonetheless, that the intensive push to merge the water and the anti-nuclear campaign mainly came from peripheral, more generic associations and groups that were active (and were distributing their resources and attention) in both issues at the same time. At a higher and more organized level, the traditional environmentalist organizations dealing with nuclear power and the political actors supporting the idea of commons maintained a certain distance.

The difference between isolation at the core and recognition at the periphery is even wider in the case of the blog of Beppe Grillo. This website is the third most relevant in the entire web domain, but its popularity drops at the centre, where it does not receive links from and send no

45 It is important to underline that the lack of ties in this network does not mean that no hyperlink is present between the actors. While I did my best to go into as much in depth as I could within each website in order to register its out-links, five of these core hubs are giant websites of thousands of pages. In these cases, the absence of links in the network means that Navicrawler did not detect links to other network actors on the mostly visible pages of the site.

Figure 4.3 Water referendum on the web
Network between the 7 websites with the highest in-degree



ABC → acquabenecomune.org

AE → altreconomia.it

REF → referendumacqua.it

CAR → carta.org

GRI → beppegrillo.it

CTA → contrattoacqua.it

FIN → fermiamoilnucleare.it

The node dimension is proportional to the in-degree in this network. The dotted circles indicate sites that constitute isolated strong components.

links to the other core nodes: in other words, none of the other relevant political actors that created websites recognize it, and it does not recognize them. This characteristic could indicate that the political message of Beppe Grillo's blog is more able to penetrate peripheral groups than the well-organized, lengthy and interconnected structures of mobilizations. Furthermore, I believe that it is possible to hypothesize that a similar pattern – with high recognition from the periphery and scarce recognition at the core – probably emerges in other issues that Beppe Grillo and his groups are active in.

However, it is important to stress that this lack of recognition at the core of the web communication network does not necessarily concern other kinds of (less digital) networks and ties: for instance, numerous members of the *Movimento 5 Stelle* supported the water committees, and had key roles within central water organizations. Furthermore, the website of Beppe Grillo is the very atypical portal of a political party leader, and FIMA always maintained a neutral, relatively distant position from the parties that supported the referendum, for instance, asking them to avoid the use of their symbols while supporting the campaign. The lack of links to *beppegrillo.it* – and to other party websites or party-connected online services – suggests that a similar choice was made on the web, too.

Ego networks

In a web network, highly recognized hubs can emerge from very different processes. For instance, a website can receive attention because it stores resources that are useful for a dense community of people interested in a theme, becoming in this way central for a group that was already connected. In contrast, a website can generically become popular in numerous sectors and among disparate groups, tending to receive links from unconnected actors and sometimes contributing to initiating communication between them.

These two different patterns are both present in the observed web domain. In order to demonstrate these contrasting ways of being a centre of communication, in this section I present the differences between the water web milieus surrounding four important websites that communicated during the water referendum campaign. They are the alternative magazine *Altreconomia* (altreconomia.it), the official website of the anti-nuclear campaign (fermiamoilnucleare.it), the blog of Beppe Grillo (beppegrillo.it), and the site of the Italian branch of the organization ATTAC⁴⁶ (italia.attac.org). With the expression ‘water web milieu’ of a node, I indicate the websites (and the links between websites) that both pertain to the previously presented referendum web domain, and are connected through in-links or out-links to the observed node. In social network analysis, what I describe as the web milieu of a site is called an ‘ego network’. As happens in most analyses of ego networks, I represent these web milieus without including the observed node, which is by definition connected with every other node.

Figure 4.4 shows the differences between the ego networks of the four observed websites. This divergence is immediately visible in the graphs, which are in two cases very dense and in the other two relatively sparse. I report some basic structural indexes below the network graphs, in order to help to measure this difference: the size of the network, its density, the number of weak components, and the percentage of nodes that represent organizations that are devoted only to the issue of water. The website altreconomia.it emerges as a communication hub for a very well connected community of linked websites. Only one node is isolated (therefore, the weak components are two, the isolated nodes and the remaining connected websites), and the density of ties is high: almost 9% of the possible existent ties are present in the network. The dense milieu that surrounds altreconomia.it suggests that

⁴⁶ ^o *Association pour la Taxation des Transactions financières et pour l'Action Citoyenne* (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions and Citizen Action).

this alternative magazine is a web resource that a well-connected community supports and has probably contributed to creating: in this case, evidently, this community is a dense social movement area, where organizations share stable connections. Moreover, this ego network shows that *altreconomia.it* recognizes and is recognized by many important actors within the water domain: the proportion of water committees in this network (30%) is high, and it includes the main water-related hubs presented in the previous chapter. In simple terms, *Altreconomia* played a crucial role in the emergence and in the diffusion of a political discourse on the theme of water in Italy.

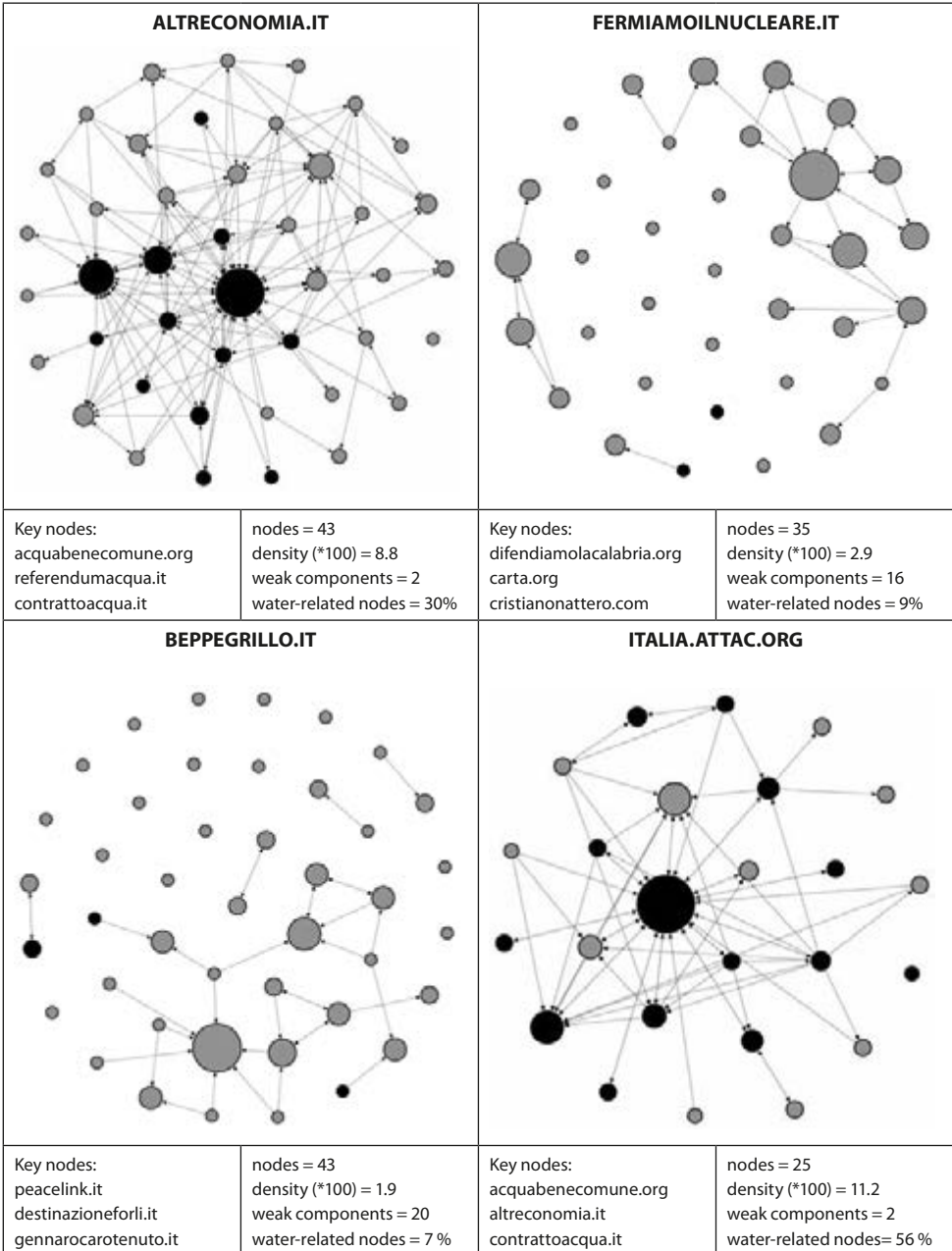
In contrast, the website of the anti-nuclear campaign *fermiamoilnucleare.it* and the blog of Beppe Grillo are two hubs that emerge from isolated websites and from relatively sparse communities as regards the water issue.⁴⁷ The density in both case is significantly lower (respectively about 3% and about 2% of the possible ties), and the networks are fragmented into numerous independent components, most of which consist of only one node. In the case of *fermiamoilnucleare.it*, three relatively denser communities are present. Two of the aggregate websites follow geography and face-to-face connections: these consisted of sites from Genova and sites from the Calabria region, respectively. Environmental organizations and famous social movement groups form the third community. In the case of *beppegrillo.it*, it is possible to recognize two main communities among the numerous unconnected nodes: a first area is gathered around local branches of the party *Movimento 5 Stelle* (from the region of Emilia Romagna). A second area is mainly linked with the social movement website *peacelink.it*, an enormous, multi-issue website that was a particularly important communication tool for social movement actors in the early 2000s.

Finally, it is interesting to note that in the ego network of both of these hubs almost no water committee or organization is present. This result seems to confirm an idea that I exposed in the previous section: the tendency to consider these websites as useful resources mainly arrives from peripheral and generic actors, and less from central, well-formed, water-dedicated organizations. Moreover, these data support my interpretation of the process of the merging of the anti-nuclear and the water campaigns: this seems to derive from the impossibility for the generic organizations and for the

47 It is probable that both sites (*fermiamoilnucleare.it* and *beppegrillo.it*) are connected with numerous other dense, thematic communities, and that some nodes of these communities appear, relatively isolated, in this network, too. Nonetheless, here I suggest that their web milieus do not form communities as far as concerns the water referendum.

Figure 4.4 Ego networks of four relevant sites in the web domain of the 2011 Italian water referendum

Ego excluded from the network. Sites with inlinks to and outlinks from Ego are included.



Dark nodes represent sites dealing with the issue of water, light nodes are more generic websites. The dimension of nodes is proportional to the in-degree (in these networks). Visualized through Gephi, Fruchterman Reingold algorithm.

activists participating in the water committees to maintain a division between their everyday efforts on the two issues.

The last presented hub, the website of the Italian branch of ATTAC, is relatively less relevant in the entire water web domain. It is the twelfth most recognized website, receiving 20 links from the rest of the network. Nonetheless, its ego network shows that this website is strongly connected with numerous water-related groups, and with a very dense community of social movement actors. Water committees and water-related organizations form more than half of its web milieu, and this surrounding environment gathers in a single component, with the exception of a single isolated node. In other words, the Italian branch of ATTAC seems to be among the few nodes able to attract widespread attention from numerous territorial water committees. On the one hand, this position seems strategic, because the website and the connected organization are at the core of a community. On the other, the density of connections within its milieu shows that this community does not need italia.attac.org to maintain its structure of communication.

4.3 Community Structures and the Content of Websites

In this last section of this chapter, I combine two different types of analysis of the web domain that supported the 2011 referendum, with the aim of understanding whether structural divisions (internal communities, regional groups, well-connected actors with similar political ideas) in a thematic part of the web tend to produce and publish online different content. Therefore, this part of the chapter aims at experimenting with a technique to trace the patterns of circulation of slogans, keywords or other kinds of content in the online environment. As a preliminary step, therefore, I observe whether the network that I am investigating is naturally fragmented into smaller cohesive communities of websites and links. After that, I reconstruct part of the vocabulary that circulates within the websites, limiting the analysis to a predefined list of keywords. Finally, I control whether the keywords and slogans that appear in one of the previously found communities of websites tend to be different from the keywords and slogans of the rest of the network. This combined analysis can show, firstly, if the clusters of websites are clusters of content, too. Secondly, it can provide a tentative image of how communication circulates online during a web campaign.

Communities of websites

The distribution of ties in a network can provide evidence for the presence of areas where nodes are more closely connected between themselves than with the rest of the observed population. These nodes form, therefore, detectable communities in the network structure, which generally tend to be homogeneous, include nodes with similar attributes, and show a better circulation of information among their members than across the group's boundaries.

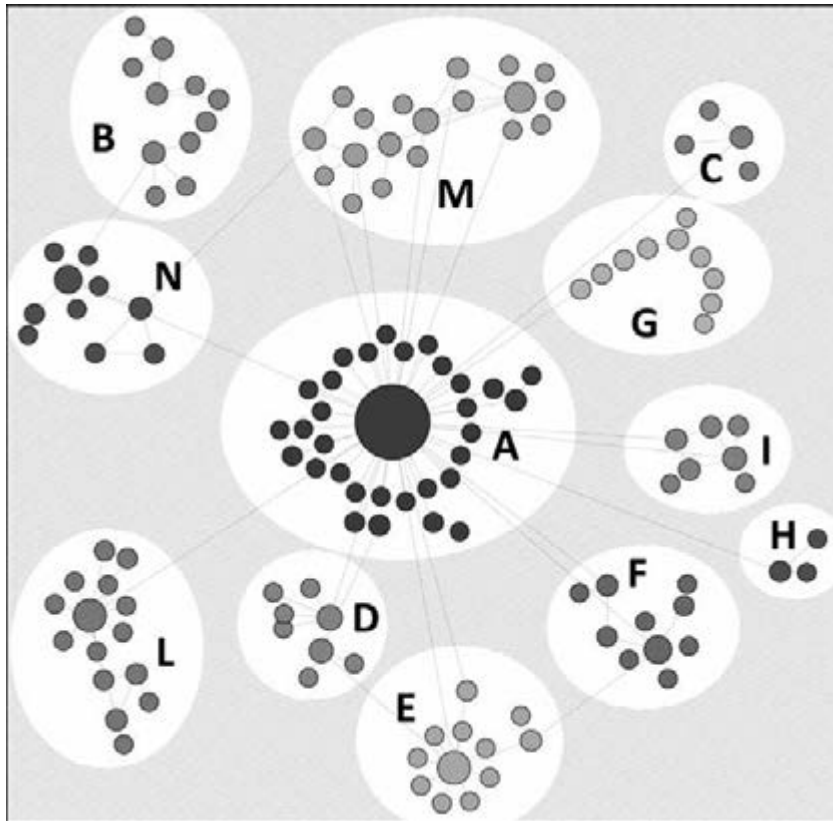
Researchers have elaborated numerous mathematical methods for understanding whether a network naturally parts in cohesive communities, aiming at trace the boundaries of these groups. Following a common practice that exists among the users of Navicrawler and of Gephi, in this analysis, I adopted the Louvain algorithm (Blondel *et al.* 2008) in order to investigate the community structure of the water web domain. This method of community detection, embedded in Gephi, is particularly suited for finding cohesive subgroups in large networks, and is widely adopted to partition web graphs and other online structures. Furthermore, the algorithm returns two results: the proposed partition in communities and the modularity measure (Newman 2006), which indicates to what extent the observed web domain naturally presents an embedded community structure.⁴⁸

I tested the presence of communities in the water web domain by following two steps. First, I observed how (and if) the entire network of sites and links hosted communities; and second, I limited the analysis only to the reciprocal links, and to the websites that these mutual links connect. In the first analysis, the Louvain algorithm is not able to detect a meaningful, clear subdivision in communities for the web domain. For the proposed partition, the modularity index is relatively low (around +0.35), and the proposed groups seem internally very heterogeneous. Political differences, geographical divisions and themes do not follow the boundaries that the algorithm detected.

Unfortunately, at least three reasons can cause this apparently poor partition, and these different explanations make it difficult to interpret the results in an unequivocal way. First of all, the algorithm might have simply detected that the water web domain does not tend to fragment in

48 The modularity measure indicates the 'number of edges falling within groups minus the expected number in an equivalent network with edges placed at random' (Newman 2006: 2). It varies from -1 to +1, and positive values indicate the possible presence of a natural division in communities.

Figure 4.5 Web domain of the referendum against water privatization, Italy 2011
Communities of mutually linked nodes



A → Core community	E → Groups from Verona	I → Peacelink + Abruzzo
B → Rifondazione (et. al.)	F → Groups from Lombardy	L → Groups from Calabria
C → Actors from Turin	G → Attac (Naples and Genoa)	M → Sicily (et.al.)
D → Democratic Party (et. al.)	H → Area of Velletri	N → Veneto/ Disobbedienti

Undirected network. 12 Communities detected through the Louvain algorithm.

communities. If this interpretation is true, websites are forming groups that are not very cohesive, and numerous links are crossing the group boundaries. Second, the network can hide a well-defined community structure, but the algorithm that I adopt cannot recognize it because the modularity index suffers from a so-called problem of resolution – that is to say, that it cannot find very small groups. Third, the algorithm may have some problem in managing ties that have a direction. In general, many algorithms of community detection work better in networks where every tie is reciprocated (Malliaros and Vazirgiannis 2013), but the World Wide

Web and the water web domain that I am presenting here are complex directed networks. Often underestimated, this difference is currently under debate (Fortunato 2010; Malliaros and Vazirgiannis 2013). Some scholars suggest that the methods elaborated for undirected networks have too often been adopted in environments where the ties have a direction, and that well-elaborated definitions of what a community is in directed graphs are lacking (Malliaros and Vazirgiannis 2013: 6). Without going into too much detail in this methodological debate, I still have the impression that I will need to test other methods in the future, specifically designed for directed web graphs, before concluding that the water web domain is homogeneously connected, without presenting a fragmentation in communities.

If only undirected, reciprocal ties are taken into account, the Louvain method suggests a more reliable partition in communities. On the web, reciprocal links are uncommon: in most cases, small sites send their links to important, famous resources, which do not link back. In the web domain that I am observing, the network of websites that are connected through mutual relationships includes 178 nodes and 181 undirected ties.⁴⁹ This undirected network hosts eighteen components: a main one with 131 sites, and seventeen small components of two, three or four nodes. These smaller groups usually represent single organizations, which gave life to more than one website.

Figure 4.5 shows how the Louvain algorithm divides the main component of the undirected network into twelve communities. The quite high modularity index of +0.73 suggests that the water web domain tends to naturally divide into subgroups when only undirected ties are considered. In general, this structural partition aligns with immediately visible attributes of the websites, which tend to follow patterns of offline communication between organizations that are close in geographical or political terms. For instance, the community 'L' contains only websites from Calabria, the communities 'E' and 'N' host actors from the Italian north-east that pertains to two political cultures (Catholic-pacifist for the first, *disobbedienti* groups in the second), and the communities 'H' and 'C' are respectively linked with the cities of Turin and Velletri. As these cases show, for what concern the 2011 referendum campaign on the web, geographical proximity and real-life collaboration of the authors seems the most important factor for understanding how websites coalesced.

49 The total number of directed ties in the water web domain is 1,839. Since a reciprocal link can be seen as composed of two opposite directed links, the proportion of undirected ties is $(181 \cdot 2) / 1839 = 19\%$.

Even though the proposed partition derives from structural properties of the network, and in many cases, it responds to meaningful offline divisions, this method still presents some limitations. Sometimes, for instance, it appears that the algorithm tends to overestimate the dimension of the communities, and to group together two very distinct areas. This problem might be related to the relatively small scale of the network that I am analysing (modularity and the Louvain method are more effective in finding bigger groups). However, the ambiguity of the web links, which are ties that can carry different meanings, can contribute to grouping different actors together. For instance, in the previous figure two groups of actors connected through local ties (the communities of Genoa and Naples) appear as linked in the network, because in both groups a local section of ATTAC is present. Since both of these local sections send a link to the national website of ATTAC, the two local communities appear as a single one in the network.

Overlapping web content and structure

A web domain is a network representation of a portion of the web, where the ties are hyperlinks and the nodes are websites. Evidently, every one of these websites is an independent yet connected communication product, which hosts numerous kinds of content: images, files, HTML code and, mainly, written text. Researchers can use these elements as variables connected with the observed websites. Furthermore, they can attach these data to the network that represents a web domain (e.g. Rogers 2013), in order to investigate whether closely linked websites host similar types of content.

In this section, I consider the presence or the absence of a group of keywords as attributes of the websites that compose the web domain of the referendum against water privatization. In order to control whether these keywords were present in the analysed sites, I created a very short script for the Linux tool Wget: this script downloaded and saved in different directories about 600 kilobytes of HTML content from each website. Then I developed two other programs (written in Python) to look for different keywords within the content of these directories, and to attach the results to the Gephi files of the referendum web domain. As a result, I could observe the circulation of 96 different keywords in the previously traced network, analysing their patterns of presence or absence. Just to give an example, Figure 4.6 quickly shows which websites were talking about the idea of common good (*bene comune* in Italian) in their text.

Table 4.4 Comparison of the presence of keywords in Community A (core of the network) and in the rest of the web domain

Keyword	Community A	Rest of the network	Difference
Acqua	97%	78%	+19%
Bene Comune	75%	47%	+28%
Obbedienza Civile	25%	9%	+16%
Iniziativa dei Cittadini	16%	3%	+13%
Referendum	66%	45%	+21%
ACEA	28%	9%	+19%
Privatizzazione	53%	31%	+22%
Forum Italiano dei Movimenti	47%	15%	+32%
Ambiente	91%	77%	+14%
Nucleare	34%	18%	+16%
Fascismo	3%	11%	-8%
Berlusconi	28%	37%	-9%

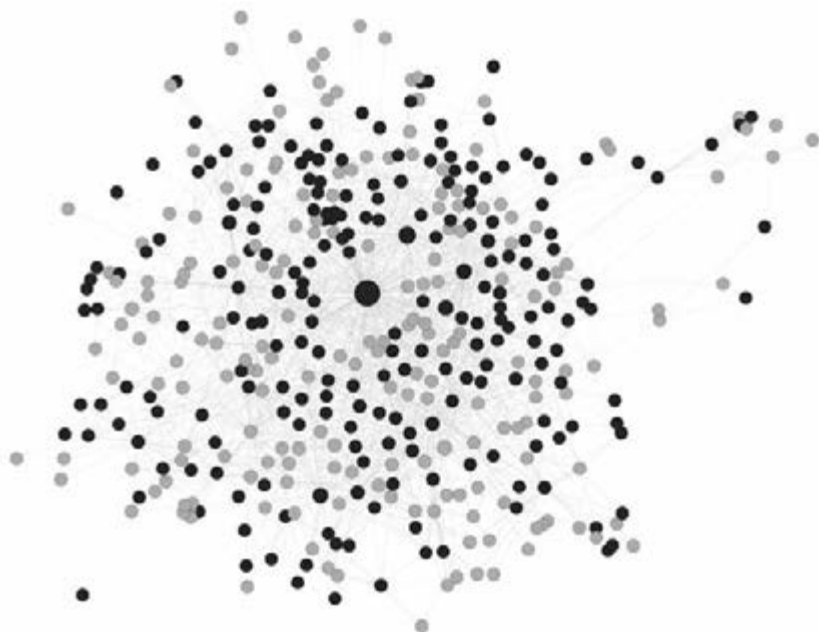
Note: Twenty-five broken websites were excluded from the analysis.

The text data attached to the network enable us to investigate numerous different research questions. In this case, I propose a very simple analysis that compares the websites included in a cohesive subgroup with the rest of the network. In particular, my focus is on the more central cohesive community, which I have indicated with the letter 'A' in Figure 4.5. This group includes 32 websites that are well-connected through reciprocal ties with the website www.acquabenecomune.org: they constitute together the core of the web domain. I consider it particularly interesting, therefore, to observe whether this central community adopts a vocabulary that diverges with that of the rest of the network.

As Table 4.4 shows, numerous keywords are more present in the central cohesive subgroup than in the rest of the network. The websites included in the community write more about topics connected to the issue of water (keywords *acqua*, *privatizzazione*, *ACEA*) than the remaining sites, and this difference is particularly high (32%) for the keyword that indicates the Italian Forum of Water Movements.⁵⁰ Moreover, the slogans and the keywords that indicate smaller, specific campaigns circulate better in this cohesive subgroup (*Bene comune*, *Iniziativa dei cittadini*, *obbedienza civile*) than in

⁵⁰ The keyword 'ACEA' indicates the numerous actions and the small-scale campaign that the Italian Forum of Water Movements and its local branches organized against ACEA S.p.A., the multi-utility that manages water services in Rome.

Figure 4.6 Presence and absence of the keyword 'bene comune' (common good) in the web domain of the Italian referendum against water privatization



Dark nodes are sites where the expression 'bene comune' is present, light nodes are sites where the phrase is absent. 25 websites were excluded from the analysis because they are no longer active or broken.

the rest of the network, and some environmentalist keywords (*ambiente, nucleare*) distribute in the same way.⁵¹ Only two keywords, *Berlusconi* and *fascismo*, characterize more the remaining, peripheral part of the web network than the observed central community. Evidently, the core websites that Community A hosts tend to address less generic opponents, too.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have analysed the structure of the Italian water web domain, in order to provide a broad overview of how the 2011 referendum campaign

⁵¹ *Iniziativa dei Cittadini* (Citizens' Initiative) is a key phrase that indicates in most cases the European Citizens' Initiative to implement the human right to water.

appeared on the web. Using concepts and tools derived from social network analysis, suggestions from the Navicrawler protocol to investigate web domains, and self-created software, I have described numerous properties of a network of 441 connected websites that supported the campaign. In particular, I observed how much the water web domain is centralized around a relatively small number of hubs, I explored the role of the water committees' websites in the network, and I described the characteristics of the most central websites. Furthermore, I analysed the internal fragmentation of the web domain in communities, and I proposed an experimental analysis on the circulation of different words within or outside the boundaries of these communities.

These dimensions of research help to reveal a clear image of the water campaign on the web. The high network centralization shows that a small number of very popular websites emerged from a broader, slightly connected population of sites. This result might derive from the model of activism that the water organizations have in mind; however, it is probable that the fact of coordinating a national campaign contributed to a certain level to increase the levels of centralization of the communication on the web.

In this network, the organizations and committees specifically dedicated to the issue of water are on average more central, and tend to recognize a higher number of other sites, sending them links. Concerning the highly linked web hubs at the core of the network, it is interesting to note that some of them (in particular, the blog of Beppe Grillo) are at the same time very popular in the entire web domain, and isolated from the other central hubs. Furthermore, these highly linked sites emerge from very different web environments: in some cases, they are relevant resources that emerged from a community, in other cases they are mainly connected with numerous isolated actors.

The web domain that I analysed does not reveal a very clear subgroup structure. Nonetheless, if only patterns of mutual recognition among links are considered, subgroups appear, mainly following geographical divisions. Finally, a quick analysis of the vocabulary that the websites adopt reveals that numerous keywords are popular in different areas of the network. In particular, a community gathered around the central website of the campaign tends to adopt slogans and keywords related to water more than the rest of the network, and to cite less frequently keywords (such as *fascism* or *Berlusconi*) that indicate a generic, less focused interest in politics.

These results, together with the possibility of visualizing the water web network, helped me to situate in a broader context the qualitative research that I conducted in the rest of book. However, this chapter maintain a

second purpose. It aims to show the potentialities of a network analysis of web structures, in particular, for researchers who want to understand the characteristics of an online campaign, and the communication strategies of different web actors. After having been widely used during the early 2000s, the observation of hyperlinks as network ties is currently a less practiced method. With this research, I suggest that the analysis of the links between 'traditional' websites (or more refined applications of these techniques to social media data) are still very useful, in particular, when attention is more focused on organizations and complex media products, instead of on single users.

In the last part of this chapter, I experimented with a method of investigation that connects two kinds of data: the relationships and the content of websites. At the moment of writing, I was starting to learn how to write programs in Python: therefore, I dedicate only a very short space to this analysis, leaving to the future deeper investigations of how content circulates in communication infrastructure like the one that I presented here. However, I am convinced that the idea of downloading information from websites, and considering it as an attribute in network representations, can provide powerful tools to investigate online communication spheres. For the sake of simplicity, here the analysis observes only text and keywords as attributes of the network nodes, although images, file names, or colour codes can be easily traced, too. By slightly modifying the idea that I briefly presented here, researchers can investigate, therefore, where a symbol starts to circulate in a large web network, or which background colours might characterize the web communication of different online communities.

5 Patterns of Online Communication during the Referendum Campaign

Florence – 13 June 2011, 3:00 PM. After having arrived from my home town, where I voted in the referendums that I am investigating, I join some local activists in the headquarters of ARCI,⁵² to watch and discuss the results. Numerous activists are trying to connect a laptop to a projector, in order to show on a wide screen the livestream of the television broadcasts covering the vote. In the last row, three young activists are checking the electoral website of the Ministry of the Interior, and gathering news from Twitter, looking for new, updated electoral data. Finally, the logo of *TG3* (a news programme on the third public TV channel) appears on the wide screen. In the studio, there are no representatives of the referendum committees commenting on the results, and only spokespersons of the main political parties are giving their interpretation of events.

Turin – an evening in December 2010. R., activist and webmaster of the local water committee, invites me to his house for dinner. After a short chat and pasta with broccoli, he opens up his personal laptop in the living room to show me the Joomla! interface that he uses to publish and update content on their website. Since he works by day as a computer programmer in an important Italian corporation, he spends his nights working at home as an engaged webmaster.

Rome – late February 2011. I am attending an important meeting in the city, held in a farmhouse that, surprisingly, survived, surrounded by numerous 1950s buildings. In a room without heating, about 30 activists from various parts of Italy gathered to develop – through a brainstorming session – new communication strategies for an important Italian organization to adopt in support of the referendum campaign. In particular, these activists are discussing the features of a new website, a Web 2.0 portal (connected with several social media platforms) aimed at coordinating large, dispersed communities of activists or sympathetic web users. During this lengthy discussion, the activists exchange ideas that play with the boundaries between online and offline spaces differently: happenings,

⁵² *Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana* (Italian Recreational and Cultural Association). ARCI is a broad association that networks numerous clubs and cultural centres in Italy. Linked in the past with the Communist Party and the Socialist Party, it has played a key role in several progressive campaigns.

flash mobs, digital actions, risks and opportunities of using Facebook are some of the addressed topics. After the event, the discussion continues with some difficulties on a mailing list, on a web forum, and finally on a Facebook group.

Marseille – Alternative World Water Forum, 14-17 March 2012. A group of three Italian activists, mainly dedicated to dealing with the media and with digital technologies, are renting an apartment with me during the event. When they are at home, they quickly recreate an informal but very efficient office: on a table, up to four laptops are always connected, with photo and video cameras. The activists work on numerous tasks at the same time: they update a blog created for the event, they send articles to small (but commercial, not alternative) online newspapers, and they edit videos and photos. During the days of the Forum, they sleep only a few hours per night.

It is very reductive to observe social media, websites and other digital technologies only as collections of online content: they are, first of all, a product of social interactions, which might take place in private rooms, offices, streets or formal meetings. What happens offline, the characteristics of the environment of production, the 'strategic cultures' of people (Kavada 2012: 79), and more generally the everyday interactions of the activists towards the digital technologies strongly influence how web content appears, and how it becomes relevant during a campaign.

In this chapter, I investigate different aspects of the relationship between activism and online content, focusing on three different aspects of this relationship. First of all, I discuss how online communication strategies evolved during the 2011 referendum campaign for water, showing in this way the relationship between online communication and the political context that surrounds it. Second, I observe how social media and web communications emerge from a physical and geographical context, and relate with it. Third, I compare different sites that emerged or evolved during the campaign, showing how they create with their features and connections with social media different possibilities for interacting and communicating online.

Even though these aspects of online communication are different, I analyse them starting from a common theoretical point of view, which connects them: the idea that websites and other web content can be usefully observed as 'artefacts' (Hine 2000) with which activists interact. Christine Hine (*ibid.*) usefully derives two ways of observing online communication from the concepts adopted in ethnographic research. The first approach that she proposes considers online communication as a culture, focusing

therefore on online exchanges, patterns of web communication, formation of groups and online communities. The second perspective, which I tend to privilege in this chapter, conceives of web content and web communication as cultural artefacts, and focuses on how people include the web in their activities, how they adopt new forms of web communication to accomplish their tasks, and how these online artefacts relate with other, previously existent routines.

In this chapter, I integrate this perspective with other concepts that I derived from the literature, which I see as related to the suggestions of Hine on how to investigate the web. Numerous authors are focusing their attention on how online communication is linked with its context of production (see e.g. Gillan *et al.* 2008; Pickerill 2003; Mercea 2013; Farinosi and Treré 2011). In particular, Nick Couldry (2004) and Alice Mattoni (2012) stress in their work the need to observe media from a different perspective, focused on what people do with the media, more than on the media conceived as texts. Starting from this suggestion, in this chapter I describe more how activists give life to web communications, instead of focusing on the visible product of their efforts (i.e. a website, a Facebook group, or online content). Furthermore, I derive from Mattoni the idea that activists' online communications are part of a broader, interconnected media environment (Mattoni 2012: 34): just to give an example, an organization can create and distribute a YouTube video with the aim of seeing if some local television stations would transmit it. Furthermore, Anastasia Kavada (2012) interestingly explores the link that exists between the characteristics of organizations and the characteristics of their online communication, focusing in her research on the connection between strategic culture and the production of websites. Similarly, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) establish, among other things, a link between the offline, cultural characteristics of two different networks of organizations, and the divergent communications that they produce.

In this chapter, I investigate the Italian referendum campaign on water starting from these three theoretical proposals (to observe web communication as an element with which people relate, to focus on media practices, and to observe how the offline characteristics of actors are reflected in their online communication), relying on interviews and ethnographic data collected both online and offline. More specifically, in the first section I describe how activists modified their way of using and perceiving the web during the campaign, responding to their new aims. In particular, I depict these changes as an evolution from an instrumental view of digital technologies (the web as a tool for action), to a view that considers the online media as environments. In the second section I explore how the water

activists responded to the need for new skills, in particular, in the fields of communications, graphics, web development and ‘marketing’ during the campaign. I differentiate, in this part, the abilities that the activists met within the boundaries of the movement and the new contacts with professionals who volunteered during the campaign. The third section investigates the relationship between online communication and other media. In particular, I explore how activists used the web and social media as an alternative to television and newspapers, and how at the same time the activists’ communications came into contact with some aspects of this broader environment. Finally, the fourth section explores how different actors created and interacted with the two main websites of the campaign. My main aims, in this last section, are, on the one hand, to show how the different ideas, projects and social interactions of the developers contributed to shape the sites, and, on the other hand, to show how the two sites promoted (and perceived, if a website can perceive) different models of digital and offline activism.

5.1 Online Communication during the Campaign: an evolving strategy

Digital communication and the activists’ goals

The organization of a national referendum campaign on the issue of water privatization determined numerous new needs and a modified political context for the actors that constituted the Italian Forum of Water Movements (hereafter FIMA). In 2010/2011 this coalition – previously used to collecting signatures and organizing citizens’ initiatives on a national scale – suddenly saw the need to enlarge its scale of action, in order to reach most of the Italian population with a large communications campaign. In part due to these changes, in part due to intentional choices, activists and organizations adapted their online behaviours and their relationship with digital technologies to the new conditions.

During the years that preceded the referendum, the Italian water movements had already adopted well-defined strategies of digital communication. The mobilization around the issue of water privatization in Italy emerged about eight years before the referendum campaign, mainly as a single-issue national ramification of the previous European Social Forum process. In the early 2000s, an initial core of activists and organizations connected with the Social Forum milieu started to come into contact with numerous local

struggles and territorial committees. Giving life to regional and national initiatives of participatory democracy, the initial groups gradually linked the local experiences with a solid backbone made of strong national organizations: trade unions, religious and environmental associations, consumer groups, and leftist and environmental political parties joined this network.

As most of the movements and coalitions have done since the late 1990s, these geographically dispersed and heterogeneous actors maintained a continuous sphere of horizontal communication, adopting a simple but effective form of digital connection: a national mailing list. This tool was, and still is, the main online backbone of the water coalition, and constitutes an uninterrupted assembly that coexists with and integrates the periodic offline meetings of these groups.

During these first phases, the Forum adopted another relevant digital communication tool: a national website, www.acquabenecomune.org, which the activists organized as an immense storage of documents, press communiqués, and resources.⁵³ The secretariat of FIMA mainly adopted it, aiming at providing information to the geographically dispersed community of activists, and at presenting the coalition to external actors, such as journalists and politicians. To a smaller extent, this website also served as a tool for coordinating demonstrations and other offline activities. At the local level, numerous committees responded with a similar scheme, adopting both a mailing list and a smaller, generally static website as their main online tools.

In the years that immediately preceded the referendum campaign, numerous local Facebook groups emerged, and an unofficial sympathetic Facebook page called *Acqua Pubblica* (Public Water) quickly surpassed 600,000 followers thanks to a very interesting strategy of collaboration with other unrelated but sympathetic political communities on Facebook.⁵⁴ This notwithstanding, at this stage the national secretariat of FIMA did not adopt Facebook and other social media to communicate. Moreover, numerous local actors similarly refused to utilize Facebook due to its for-profit nature, to privacy-related issues, or to the lack of time and activists to dedicate to this platform (see Chapter 6 for details).

53 In order to give an example of the dimension of the website www.acquabenecomune.org, in 2011 I tried to download the entire site on my computer. I interrupted the transfer well before having completed the task, after having crawled more than 2,000 pages. At the moment of writing, www.acquabenecomune.org has become a smaller website focused on single campaigns. Unfortunately, no complete archive of the site seems to be available online.

54 The administrator of the page *Acqua Pubblica* is Domenico Finiguerra, a very active environmentalist and mayor of a small town near Milan, Cassinetta di Lugagnano.

The evolution that I am describing started in April 2010, when FIMA organized the first phase of mobilization for the referendum campaign, a massive signature collection that reached about 1,500,000 citizens. In a progressive acceleration, the activists modified their communication strategies during the last six months of the campaign, entering a final and extremely intensive climax from May to 13 June 2013, the last day of the vote.⁵⁵

I can briefly describe this mutation by focusing on five elements. First of all, FIMA included some new professional figures in its secretariat. In particular, two activists with strong skills in computer science and communications started, respectively, to adapt the website www.acquabenecomune.org to the new campaign tasks, and to elaborate a strategy of public relations that included the use of social media. Among other things, these two professionals promoted a different model of web communication: they simplified the structure of the campaign websites (in part in collaboration with other organizations and with an external consultant), including in them elements of interactivity. Furthermore, they created recognizable, official accounts representing FIMA and the referendums on Twitter and Facebook.

Second, during the campaign – and, in particular, after a national assembly held in autumn 2010 – the activists started to consider communication as the most important field that they had to control in order to bring their efforts to success. Activists and organizations stressed the fact that they had to reach and convince more than 25,000,000 voters in order to achieve the quorum and win the referendum.⁵⁶ Since it gradually became clear that the referendum supporters could neither afford a traditional television campaign, nor rely on the small number of electoral debates on public television and in the mainstream media, these organizations and activists tended to adopt online media – Facebook and YouTube, in particular – to reach a broader public. Furthermore, numerous activists started to reflect on how to capture the attention of the media, debating on many occasions the possibilities that digital technologies were opening up, and embarking on a phase of intense experimentation with communication strategies. Within formal or informal groups, activists

55 Just to give an idea of the magnitude of this climax, the words *referendum* and *quorum* were the most prevalent on Italian Facebook statuses in 2011, according to the Facebook Memology that the platform publishes every year on its official blog (Bianchini 2011).

56 The legal term *quorum* – very well known in Italian society, politics and journalism – indicates the minimum number of electors required to declare a referendum vote as valid. The law fixes it to the absolute majority of voters (50% + 1), including Italians living abroad. The number 25,000,000 is an approximation that the activists adopted as a slogan.

openly discussed – among other media-related topics – the relationship between online technologies and offline territories, the effectiveness of Facebook communication, and the possibility of stimulating new groups of sympathizers through the web.

Third, the need to focus attention on the field of communication gave some activists the opportunity to specialize, focusing their activism on strategies relating to the digital environment. In particular, when the campaign started to attract new volunteers, the younger ones and those already familiar (in an amateurish way) with social media or other online platforms started to organize new blogs, or to create and update water-related Facebook pages. Moreover, activists with professional skills and some sympathetic communication workers started to make a substantial contribution to the campaign.

Fourth, the large number of activists dedicated to communication and digital technologies, the adoption of social media and blogs, the continuous debates and experimentation with new media techniques slowly contributed to fragmenting the initiative on this field, and led to the creation of independent centres of action. The local committees or even single administrators of Facebook pages started to promote their own decentralized media strategies, without necessarily following suggestions from organizations active at the national level. Some efforts at coordination accompanied this tendency towards decentralization: for instance, a national group dedicated to communications was active during the first phase of the campaign, and some FIMA activists proposed numerous initiatives and content that local actors could easily put to use (for instance, they asked them to publish photos of the referendum flag in different contexts). During the last phase of the referendum campaign, nevertheless, local and informal groups freely decided how to act in social media and online spaces.

Fifth, the intensity of the activists' efforts reached its peak during the last month of the campaign, invading the space of Facebook with referendum-related initiatives, at the same time becoming visible on some mainstream media and in the 'real world' offline. A single appeal to the vote was sent to more than 3,000,000 Facebook users, while pictures and videos inviting participation went viral and spontaneous initiatives emerged from new, quickly organized groups active for the first time.

As it is easy to understand, these five elements (participation of new professionals, focus on communications, digital 'specialization' of some activists, decentralization, and peak of intensity) contributed to a radical transformation of the relationship of the activists with digital technologies. In the next section, I propose a synthetic description of what I consider as

the main dimension that characterized this evolution of the communication strategies: the activists started to conceive the online technologies less as a tool, and more as a communication environment, a sort of arena that they could influence. This evolution caused in my opinion a stable modification of the communication strategies for the actors involved in the campaign, also promoting the emergence of new roles within the movement milieu.

From tools to complex communication environments: a new model of online communication

The Italian social movement that promoted the 2011 referendum on water privatization strongly modified its relationship with digital technologies during the course of the campaign. The diffused choice to utilize Facebook as an instrument of communication is probably the most evident change derived from the mobilization: I dedicate, therefore, an entire chapter of this work (Chapter 6) to this modification. Another relevant element that characterized this evolution was a widespread re-conceptualization of the role of online technologies – and of the web, in particular – in political communications and campaigning. In few words, I can describe this transition as a passage from an instrumental way of conceiving of digital technologies, to a more complicated representation of these technologies as communication milieus.⁵⁷

Before engaging in the new political task of promoting and sustaining a referendum, most of the water activists and groups tended to perceive online technologies as cheap and useful tools that could enable them to achieve numerous distinct goals. For instance, according to the activists, information technologies enabled the coordination of a disperse community of activists, allowed them to send information to sympathetic media, and facilitated the continuation of conversations started during an assembly or a meeting. The national mailing list and the website www.acquabenecomune.org, which made up the main digital backbone of the FIMA coalition, were used (and are still partially used) to enable decentralized and horizontal communication between the activists, and to share documents, information and digital resources among them.

57 I adopt here the term ‘communication milieu’, rather than ‘environment’, because in this case I am not referring to the concept of media environment as developed, among others, by Mattoni (2012), but simply to a different way of perceiving the web as a space where people can act, instead of as a tool with which to act.

Furthermore, in this first phase the use of these online tools was mainly subordinate to initiatives regarding the offline reality: the mailing list was used to organize a demonstration and the website was a tool for publishing and distributing a report created during a national assembly. Another evident characteristic of this 'way of being digital' and of conceiving of online technologies is the fact that technologies are mainly adopted for inward-oriented communication and organization among activists, rather than for the purpose of contacting a broader public. Of course, there are evident exceptions to this instrumental, inward-oriented model. For instance, the administrator of the Facebook page *Acqua Pubblica* – briefly described in the previous section – was already adopting complex strategies in different online spheres to increase the number of readers and to connect with other, different web-based political communities. Furthermore, in some cases the activists described the website www.acquabenecomune.org as a tool that was able to represent the water coalition and its internal organizations to interested people, moving in this way in the direction of outward-oriented communication, as it emerges in an interview to the FIMA webmaster:

I think that, notwithstanding the role of the social networking sites, the Net is a social network. I mean, you have many people who surf to look for information. And the website [www.acquabenecomune.org] is our voice, our space. (IW 26A)

As I wrote above, activists gradually substituted this instrumental and inward-oriented use of digital technologies with a more complex and multifaceted model. Thanks to the numerous decentralized decisions that characterized the campaign, to the diffused experimentations, to the frequent debate and self-reflection among the activists, but also due to the participation of a new generation of activists to the campaign, a heterogeneous set of online actions and perceptions quickly emerged. Roughly summarizing this complexity – which I explore in detail in Chapter 6 – I can describe the emerging perception as a new conceptualization of the online technologies, which the activists started to see as a space of action.

With the expression 'conceiving online technologies as a space of action', I refer to two distinct yet overlapped opinions. First of all, the activists started to see the users of Facebook, the Italian blog networks, online newspapers, and the web in general as territories where the water activists could reach a new public, territories that they could try to 'capture' with

their communication efforts. Adopting this perspective, communities of activists organized coordinated initiatives with the aim of occupying the space of comments threads in online newspapers. Furthermore, they created a new space online (a section of the website www.referendumacqua.it) in order to reach possible online sympathizers and to ask them to perform small propaganda actions. Moreover, the activists monitored the websites of possible opponents; they did their best to promote their messages within other Facebook communities; or tried to create content that could go viral. Second, the activists introduced the idea of a sympathetic, alternative online space, which they opposed to the traditional and closed mainstream media environment. Therefore, activists adopted the web, Facebook and email chains as platforms for alternative communication efforts, to oppose the silence of Italian television and of the main national and local newspapers. In other words, activists perceived digital technologies as 'their own' environments of action, a place in which their opponents were less prepared to communicate.

The campaign development and goals contributed to change the form of the previously described 'instrumental' way of conceiving of online spaces, too. During the years that preceded the referendum campaign, the FIMA actors mainly perceived things in terms of stable communities of activists. During the campaign, and, in particular, in its later phases, the widespread use of social media permitted in some cases the inclusion of sympathetic Facebook or Twitter users in ephemeral activities. These sympathizers launched pro-vote bicycle rides, printed and distributed leaflets, and monitored the voting results in their own towns on Twitter. At the end of the campaign, therefore, in some FIMA organizations the idea that digital tools could help to mobilize and activate larger communities of sympathizers on the ground started to emerge, even if most activists observed this phenomenon (and its ephemerality) in a critical way.

To conclude, it is important to remember that these models present numerous exceptions, and that different, more complex relationships between digital technologies and activism characterized in some case the referendum campaign. This notwithstanding, the framework that I presented here can describe an evolution that regarded elements as diverse as the digital communication strategies, everyday online behaviours and, probably the most important of all, the way the activists conceived the online space. These changes are crucial to explain numerous other modifications: in particular, FIMA started to perceive the need for new skills and competences, a phenomenon that I describe in detail in the next section of this chapter.

5.2 The Role of the Specialists: technological and communications skills

Heterogeneous abilities

During the Italian referendum campaign against the privatization of water, different activists and supporters made their own contribution to diffusing the appeal to vote, adopting various forms of communication and dealing differently with the new communications context that the campaign goals contributed to producing. In the following paragraphs, I present six examples of online activism and collaboration that I encountered in my research: they can demonstrate how broad the spectrum of media-related activities and of digital and communications skills present among the water activists and supporters was.

In a town in Tuscany, an activist in his thirties, working in the education sector but with a good background in making videos, created an unofficial advertisement for the referendum. With the help of his girlfriend and of some relatives, he produced this video during his holidays and at night. After having uploaded it onto YouTube (Marabotti 2011), he independently developed and applied a strategy of diffusion (mainly through mailing lists), which proved to be successful: the video went viral, reached about 120,000 views, and a national TV broadcaster (Sky TG24) retransmitted it.

In Rome, a very talented paid activist of a small but well-connected organization contributed to the campaign mainly by creating websites. With the help of the FIMA webmaster, and following the suggestions of a broader community of supporters that emerged during a brainstorming session, he designed a web page that aimed at gathering digital activists and sympathizers, providing them numerous small models of action to follow, micro actions that were useful for supporting the vote. While doing so, he took into consideration some suggestions from a social media expert, an external consultant who gave a free introductory class to him and to other movement actors.

In two different cities, two young women independently approached the local water committees in order to volunteer for the campaign. Their histories and backgrounds as active people were very different, but in both cases the water committees asked them to work on the online space, reshaping the local blogs and writing on the local Facebook pages.

In Turin, a water activist with a particular interest in digital communications and with a previous experience of activism in the local Meetup gatherings of Beppe Grillo decided to contact three very young designers in

the same city. These designers were already famous on the web as authors of a beautiful animation that reached more than 1,000,000 viewers on YouTube (Negrin 2010). Knowing of their ability to build social media content and initiatives that had gone viral, the activist asked the designers to volunteer for the campaign. With complete freedom of action, they created an initiative in support of the referendum: a small ironic project of photo sharing, which people could easily reply to, personalize, and share on Facebook and YouTube (*SmileLab* 2011).

Finally, a small group of students, who had begun to engage in activism during a previous wave of mobilizations in the Italian universities, launched an alternative information event from their amateur Facebook page. They invited their contacts to vote for the referendum, with the aim of reaching about 2,000 users. Unexpectedly, the appeal went viral, and quickly reached about 70,000 people. For reasons that I was not able to explore in detail, Facebook decided to obstruct this event by erasing it from its platform.

As can be observed, these examples reveal numerous different dimensions that researchers can adopt to analyse the patterns of communication, the strategies and the skills that activists and supporters implemented in order to diffuse their campaign. Here, however, my main aim is to concentrate on two questions. First of all, I am interested in showing how new skills emerged during the campaign. Second, I want to investigate how the movement actors that I am observing adapted themselves in order to find these new capabilities.

A preliminary, indicative answer to the first question is that the observed movement actors searched these resources both within the boundaries of their movement and in a faded area of external supporters and professionals. Therefore, in the next two sections I adopt this relevant distinction to present the relationship between digital expertise and social movement communications in the case of the Italian referendum campaign against the privatization of water.

Digital knowledge and actions within the boundaries of the movement

In most cases, the FIMA actors reacted to the new communication needs that emerged during the water referendum campaign with tactics and resources that emerged within the boundaries of their movements or organizations. They searched for abilities or resources among the activists, they experimented with new forms of action, they adapted their activities to the new online environment, and they activated, applying the previous tactics, a strong learning processes within the movement milieu. These

internal ways of dealing with an evolving digital environment during the campaign assumed various forms, and involved several different actors. However, I could distinguish three key patterns of action in the campaign that I am investigating.

First of all, in numerous cases widespread media skills were already present in this movement milieu: the activists simply re-adapted these skills to the new circumstances and media environments. Concerning this first point, it is important to remember that numerous skills, and, in particular, the ability to deal with digital technologies and with changing media environments (Mattoni 2012), are very widespread within movements, and are inherited from previous experiences of activism. In this case, numerous Italian water activists – and not only the younger ones among them – already knew very well how to create simple websites or blogs, many more knew the very basic skills required to post content on Facebook and create Facebook pages, and at least one activist in every local committee was able to create and send press releases. In addition, the movement environment within and around the FIMA initiatives had already developed a specialized structure for the production of digital and non-digital media content.⁵⁸ For instance, a small number of people were able to create videos, and they were easy to reach in case of need through the national mailing lists. Alternative radio stations, newspapers and websites supported the resistance efforts against water privatization. Informal groups of media activists coming from different organizations were already in contact, and were working together during relevant national events.

In many cases, the limited amount of time and human resources was more responsible for restricting the number of digital-related activities in this movement milieu than was the lack of knowledge. The referendum campaign simply activated this pre-existent background: skilled activists concentrated their attention on the digital environment, and they made extraordinary efforts in the months that preceded the referendum, working for more hours and days on communications-related projects. On the one hand, activists dedicated part of these efforts to pursuing activities that they were already used to working with. For instance, one of the main symbols that the activists tried to spread during the months that preceded the vote was a flag. I think that its diffusion and its use was an attempt to replicate the enormous success of the Italian campaign *Pace da tutti i balconi* (Peace from all the balconies), where a rainbow flag quickly became an incredibly popular

58 See Chapter 4 for a network overview of the online resources that the Italian Forum of Water Movements developed and connected through time.

symbol in 2002. On the other hand, activists applied their knowledge and strategies to the new media environment that characterized the campaign. For instance, they posted press releases on Facebook, as they had previously on blogs and websites, but slowly (and not always) adapting this behaviour to the new environment. Finally, activists had another relevant resource that they could transfer from their previous experiences to this new digital space: they had connections and contacts with people and sympathizers that they had met during their previous initiatives. Therefore, even when activists were not particularly expert and skilled users of the online media, they could quite easily reach a large, committed online public.

Second, activists started to play with the social media environments and their features, experimenting with new practices related to the online space. As I discussed in the previous chapters, during the last months of the campaign the FIMA actors started to perceive the communications field (and digital communication, in particular) as the most important arena where they could support the vote. Dealing with online technologies, therefore, became a more widespread task than before. Numerous formal and informal groups started to elaborate independent online strategies, with the very simple aim of reaching as fast as possible the highest number of people, in particular, on Facebook. This experimentation was highly creative: groups and individuals played with the boundaries between online and offline spaces, coordinated their initiatives in order to become more visible to the traditional media, and attempted to reproduce – often in an amateurish but effective way – activities seen elsewhere and perceived as new, such as flash mobs, critical masses, or forms of crowdsourcing. Successful initiatives emerged (in my opinion) more due to the large number of people experimenting with strategies than as a result of good planning.⁵⁹ In general, most of these activities did not require particular digital skills. In contrast, this experimentation was useful for developing and spreading new abilities and behaviours, which emerged from the action. Facebook proved to be a particularly useful platform for this experimentation, mainly due to the presence of an online ‘public’, to features that helped the circulation of images and videos, and to the possibility of creating closed groups where online strategies could be discussed.

Third, in my opinion the presence of high-skilled paid professionals in some social movement organizations played a crucial role, permitting the creation of stable groups of action (gathered and organized around the figure

59 In Chapter 6, I describe in detail the patterns of communication and the initiatives that emerged during the campaign.

of the remunerated professional), and giving life to complex experiments of digital or social media activism. These professionals – mainly characterized by technological and communications expertise – were able to work on a full-time basis, and made a decisive contribution to the development of online activities and strategies throughout the campaign. Active on different spheres, they dedicated, however, a particular attention to the already described processes of experimentation with social media, to the creation of websites, to establish stable relationships with people working within the traditional media. Easily recognized by journalists and able to adapt their routine to the media timelines, they could obtain larger levels of visibility and a higher impact than those of most activists.

The presence of paid professionals in the FIMA network proved to be crucial within three other dynamics, too. First, they proved to be able to create and sustain digital platforms of action, which other activists and sympathetic people could use to sustain or share their initiatives. The most relevant example of this kind, among numerous ones, is the creation of an internal page within the website www.referendumacqua.it, where people could download images and banners, post their local actions online, and come into contact with territorial committees or with a Facebook group of digital activists. Second, these professionals promoted the creation of groups of media-oriented activists: starting from face-to-face meetings, the professionals helped, in particular, younger activists to elaborate strategies for online action, and collaborated in implementing them. Third, in some cases these professionals taught their skills and transferred their knowledge to others. Through this learning process and through the previously presented dynamics, they were able to transfer to relatively large groups of media activists their conceptions of the online space and their 'digital traditions'. For instance, during the referendum campaign a professional activist shared his habit of building small, single-issue websites (which are crucial communication tools during campaigns) rather than large websites (which tend to reply online and present to the public the structure of the organizations).

External experts

During the 2011 campaign, a certain number of very expert communication professionals helped the FIMA central office, or created independent initiatives for some local water committees. For instance, thanks to the contribution of an external fundraiser FIMA proposed an experimental form of online donation. Since in Italy the official referendum committees can

receive compensation for their electoral expenses after the vote, those who visited the site www.referendumacqua.it were asked lend a certain amount of money to the Forum. After the referendum victory, the donors received an email that opened two possibilities: they could receive the money back, or 'invest' it in one of FIMA's water-related activities.

Given the short amount of time at their disposal and the challenging goals that they were trying to achieve, numerous activists adopted an additional resource for dealing with the needs appearing during the water campaign. They used their relationships with a wider area of sympathetic professionals and of people active in the communications environment, and asked these actors to develop digital strategies, produce online content, and to create visible support for their campaign. In particular, they came into in contact with experts in fundraising, professionals and agencies active in the fields of communications and social media, graphics, famous designers and video makers, artists and other experts who agreed to collaborate for free. These sympathetic professionals played an interesting role in the campaign, due to their relatively weak experiences of activism, and their cultural connection with the market-oriented communications environment.

These actors cannot be defined as traditional and proper activists: in general, they were sympathetic to the movement that supported the campaign, but not necessarily committed to the issue of water privatization. By definition, they were not linked in a stable way with the traditional movement actors, such as the organizations or the local water committees, but acted more as 'consultants' or 'external helpers'. From these attributes, they derived a form of engagement characterized by intense, independent and generally short in terms of time commitment, which presented well-defined objectives: the production of a video, the organization of a lesson for the activists, the creation of fliers or of a web template. As regards their choice to participate, most were guided by the desire to use their skills at least once in a non-profit environment instead of in the market.⁶⁰

The relationship of these volunteers with the traditional, market-dominated communications environment is particularly interesting to observe. Activists tended to evaluate highly the professional skills (in terms of ideas or technical abilities) of these external actors, and to appreciate their free collaboration with their campaign. As a result, these professionals proved to be highly influential: their conceptualization of social media and

60 Unfortunately, I was only able to interview two of these experts, who, in both cases, described their desire to work once in a while outside of the market environment. A similar view, furthermore, indirectly emerges from how other activists described the role of these experts.

of fundraising strategies, therefore, quickly permeated some movement sectors, in particular, by passing through the contacts that they had with the paid activists whom I discussed in the previous section. In this way, these external experts established a mutual relationship, a connection, between the ideas circulating in traditional, market-oriented communications environments, and the alternative, social movement-directed strategies. To give one example, they successfully suggested simplifying the visual structure of websites, focusing them on simple messages and prioritizing the viewing of fundraising-related pages. A second effect of the market-related nature of these external supporters is the fact that they were obliged, in many cases, to keep their activities secret in order to maintain a neutral image with no political connotations.

5.3 The Media Context: the relationship with non-digital media

In the interviews that I did and the events that I observed, activists often explored the relationship between the traditional media and the web resources (social media or sites) that they tended to adopt. As it happens for every form of activism, for instance, during demonstrations, when people organize projects that are based online they take into account what happens in numerous media spheres: a large, complex Facebook initiative, for instance, can aim at appearing in a TV programme or in newspapers. Following these guidelines, and the earlier work of Alice Mattoni (2012) on the topic, I briefly observe in this section how the activists relate with the entire media environment, while creating content on and for the web.

To simplify the presentation, I differentiate between two very different kinds of discourses (and related practices) on the relationship between online technologies and other media, which coexisted during the campaign. Firstly, by deciding to communicate online, the activists are making a choice within a broader spectrum of possibilities: they treat digital technologies, therefore, as an *alternative* to the use of other media. Secondly, while building websites and communicating online, activists combine the web with other forms of communication: in this case, I observed the web *in combination* with other media. This subdivision is, nonetheless, a sort of theoretical, simplified and synthetic model of media alliances and oppositions. The water activists established complex and very different relationships with the broader media environment (*ibid.*), which contributed to shaping their online strategies.

Digital communication as an alternative

The referendum activists often considered the web and the online communication as an alternative within a wider spectrum of communication resources. This view can follow two different paths. On the one hand, the web can constitute an alternative to the mainstream media that do not cover the campaign, or even oppose it. On the other hand, web platforms are an alternative to channels of communication that are neutral or sympathetic towards the issue at stake, but are perceived as less effective than online tools. In the first case, the well-known opposition between mainstream and alternative communications emerges. Therefore, the web appears as a free space that the activists can better control, in contrast with other spaces, such as national television and the newspapers, and the local press, in particular.

In the Italian context of 2011, I strongly expected to observe a serious opposition between web and television. The issue of freedom of information, related to the control of Berlusconi or of the main parties over the television networks had been one of the main political themes in the country for at least ten years.⁶¹ In this campaign, nonetheless, the antagonism between online communications and television reached particularly high levels during the three months that preceded the vote. The activists had a very conflictual relationship, most of all, with the national broadcasting service RAI – *Radiotelevisione Italiana SpA* (hereafter RAI). They attacked the way it dealt with its duty to inform the citizens about the referendums, the perceived silence about the vote on public television, and the absence of the referendum committees on RAI's political programmes.

Numerous events testified to this conflict. For instance, in April a researcher denounced in an email the fact that the RAI radio service prohibited her from talking about the referendum. The email spread very quickly and went viral, even though the author later declared that she was simply trying to reach her contacts and some of their friends (Boschi 2011). Furthermore, the artists who were participating in the traditional 1 May concert organized by the national trade unions in Rome had to sign an agreement with RAI that obliged them not to refer to the referendums during their performances, which were broadcast on the public channels.⁶² Finally, the parliamentary commission that oversees the public broadcaster, the

61 See e.g. *Freedom House* (2011), but see Wu Ming (2011) for a different analysis.

62 According to the RAI, the choice of not permitting public support to the referendum issues during the 1 May concert simply applied the *par condicio* law, which regulates the presence of political content during electoral campaigns (see e.g. D'Emilio 2011).

Commissione di vigilanza RAI, approved the rules for the referendum electoral spaces only on 4 May, one month after the expected date, thereby reducing the length of the electoral campaign on the television channels (*Libera TV* 2011). Six days before, the activists of the nuclear and water referendum committees had protested over this delay in front of the RAI headquarters (*Acqua Bene Comune* 2011b).

In some cases, this conflict assumed more subtle forms. For instance, the water activists were very rarely invited to the main political talk shows, even when the main argument of discussion was the referendum. In most cases, only speakers of the main parties participated and had the opportunity to express their support for the vote (*Micromega* 2011). In one case, a private TV station invited the water referendum committee spokespersons, but only on the condition that they appeared in a link from the courthouse of Milan, which was hosting most of the Berlusconi trials. The committee declined the invitation, considering it an attempt to re-frame their presence and the issue of water privatization as a generic, anti-Berlusconi demonstration.

As concerns the relationship with the press, I observed a highly conflictual relationship with the local newspapers. Bloggers and webmasters often depicted them as hostile media, which tended to ignore their press releases. The network of blogs and websites of the territorial water committees, therefore, contributed to bypassing these media. Interestingly, other news sources competing with the main local newspapers tended to be more sympathetic towards the campaign. For instance, an activist from a small town in Lombardy describes a good relationship with the online and offline competitors of the main local newspaper, and very similar patterns emerged in other regions:

Some local blogs, for instance, in Brescia there is *Val Sabbia News*, which has constant high readership in the entire Valle Sabbia area, and in Brescia there is *Qui Brescia*, another news website, read widely in the city. We are able to appear there [but] we cannot appear in newspapers that are still very important, those that are the newspapers that you see at the bar [...]. We have more space in *Brescia Oggi*, for instance, the other newspaper, which has a lot less visibility. In the *Giornale di Brescia* we can appear only with difficulties, with a lot of difficulty. (IW 22)

A second, very different way of seeing the web as a form of communication alternative to other media emerged in two interviews that I did with the press agent of the campaign. He considered the web as one of the tools at his disposal, an option that opens opportunities and presents limitations

different from those of other media. For instance, in order to explain why Facebook is useful, he compared the long, convoluted process that he should follow in order to publish a short article in a very sympathetic mainstream medium – the newspaper *Il Manifesto* – with the quick process for posting a video or news on Facebook. Since he managed the campaign's Facebook page, which had a relatively large audience, he estimated a similar number of readers for both strategies, and thus from this perspective online communication appeared to be more efficient and less time demanding. Another element of the campaign is related to this way of perceiving online communication as an alternative within a larger media set. At the end of January 2011, five months before the vote, a large number of key activists were still conceiving the referendum campaign in very traditional terms: the secretariat of FIMA, too, was collecting money with the costs of TV spots in mind. The use of the web, and, in particular, the massive adoption of Facebook, emerged at a second stage, and partly from the activities of dispersed communities of supporters.

Digital communication in coordination with other media

The other way of observing the web and social media as elements in a broader media environment is to focus on how other forms of communication have sustained the web initiatives. First of all, the online referendum communication strongly interacted, in a positive way, with some elements and characteristics within the mainstream media milieu. In terms of television, the activists tried to push their online communication products on local and national TV channels, and for the members of the FIMA secretariat the practice of showing the URL of the main referendum website in television debates was particularly important.

However, the Forum activated more interesting interactions with several national and local newspapers. Online groups of water activists organized so as to 'capture' the comments spaces on the websites of the main newspapers, whenever news items on the issue of water or the referendum were published (see Chapter 6). Furthermore, during the last months of the campaign, the activists created numerous online-dependent initiatives, tailored to appear in the local press: the widespread use of flash mobs, happenings, and critical mass bicycle rides enabled the referendum committees to increase their visibility in the local media. Finally, in the very last phase of the campaign the online version of the newspaper *La Repubblica* – in general perceived as a moderate opponent of the water committees – decided to act as a 'networked political actor' (Vaccari 2011) to support the referendum. The

online newspaper started to host videos and information on some supporters' initiatives, asking the widespread community of readers to contribute to the campaign by sending content to the newspaper. An interesting mapping, created from the readers' 'crowd', emerged on *repubblica.it* in a form that seemed to reply the one that the FIMA secretariat hosted on its websites *acquabenecomune.org* and *referendumacqua.it*. In part, this evolution allowed numerous semi-amateur videos made by the committees to appear on a highly viewed web hub. However, this media partially reshaped the meaning of the campaign, presenting it as an opportunity to win against the right-wing parties, and creating new symbols, less related to the issues at stake: in other words, *La Repubblica* participated in the campaign as a different, independent actor.

Another media technology that strongly interacted with the online sphere during the campaign was, unsurprisingly, the traditional telephone. In particular, the work of the FIMA central office and the ties that it maintained with the organizations that sustained the campaign mainly depended on continuous phone calling, which was one of the core activities in the office daily routine. In part, this 'old' technology acted to complement and integrate the use of online communication. Local activists and the team that I observed used the telephone in order to clarify problems concerning the website *www.acquabenecomune.org*, for instance, to specify where it was possible to download a document, figure out how to make a donation, explain the step-by-step procedure to publicize a local event or identify where the public could sign the petition supporting the referendum proposals. This behaviour confirms a characteristic of web communications that today should be evident, even if it is seldom taken into account: some websites are incredibly complex communications products, which require continuous human interactions and traditional, back-office work to be effective.

5.4 Processes of Website Creation

A different way of observing the web in its context is to focus on how activists actually create their online communication 'products', such as websites or social media pages. In many cases that I observed, numerous people collectively contributed to the development of a web project, for instance, writing content, influencing the graphical layout, suggesting a new form of interaction with the users. Nonetheless, the figure of the administrator and of the webmaster – or of a single, independent producer of content

– remains everywhere crucial: he (or she) tends to have an exclusive, one-to-one relationship with a site or a page, and this link is a very important element to investigate during a campaign.

For what concerns the production of websites, webmasters – thanks to their technical skills and their possibility of controlling communication – have the opportunity to strongly influence the communications strategies of an organization during a campaign. In this last part of the chapter, therefore, I briefly describe the process of production and the everyday routine that ‘surrounded’ the two main sites of the campaign, www.acquabenecomune.org and www.referendumacqua.it. In both cases, I try to maintain a focus on the relationship between the sites and the activists who created them, instead of describing the main aspects and features of the website.

The Forum webmaster and www.acquabenecomune.org

N. was the webmaster of FIMA, who autonomously managed the main website of the coalition (www.acquabenecomune.org), and strongly contributed to the life of the single-issue site of the water referendum campaign (www.referendumacqua.it). He is a young computer science graduate specialized in IT networks, who switched to developing websites because this sector offers better job opportunities than the previous one. Consequently, his computer skills are very high, as it is its level of independence: planning and conceiving the main campaign websites, he played a key role in defining one of the main platforms where the activists organized and met online. He started to work on www.acquabenecomune.org only in March 2010, one month before the launch of the referendum campaign, replacing a previous web developer: he consequently inherited and adapted to the new struggle an already existing environment.

When he started to work on the referendum websites, he created a *de facto* completely new version of [acquabenecomune.org](http://www.acquabenecomune.org), which appeared online as a subsection of the previous site, at the URL www.acquabenecomune.org/raccoltafirme. While he maintained in this new version a graphic layout almost identical to the previous one, he decided to help focus readers’ attention on the ongoing referendum campaign, mainly making some old sections of the site less easy to see and to reach. In the following months, N. slowly modified a number of other elements inherited from the previous developer. In particular, he introduced numerous innovations to the relatively plain layout of the site: primarily, he included a space dedicated to videos, a small application reproducing songs by artists supporting the campaign, and a new way of visualizing photos.

In order to manage the site, he used Joomla!, one of the most used open source content management systems, and he interacted on a daily basis with the Italian community of Joomla! users to share suggestions and solutions. During the campaign, N. was the only person with complete access to the entire website and its database; however, he gave limited access rights to the other members of the central office in Rome, who nonetheless often ask him to 'put online' what they were writing.

Even though the website www.acquabenecomune.org remained throughout the campaign an immense repository of documents, press releases, content and contacts, the FIMA central office and N. designed a part of the site as a (pre-social media) interactive tool. Using a dedicated online form, some local activists were able to post short messages on the site in order to publicize their local initiatives. Even if this level of interaction and 'shared management' might seem very limited, in some cases it created difficulties and hurdles for the webmaster, which tended to control every one of these contributions before publishing them.

The creation of www.referendumacqua.it

During the second phase of the referendum campaign, N. contributed to the creation of another web project, a portal called www.referendumacqua.it, developed with Joomla!. Initially, the main aim of this second website was to help the FIMA central office to raise funds for the referendum campaign, a function that seemed very difficult to achieve only through www.acquabenecomune.org, which was too broad and unable to attract the reader's attention to the donation buttons. Around this project, various professionals and activists collaborated. While N. was in charge of working on the structure of the site, the graphic layout and several images were created with the help of a professional communications agency, volunteering in this work. Furthermore, a professional fundraiser, who similarly volunteered in order to support the campaign, made a key contribution by suggesting the application of a conceptual scheme used in fundraising to the site, the so-called AIDA model.⁶³

The website always hosted very concise content and tried to catch the reader's attention through the effective use of videos and graphic elements instead. This simple and strictly controlled structure significantly changed after March 2011. During an informal meeting that took place at the end of

63 AIDA is an acronym that stands for Attention, Interest, Desire, Action. These concepts inspired the creation of the site referendumacqua.it, its functions and the disposition of its menus.

February 2011, a relatively small group of activists pertaining in large part to a well-known organization present in various parts of Italy (see Chapter 6.2) launched the idea of giving life to a complex interactive portal, with two main purposes. On the one hand, it aimed at attracting new supporters for the campaign among the younger sector of the population, which the activists considered as particularly present on social media and who would be interested in participating through the web. On the other hand, it aimed at creating a place where it could be possible to share initiatives and ideas related to the referendum, and to store a trace of them in a single place. After an initial discussion, the core activists who were working within the FIMA central office proposed to merge this project with www.referendumacqua.it.

From March/April 2011, the webmaster, N., and another communications professional from the organization that planned the construction of the interactive site started to collaborate, creating a section on referendumacqua.it dedicated to the activists' participation. At the URL www.referendumacqua.it/attivati the referendum sympathizers, together with long-term water activists, could find tools to organize their propaganda actions, without relying on the help and mediation of local committees and organizations. This section hosted various applications, including a space to share photos, a dashboard for publicizing local events and initiatives, and a place where it was possible to propose new ideas to the campaign organizers. The entire site and this internal section were created in a very fast way: for this reason, and due to the collaboration of two different organizations in building the site, the signs of overlapping between the two projects remained evident for the entire campaign.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I presented the complex environment and the social interactions that surrounded digital communication during the referendum campaign against water privatization. This investigation shows, in my opinion, two very interesting aspects of the campaign. The first regards how online communication evolved, with some exceptions, from a conception of digital technologies as tools with which to organize and mobilize, to the idea of digital environments where activists try to intervene with their messages. This change overlaps, moreover, with a focus on outward-oriented communication, which derives from the fact of having organized a large-scale campaign (see e.g. Baringhorst 2009). A second key aspect that I develop in this chapter is the fact that water activists established interesting relationships with

sympathetic professionals during the campaign. Some of them were very free to act, and highly influenced the strategies of numerous organizations. I am convinced that these relationships opened up interesting channels between working models that are typical of market-oriented environments and social movement actors, and I will study this topic in more detail in the future.

Two other dimensions that I observed have already been examined in more detail in the literature. The first of them is the idea that online communication strongly interacts with a broader media environment. The work of Mattoni (2012) explores the same issue in greater detail, and Hine (2000), among other digital ethnographers, stresses the fact that the Internet is enacted in places that are not online. The second of these dimensions regards the link between how activists conceive a campaign and interact among themselves, and their communication products. Among numerous authors, Kavada (2012) interestingly explores this issue, which is nonetheless part of the idea, not always remembered but increasingly relevant, that the offline characteristics of content producers tend to be reflected in their online communications. Even though this concept might seem obvious, it stands at the base of every analysis that sees the web as a source of data.

Since, during the evolution of the campaign, activists created hundreds of websites and contributed to the formation of a very wide and complex network of communications on the web, the analysis that I conducted in this chapter has a limit. While the interviews with the activists helped me to reconstruct recurrent patterns regarding online communication, I started this research with the purpose of directly observing through participant observation how activists were creating web content. Of course, this aim quickly appeared to be impossible to achieve, due to the geographical scale that the campaign reached, the dispersed nature of web communications (in particular, as concern the social media pages and users), and the fact that many things happened in private contexts that are very difficult to observe. Furthermore, a participant observation of how web content is produced during a campaign tends to overevaluate the internal dynamics of the organizations, and underevaluate the connections and links between different projects.

I decided to overcome these problematic aspects in two ways: by 'delegating' to the network analysis in Chapter 4 the aim of providing a broader overview of the campaign and by maintaining a special focus on a single place, the FIMA central office in Rome, which hosted the two main hubs created during the campaign. It is important to note, however, that the idea of a multi-sited ethnography, which I derived from Howard (2002), is very difficult to achieve when the object of study is a campaign organized by very large networks of social movement actors.

6 The Campaign for Water on Facebook

Perceptions and organizational models in a real-digital space of activism

We are able to interact with people in an easier way through Facebook, probably because of the nature of this tool, which drives people to interact more. So, in this sense, Facebook answers to the problem [...] of the blog with interaction. (IW 11)

Q: Do you think that this massive social media use had an influence, creating in some way different models of participation and organization?
A: No. [...] No, because the social network, the web is an illusory world that has its level of discussion, which is sometimes devastating, redundant, useless, full of flames, with a very high propensity to the insults, because it is true that there is no direct link with the real world. [...] They substantially protect you from every kind of contradictions that you can find in abundance in the real world, while travelling on the web you can even go on forever without facing them. It is the other level, the real one... I mean, it is not consequential to say 'Like' and then to take the street, because this [is what] makes the difference. (IW 27)

I was often meeting S., who in the last two or three years was... well, we were mostly saying 'Hello' and 'How are you?' when we were coming across each other, so we were more acquaintances than friends. Yet, we noticed that on Facebook we were doing always the same things, sharing the same links and so on. So, on the chat we said to each other, 'What about doing something at the local level?' Then he took a while to answer, then I met him in a bar, and I told him, 'So, aren't we doing anything?' 'Well, now I am busy...', and so on. Then, the following day he answered an email. He told me, 'Well, we can organize a bicycle ride.' (IW 9)

When I accessed my Facebook account on 9 June 2011, I found a situation that I had started to become familiar with from at least a month before. I found it completely filled with content linked to the four Italian referendums – scheduled for the following Sunday – against the forced privatization of water, reintroduction of nuclear power, and immunity from trial for government ministers.

My notification counter was red, and very active: I had received 34 notifications, which were proposing referendum-related images, videos, or invitations to local events. Groups from all over Italy had sent me ten videos, a digital electoral flyer and two viral appeals to vote organized in the form of Facebook events. Furthermore, other notifications informed me about numerous offline happenings: a debate on the privatization of the water supply services, four flash mobs, a local march for water, two referendum-themed happy hours, seven concerts or evening meetings, and five bicycle rides under the yellow/no-nuclear and the blue/public water flags. Clicking on one of these notifications, I entered a serious conversation hosted on the wall of a Facebook group, connected with a local committee for public water. One of the users was trying to understand if and how her father, unable to walk by himself to the polling station, could vote from home. Various other members replied, quickly solving the problem.

On the Facebook area dedicated to messages, I received the latest information about a well-organized evening bicycle ride. As in the previous case, the participants were solving a small problem through a dense exchange of comments: an activist was unable to find a bicycle, while other members discussed his case, and finally found an extra bike for him. Various members of this group were adopting the same profile picture, a collective photograph taken during a previous ride. The photo depicted the activists tracing a giant 'Yes' with their bodies and their bicycles, on the main square of their town.

In this chapter, I describe in detail the intricate forms of activism and political communication that Facebook can host during a large-scale campaign like the one that preceded the 2011 referendum. Activists and sympathetic citizens widely used Facebook as a communications platform during the referendum campaign that the *Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua* (Italian Forum of Water Movements, hereafter FIMA) helped to promote. They formed very complex networks of contacts and experimented with interactions on this social networking site on different geographical scales, and in different contexts. Furthermore, as the three quotes that introduce this chapter reveal, every activist adopted Facebook perceiving this online platform in very different ways, and these perceptions influenced the initiatives that the activists created.

According to various commentators (and to many of those who participated in the mobilizations), the decision to adopt Facebook as the main communication platform proved to be crucial for the success of the referendum campaign. Firstly, this social media platform contributed to creating – or at least to sustaining – a communications sphere that helped to contrast

with the strategic silence of the centre-right government and of most of the mainstream media. Secondly, the relatively traditional organizations that introduced the water-commons theme in Italy succeeded in entering into contact on Facebook with younger segments of the population and with informal groups, which sustained the campaign without necessarily sharing the leftist, anti-neoliberal political framework that characterized the core of the mobilization.

In this chapter, I analyse the development of the water-related referendum campaign on Facebook, focusing on the numerous divergent models of activism that emerged on this platform throughout the months that preceded the vote. In this research, several different analytical dimensions emerged. I dedicate, nonetheless, particular attention to two themes: on the one hand, I investigate the connection between online activism and physical space; on the other hand, I explore how the perceptions of Facebook as a media environment contributed to influence the communications strategies of the activists. Furthermore, following the example of other authors interested in the relationship between social media and activism (Marichal 2012a) or society (Papacharissi 2013), I concentrated more on the characteristics that this kind of online activism has, rather than on the effectiveness (or dangers) of Facebook in mobilizing people. Following the words of Marichal, my main research questions in this chapter are 'What kind of activism does Facebook encourage?' and 'How does Facebook change what it feels like to be an activist?' (2012a: 111). In particular, I tried to answer these questions by individuating previous forms of activism that Facebook started to host, pre-existent behaviours that the activists started to adapt to the new environment, and almost new actions that the platform seemed to accelerate and support.

In order to explore the development of the campaign on a platform where the messages are widespread and fragmented, I combined two sources in this chapter. On the one hand, I investigated directly the models of participation that Facebook hosted: having in mind the suggestions of the authors that pioneered the complex field of digital ethnography, I explored online how different forms of Facebook activism emerged during the last months of the campaign. On the other hand, I filled out these online data with interviews with key activists whom I contacted after having observed their Facebook initiatives, and with observations of some of the offline physical contexts from which the online events emerged.

Obviously, a national, multi-centred political campaign on Facebook is an enormous phenomenon, which is difficult to conceive as an ethnographic field of study. As a researcher, I could participate in or observe only a

very small portion of the events that constituted the impressive wave of Facebook communication that preceded the vote. However, I was able to partially overcome this difficulty by relying on some of the features that Facebook offers to its user. Creating connections with more than 200 actors related to the campaign, and concentrating on the notifications that they were producing, I obtained every day a quick synthetic image of what was happening in different online environments, and in different areas of the country.

Briefly summarizing, I start this chapter by presenting, in the first section, different approaches that allow Facebook to be an object of study, in particular, in relationship with activism and campaigning. After a short literature review, I present the difficulties that a researcher can encounter while conducting a large-scale investigation centred on Facebook; furthermore, I indicate two divergent methodological approaches that can help to deal with these limitations, between which I situated the present research.

In the following sections, I present the results of my observations. The second section describes how the activists slowly entered into relationships with Facebook during the campaign. This timeline permits me to trace a first, general image of how the activists adopted the platform, and to present the debate on the relevance of Facebook for the success of the 2011 referendum, as it appeared in the newspapers and on the web in the days that followed the vote. In the third section, I focus on the content and on the actions of the water activists on Facebook, observing the different set of experiences, initiatives and recurrent patterns of use that I consider as able to represent the way in which this platform became relevant for the campaign. In particular, I concentrate on the interactions within a single online group, on the role of images and memes during the campaign, on the emergence of viral appeals to vote, and on how the activists 'played' with the online/offline dimensions. In the fourth and last section, I shift my attention from the actions to the opinions and the perceptions of the activists, illustrating how they describe Facebook and their relationship with it differently: three recurrent ways of perceiving the platform emerged, combining horizontal or vertical communication, and inward-/outward-oriented views. Finally, throughout these sections I introduce some additional analytical dimensions, which I consider useful to link this chapter with the other parts of this book. In particular, I observe the relevance of the geographical scale of action, I describe how the activists linked their online and offline actions, and I indicate some unexpected models of activism that might emerge in a more frequent way when a campaign happens on Facebook.

6.1 How to Investigate a Facebook Campaign

Approaches and difficulties in literature

When I started this research, in 2011, the literature on Facebook was still very limited: numerous contributions appeared only during the following two years, and influenced my investigation in its later phases. For what concerns the relationship between Facebook and activism, authors tend to include this issue within the broader discussion regarding the possible influences of social media platforms on society, democracy, and political campaigning. Different authors suggested that the increased use of social media in activism give life to risks regarding privacy and control for the activists (Andrews 2012; Trottier 2012; Morozov 2011; Fuchs 2011; Acquisti and Gross 2006; see also Bolsover and Howard 2017). Furthermore, some authors focused on the well-known dichotomy between ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ spheres, suggesting that Facebook activism can become an online, incomplete communication-oriented surrogate for ‘real world’ activism (Morozov 2011).

In general, after a first phase of enthusiasm (e.g. O’Reilly 2007), it is nowadays more difficult to find in the literature contributions that are completely optimistic about social media use in activism. Nonetheless, scholars have pointed to the potential empowerment of political communities through social media use (Effing *et al.* 2012), and recognize in these platform the possibility of supporting new forms of online protest, sustaining a common identity, and quickly increasing the number of mobilized people (Earl and Kimport 2011). With a different focus on the ability of spreading messages and on network building, Bennet and Segerberg (2012: 36-37) include social media use in their broader concept of personalized communication, and observe that a more individualized, less centralized communications strategy – which seems easier to organize on social media platforms – does not imply incoherent, ineffective collective action. Proposing the concept of connective action, these authors describe how social media can introduce consistent changes in activism, permitting less hierarchical, spontaneous forms of organization. Similarly intervening on the complex and ambitious question ‘How does the intensive use of social media transform the organization and communication of protest?’, Poell and Van Dijck (2018: 546) claim that hierarchical structures and separation of roles persist on social media, in different forms. According to these authors,

Small groups of activists, centrally positioned in social media-facilitated networks, fulfilled many of the functions traditionally associated with

social movement leaders, that is: strategically framing protest activity and connecting previously separate individuals and groups in common action. (*Ibid.*: 550)

A positive view of social media use is often implicit in numerous studies that analysed the 2011 wave of mobilizations that included the Arab Spring, the Spanish 15-M and Occupy Wall Street, which attracted the attention of numerous scholars on the links between social media and activism. However, due to the closed nature of the Facebook data (see Rogers 2013: 153), most contributions focused on different environments that are easier to investigate: the traditional web, the blogosphere and Twitter,⁶⁴ dedicating marginal attention to Facebook (e.g. Howard *et al.* 2011; Micó and Casero-Ripollés 2013; Tufekci and Wilson 2012). For researchers interested in exploring the dynamics of activism on Facebook, the main obstacle is still a methodological one. In general, while in numerous cases Twitter proved to be an incredibly detailed source of 'big data' about protests and campaigns (e.g. González-Bailón *et al.* 2011), the research on Facebook seems to be still looking for stable techniques of data collection. While some authors have based their investigation on well-known offline methodologies (e.g. Mascheroni 2012; Teruelle 2012; Petray 2011), others have tried to gather data online, focusing mainly on text (Hendricks *et al.* 2012), on single groups or users, and on comparisons, while at the moment structured network data (see Webb *et al.* 2012) seem more difficult to obtain. For instance, Gladarev and Lonkila (2012) compared the use of Facebook and of another social networking site in two countries. Kang (2012) adopted the 'actor network' theory approach to observe the dynamics within single Facebook groups, while Mascaro and colleagues (2012) observed the discussions within two large political groups, interestingly selecting only the most commented posts for their analysis. Finally, some scholars are combining different methods of data collection, introducing both online and offline techniques of investigation in order to explore social media activism from different angles.

In particular, Farinosi and Treré (2011) observed the interplay between online and offline activism in L'Aquila – after the 2009 earthquake – combining semi-structured interviews, qualitative-quantitative analysis of a Facebook group, and online/offline ethnography. Dan Mercea (2013) similarly combined a qualitative analysis of textual data and interviews, introducing a comparative perspective between two similar cases. In this chapter, I follow these last two examples, trying at the same time to adapt the offline/

64 A relevant exception is Gaby and Caren (2012).

online methods that the authors proposed to a large-scale campaign of communication.

Limits of a Facebook investigation

Communication patterns on Facebook are extremely difficult to observe, if compared with traditional websites and with other social networks. As Bolsover and Howard point out, ‘the majority of technical studies focus on Twitter data because the platform provides more open access than the more widely used Facebook’ (2017: 274). Similarly, Zeynep Tufekci describes Twitter as the *Drosophila melanogaster*, or common fruit fly, of social media studies, while Facebook obtains marginal attention from scholars:

Unsurprisingly, only about 5% of the papers presented in ICWSM [International Conference on Weblogs and Social Media] 2013 were about Facebook, and nearly all of them were co-authored with Facebook data scientists. (Tufekci 2014: 506)

Although an enormous amount of posts, notifications and events connected with the Italian referendum campaign on water privatization circulated on this platform, it proved to be impossible for me to build a complete, structured and representative archive of the entire referendum-related sphere of communication on Facebook, and to produce broad maps of how this wave of communication grew and evolved. Furthermore, I aimed more at tracing fine-graded descriptions of how Facebook activism can appear during a large-scale campaign – or, to quote Tufekci, ‘illuminating glimpses into specific cultural and socio-political conversations’ (*ibid.*: 508) – rather than at tracing the evolution of the campaign in its entirety.

The difficulties that I encountered have three main origins. First of all, the commercial aim of Facebook is to gather and organize data referring to large populations of users. Since these data generate profits, they are protected and in general difficult to access for external researchers. This notwithstanding, scholars and computer programmers have often created applications that suggest what the structure of communication on this platform looks like, tracing, for instance, network representations of groups of users. While some Facebook apps can be used for research purposes, when I conceived this research Facebook was limiting in most cases the range of action of these applications to a maximum of 500 users, or to the community of friends of the researcher.

A second limitation regards the user's privacy settings. Most users decide to share their information and posts only with their online acquaintances, or their so-called 'friends of friends'. Therefore, Facebook is an environment that strongly differs from the traditional web, where things are created and shared in order to become public (Marres and Rogers 2005). Even when Facebook users do not protect their data, they tend to consider their posts and behaviour on this platform as something that they want to keep under their control: it is realistic to presume that they would resist them being used in research. As Bolsover and Howard (2017: 275) write: 'Available doesn't mean ethical. Although the data of many social media sites are public, research has shown that users do not necessarily understand their information as such.'

A third limitation concerns the fragmentation of communication during a large-scale web campaign. Due to the large number of organizations, activists, and everyday users involved, and due to the lack of a reliable search engine to investigate Facebook in its entirety, the boundaries of the campaign are difficult to determine in advance.

While these limitations make it difficult to trace the development – or the rapid 'explosion' – of a Facebook campaign in its entirety, the lack of large-scale data is less relevant in research focused on the activists and on how they behave and interact with Facebook. While the observation of Internet sources can help the researcher to investigate offline phenomena on a larger scale, this appears to be difficult in the case of Facebook (Rogers 2009, 2013). In contrast, the investigation of virtual communities and online cultures seems relatively easier to achieve. I focus my research, therefore, on the direct observation of people's activities and on the communication strategies of different organizations that participated in the campaign. In doing so, my main models are the virtual ethnography approach of Christine Hine (2000), the comparison of the digital strategies of some environmental organizations that Jenny Pickerill (2003) ideated, the work of Alice Mattoni (2012) on the activists' media practices within the Italian precarious movements, and the contributions of Farinosi and Trerè (2011) and Mercea (2013) regarding Facebook activism.

Nonetheless, my method tends to differentiate from the previously presented approaches on two points. Firstly, in contrast with Mattoni (2012), while I mainly focus on the activists and their efforts, I continuously observe their relationship with a single online technology and its features, without aiming at understanding a complex media environment in its entirety. Secondly, in this book I do not compare independent case studies, but I observe numerous different yet connected experiences of activism. The hundreds of Facebook groups, users and actions linked with the 2011 Italian

referendum that I observed are deeply linked elements. I simultaneously try, therefore, to compare different organizations (as Jenny Pickerill and Dan Mercea do) and to observe the general pattern that emerges from their interactions (following Christine Hine).

Facebook as an ethnographic field

The exploration of how a digital campaign develops through time, and of the various activists' practices that social media can host during a similar mobilization, can follow numerous divergent methodological paths. Even when researchers decide to adopt an ethnographic approach recurring to forms of participant observation, digital phenomena leave open choices regarding what to observe, where to observe it, and which boundaries to adopt. Furthermore, in this process of definition of the field, they have to deal with complex and variable scales of action that sometimes cross and re-cross the borders between online and offline milieus.

In my research, I decided to focus on several Facebook initiatives which were connected yet independent elements of the broader water campaign. The main methodological option that I had to face in the preliminary steps of this work regarded how to situate myself as an observer of the events that were emerging, both on Facebook and on the ground. Taking into account numerous ethical limits and contrasting ways of exploring a web phenomenon, two alternative research approaches came to mind.

The first option that I considered was to observe social media from outside, meeting offline the activists who were giving life to relevant Facebook initiatives during the campaign. Adopting this path, researchers can reconstruct a social media campaign relying on face-to-face contacts, on non-mediated relationships, adopting a focus on the activists' discourses instead of on their own experiences of direct participation within groups, pages, or Facebook events. In this way, they can reconstruct patterns of Facebook activism by systematically collecting data that the activists explicitly concede (e.g. through interviews, surveys, or participation in events), respecting the limits that both Facebook and the users decide to establish, and maintaining a certain distance from the online communities that sustain the campaign. Furthermore, this non-digital path permits researchers to adopt a perspective that is less influenced by the internal mechanisms of social media, because they do not rely on the Facebook features (which implies a certain level of distortion) to reconstruct the development of the campaign or to enter into contact with the activists. The obvious limitation of this approach is that researchers observe the Facebook

initiatives without entering into contact with, and without observing in a critical way, the facilities that this social medium can offer to the activists, the features and the rules that might change the way the activists organize. In order to trace how the people interact and communicate on the platform, going beyond the activists' perception of the phenomenon, researchers should come into direct contact with the activists on Facebook and with the events that they organize.

The second way of investigating Facebook that I propose, therefore, suggests that scholars should observe this social networking site while using it, directly joining the sphere of communication linked with the actors and phenomena under study. For instance, researchers can use the internal search engine in order to find meaningful groups, pages and events. They can participate in discussions and debates, with the aim of observing the development of unexpected or atypical communication fluxes. They can choose, in few words, to join an area of Facebook, observing at the same time its links with the real world and considering these two elements as their ethnographic field.

This last approach has obvious benefits. For instance, since Facebook tends to provide to the users information from the sources that they visit most, researchers who interact with the studied environment start to modify their experience on this platform, situating themselves at the core of the communications fluxes that they are observing, and receiving a large amount of notifications related to the phenomenon being studied. Nevertheless, in adopting this approach other limitations emerge. First of all, researchers should carefully define the ethical limits of their investigation: by positioning themselves within the studied networks of users and content, they will be able to access sensitive data, and the users may therefore perceive them as an undesired observer. Second, they should be aware of the fact that, while interacting with Facebook in order to observe broad phenomena, they still maintain a very partial, personalized point of view. The boundaries of this view depend, on the one hand, on how well the researcher's connections represent the entire population of Facebook activists and, on the other hand, on the choices of the social media platform: the 'distortion' that I mentioned in the previous paragraph can privilege messages coming from different actors, according to algorithms that are in part unknown. By adopting this approach, researchers have, at least in part, an experience on Facebook that is somehow tailored on themselves, and they must take into account the risks of this internal point of view.

In my research, I decided to observe the referendum campaign by adopting the second approach presented above. More specifically, I proceeded

Table 6.1 Referendum-related actors connected with my Facebook account during the campaign (events excluded)

	Facebook pages	Facebook friends	Facebook groups	Total
Individual activists	2	104	0	106
Water committees and initiatives	63	48	26	137
Other supporting groups	40	25	0	65
Total	105	177	26	308

through the following steps. Firstly, I slowly mapped, mainly from April to December 2010, the presence of the water committees on Facebook, utilizing the internal search engine. Secondly, during the entire campaign I made requests to join these water- and referendum-related groups and pages, opening connections with the activists whom I already knew and with other engaged referendum supporters. Furthermore, I decided to accept 'friend' requests from people obviously engaged in the referendum campaign, for instance, those users who were 'wearing' a badge or an electoral symbol in their profile photo. As a result, I connected my Facebook account with 308 entities connected to the campaign, which represented 106 individual activists, 137 water committees and water-related initiatives, and 65 other organizations supporting the campaign (Table 6.1). Thirdly, I participated in the activities of some of these groups, using the numerous Facebook notifications that I was receiving every day as an entry point, and writing field notes on what was happening in this social media environment. In several relevant cases, I decided to cross the digital/offline barrier, visiting the activists that organized these initiatives, interviewing them, and observing the physical place (when it existed) where the digital action emerged.

During the last month of the referendum campaign, the stream of content related to the referendum was so intense and rapid that it became impossible to manually check the hundreds of groups and pages that I had previously identified. In order to individuate relevant initiatives in this chaotic environment, I focused on a highly condensed source of information: the numerous Facebook notifications that I was receiving every day, which were providing a good summary of the events organized in the entire country, permitting me to individuate those actions that I should investigate in more detail.

In adopting this approach, I had to face serious ethical dilemmas, in particular, in relation to the disclosure of my identity and of my research plan. On the one hand, researchers should in general declare their presence

in a semi-private digital environment that hosts discussions among activists. On the other hand, the field that I observed was highly fragmented, and it was impossible to present my research and myself to every user who was participating in the hundreds of initiatives that I was observing. To cope with this difficulty, I decided to present my project and my identity in two ways. On one side, I exposed online my research within the groups that I studied in more detail, and to the users with whom I interacted most. On the other side, I presented my project offline, too, informing the activists on my research during the interviews, the face-to-face meetings, and in the weeks that I spent in Rome in the FIMA secretariat. Furthermore, I publicly presented my project during one of the FIMA assemblies: the Forum activists recorded my intervention, and made this short presentation available online by uploading it to YouTube.

As an exception to this tendency, in some cases I observed some fluxes of communication on Facebook groups without revealing myself. I made this choice when I was dealing with public, very broad groups or open events, which I was mainly considering as sources that were aiming at spreading information (as the traditional websites tend to be), more than as closed communities that were protecting their interactions from external eyes.

6.2 Activism on Facebook during the 2011 Referendum Campaign

Water campaigning and Facebook through time

Two characteristics of the mobilization around the issue of water privatization in Italy can suggest a useful point of view for understanding how the activists adopted Facebook as a communication tool. Firstly, the organizations and people involved in this campaign structured this issue as a long-term area of action. Mobilizations for public water in Italy encountered both intense peaks, during the three springs of 2007, 2010 and 2011, and long phases of apparent stasis, when the action tended to be fragmented and to move from the national level to the local regions, and to smaller groups of core activists. Secondly, during both of these phases the mobilization proved to be well established in the country, thanks to various local centres of action, the committees and the so-called territories, which were acting in an almost independent way. To a certain extent, the entire campaign consisted in a series of efforts aiming at rising the scale of action from a dispersed local level, where the water actions were well rooted, to a broader national and institutional one.

Due to the longevity of the mobilization, the interaction of the activists with the online environment of Facebook began well before the first stage of the referendum campaign, which started in April 2010. Moreover, due to the independence of action of the local groups and committees, the first interactions with Facebook happened without central coordination or strategy. During this early phase, numerous local committees had already decided to create a local Facebook group, or a collective profile, in order to facilitate communication with the people involved and to represent themselves in this relatively new online space. These dispersed communication efforts constituted a useful substrate, which helped FIMA in the organization of its communication strategies during the following phases of the campaign.

During this first period, the most important experiment regarding public water on Facebook was started by an institutional actor. Domenico Finiguerra, mayor of the small town of Cassinetta di Lugagnano and an environmental activist not linked with the main parties, in late 2008 created the page *Acqua Pubblica* (Public Water), a sort of informal national communication hub around the issue of water on Facebook. This space was not directly connected with the formal structure of the water committees, but it quickly exceeded the impressive number of 600,000 fans, achieving by the end of the campaign about 1,000,000 'likes'.⁶⁵ In particular, this page grew through a strategic collaboration with *Il Popolo Viola* (The Violet People), a well-known Italian political community and a sort of early comer on Facebook, famous for having organized a national demonstration against Berlusconi in 2009 by mainly relying on this online platform (Vergani 2011).

The communication dedicated to the privatization of water on Facebook and the attention of the water activists to this web platform grew satisfactorily from April to July 2010, during the phase dedicated to the collection of signatures that are necessary to call for a referendum. In particular, from April 2010 the FIMA secretariat started to coordinate the campaign at the national level. Above all, this group decided to open an official page on Facebook, called *Referendum acqua pubblica – www.acquabenecomune.org*, administered in a fully independent way by the FIMA communication officer. In order to launch this page and to obtain a substantial number of followers, the administrator requested the help of Domenico Finiguerra and of other large local groups, which posted on their walls numerous appeals to follow this new communication space. The page reached about 90,000 'likes' during the campaign, an important but still relatively low number, taking into account the high popularity of the page *Acqua Pubblica* and of

65 On 15 November 2013, the page *Acqua Pubblica* had 1,006,846 likes.

the referendum issue in general on Facebook.⁶⁶ With some resistance, other local committees decided to shift their attention from the traditional web to Facebook, mainly because they started to notice that on this social media platform they were able to connect with larger sectors of sympathetic but less engaged people.

Finally, Facebook became strategic for the success of the referendum proposals during the last months of the electoral campaign. During the assemblies of the water groups in autumn and winter 2010/2011, a recurrent phrase perfectly described the new and apparently desperate communications needs of the referendum promoters. It more or less declared: '[During the campaign launch] we reached 1,500,000 Italians; now we need to convince more than 25,000,000 voters', the minimum quorum required to declare a referendum valid in Italy. In this way, the activists stressed the fact that wider access to the media and the ability to communicate with the Italian electorate was their real battlefield, which could determine the success or failure of their mobilization.

Since the television broadcasters and the major newspapers were openly opposing or strategically ignoring the electoral campaign, these core activists very often perceived social media as a set of useful alternatives to the traditional mainstream media. Facebook, in particular, started to appear as the best place to be on the web, where it was possible to reach an external and only loosely committed 'audience'. Starting from this idea, activists, local committees and individual organizations experimented with thousands of uncoordinated different initiatives, trying to communicate with what they perceived as a sympathetic (but not very engaged) online public.

In the heterogeneity that emerged, I observed some recurrent patterns and strategies. Almost everywhere, activists started to use their personal profiles in order to communicate in an individual way, posting articles or photos (in particular, modifying their personal profile photos) with the aim of raising awareness among their contacts. Furthermore, local activists replicated their organizations online, creating Facebook groups that coordinated initiatives, made public their offline events, or shared online content on the platform. Both the organizations and the activists interacted with other network actors, contributing to the circulation of water-related material (images and memes) on Facebook. Furthermore, the activists created different kinds of events in order to inform and attract people to vote, in some cases publicizing initiatives that were local, small,

66 On 15 November 2013, the page *Referendum acqua pubblica – www.acquabenecomune.org* had 103,172 likes.

and linked with an offline territory, in other cases giving life to online events that spread on a national scale. Finally, in rare, successful cases, newcomers and veteran activists adopted the platform to consolidate and give a new meaning to their informal online acquaintances, creating in this way new communities and even formal associations that seemed to appear on Facebook from nothing.

This variety of activities reached a peak during the last month of the campaign, approximately in the second half of May 2011. During these days, the referendum became a very popular issue on the media and in the entire Italian society: it is probably due to this peak that the Latin words *quorum* and *referendum* became the most prevalent in the Italian Facebook profile updates, as confirmed on the annual Facebook Memology report (Bianchini 2011). On broad 'areas' of Facebook (and, to a minor extent, of other web platforms and social media), users simultaneously started to communicate and share content about the referendum, dedicating almost their entire pages, groups and profiles to convincing as many people as they could to vote, or to circulating referendum symbols.

In this phase, even the personal experience of using Facebook completely changed for those interested in the issue of water privatization, or connected with water activists. In my case, in particular, the Facebook notifications were suggesting events and activities related to the referendum campaign to me almost exclusively. About one-quarter of my Facebook friends started to follow the group *Acqua Pubblica*, numerous acquaintances changed their profile photos to symbols linked with the referendum, and I started to receive 'friend' requests from people whom I did not know, but whom I could recognize as water activists.

Facebook and the interpretations of the electoral success

Immediately after the conclusion of the referendum vote, and of the victory for the proposers, an intense debate emerged in Italy about the role that social media strategies played during this electoral campaign. Following an interpretation already adopted in order to describe the so-called Arab Spring protests, the mobilization of the *Indignados* in Portugal and Spain, but also – at the local level – the election of two leftist candidates as mayors in Naples and Milan, various commentators considered the referendum success as partially connected with the increased social media use.

According to this way of perceiving the electoral victory (e.g. *Il Sole 24 Ore* 2013), the use of Facebook seemed to be able to raise the levels of political participation among younger voters, whom the water activists had previously

considered as difficult to reach and to involve in their campaigns. Moreover, this interpretation also suggested that the electoral consultation could be conceived of as a confrontation between two different kinds of media, the television and the web. In this scenario, the television is seen more or less as a synonym for 'mainstream media' and represents a communication sphere that, thanks to the phenomenon of economic concentration and a closeness to traditional party politics, the then Prime Minister Berlusconi and the main political parties could better control. The web, on the other hand, indicated, in particular, the space of social media, conceived of as democratic, uncontrolled, and open. As a consequence, according to this view, a large number of '*popolo di Facebook*' ('people of Facebook') contributed significantly to winning the referendum, making it possible for the first time in decades to write a political agenda alternative to the one of an apparently invincible concentration of media.⁶⁷

In contrast with this point of view, other observers and bloggers involved in the campaign proposed a more cautious interpretation, criticizing the technologically deterministic assumptions of the former one. According to these commentators – and, in particular, to the group of writers and intellectuals known collectively as Wu Ming (2011) – Facebook should mainly be considered as a tool: the activists may have used it in order to communicate and to organize, but they are the real protagonists of the electoral victory. Furthermore, other commentators have suggested that, among those who were enthusiastically depicting the role of Facebook, many often proposed an oversimplified vision of its use and characteristics. For instance, Jumpinshark, a famous blogger who intervenes on political or on social media-related topics, ironically criticized the expression *popolo di Facebook*, describing it as too naive:

These 'stories' are sometimes echoed in extremely comic reports, which talk about the highly mysterious 'people of Facebook' as if they were the Cimmerians and, more seriously, as if all of us were there playing FarmVille, but collecting news instead of carrots. (Jumpinshark 2011)

The relevance of the role of Facebook during this consultation is very difficult to measure. Furthermore, the answer cannot be the same in every geographical context, for every group, and in all the various typologies of Facebook use or forms of social media activism. Moreover, even when the

67 Italian newspapers and traditional media very frequently used the expression *popolo di Facebook* (people of Facebook) in their articles in 2011.

activists adopted this platform in successful and creative ways, it is very difficult to determine to what extent their achievements depended on the characteristics of the platform, and to what extent they derived from the communications qualities or from the resources of the activists who were using it. Consequently, I suggest that it is more useful to adopt an opposite approach: my aim, therefore, is to present the spectrum of initiatives and uses that the activists elaborated on Facebook, observing how they adapted this platform to their different goals and needs. In observing these practices, I try to understand in which cases Facebook proved to be useful and difficult to substitute, in which cases it seemed to be less effective, and in which cases the activists proved to be able to create interesting strategies of communication on this media environment.

Since the referendum campaign was very broad, I will concentrate on a relatively small number of examples of Facebook use. Nevertheless, in selecting them I tried to cover the widest possible spectrum of uses and interactions. Therefore, I decided to describe radically different phenomena: online spaces of discussions, viral events, the diffusion of symbols, groups and happenings, which altogether provide a complete image of how the activists used Facebook during the referendum campaign.

6.3 Groups, Initiatives, and Patterns of Use

Interactions on a group: the case of *Attivisti in Rete per l'Acqua*

The closed and private Facebook group *Attivisti in Rete per l'Acqua* (Water Activists on the Net) was born during the first half of March 2011, a couple of months before the last wave of referendum mobilizations: in a period, therefore, when the core water organizations were already very active but not yet closely connected with a broader public. This group was relatively small (48 users at the end of the referendum campaign, with many of them not participating very much in the group discussions) and it was linked with an important and structured organization – *Manitese* – which is present in various Italian territories. The main aims of the group were three. First, it permitted a small and dispersed community of activists to work together and collaborate without meeting offline. Second, it was a place where these activists discussed their communication strategies relating to the Facebook environment. Third, in this group the activists transformed their strategies into actions, giving life to small online initiatives (e.g. sharing a poem on water, posting an article on different pages in a simultaneous way, or

spreading a video), trying in this way to reach a larger number of users and to suggest propaganda content to hundreds of local water supporters.

The idea of creating this group emerged in Rome at the end of February 2011, during a meeting dedicated to proposing and discussing new communications strategies for the referendum campaign. In particular, the main project discussed during the meeting was the creation of a new, more interactive website dedicated to the water referendums, which would be able to gather new activists and to create innovative web-mediated forms of participation. Therefore, the idea of creating a Facebook group emerged as a side project, with a limited and very simple objective: at the end of the meeting, various participants asked for an online place in which to continue their discussions.

Initially, these activists decided in a relatively heated debate to adopt an online forum as their hosting platform, rejecting two other solutions. First, a mailing list, since the activists were already receiving too many emails from the local and national lists connected with the water mobilizations; second, a Facebook group, mainly because they did not want to oblige other activists to create an account on this platform. Nonetheless, the forum quickly proved to be both too slow and not dynamic enough for the activists, due to the long registration procedure and the fact that it was unconnected with their other online activities. Therefore, at this point Facebook started to appear as a better option for hosting the group and as a tool able to overcome the problems of the forum. One of the activists involved in this change described this difference well:

I knew that the forums would have failed. [...] In my opinion, an evolution is taking place, which is too strong [to contrast]. And this is why I talked about Facebook from the beginning. There has been a very strong evolution – since the beginning but during the last months, too – concerning the possibility of visualizing people, which a forum cannot give you any more, except for those who are a little old-school style, or really convinced of what they are writing, of the need for communicating with the others. The groups that someone uses, such as the Facebook one, in the end allow them to create a communication that is much more... instantaneous, made of images, of videos, able to make you react quickly, in five minutes. And, as a matter of fact, in some way, this group on Facebook allows a certain interaction, after all. (IW6a)

Starting from this initial aim of connecting the activists, this group slowly evolved, and became a place where it was possible to plan, discuss and

experiment with new strategies of Facebook communication. This online space proved to be interesting, furthermore, because the community mostly included activists that were not used to adopt Facebook as a communication tool for campaigning or political actions. Consequently, short debates about the properties or the risks of the platform continuously emerged, presenting the possibilities that Facebook was opening up, and in some cases the expectations or delusions of the activists. During these discussions, the members of the group often expressed contrasting feelings about the platform. On the one hand, the activists sometimes overestimated the possibilities that Facebook was unfolding. In the following quotation, for instance, a water activist engaged in a discussion on Facebook regarding the opportunities opened up by large Facebook events enthusiastically comments on the enormous popularity of an independent referendum-related event:

The event has more than 200,000 contacts... it is enough to tag or post photos or links on the wall and everybody can see them... I think that we must work during the next days to give the highest visibility to this event... a yes to that page is a yes for water, after all! (Male water activist, part of a national NGO – conversation on the Facebook page Water Activists on the Net)⁶⁸

In other cases, the discussion hosted comments that were much more critical. The following quotation, in particular, seems to criticize the rising level of personalization of communication (as depicted by Bennett and Segerberg 2012) in the Italian political campaigns:

Others (like me) answer no [to the invitation to viral Facebook events and petitions] because they think that the invitation or the graphic of the event are annoying, or the fact that it is a 'Facebook event' makes it appear as something not so serious. The fact that the most stupid of your friends can invite you, even though you have been working hard in the committees for years and you are always bombarding him with information and news (that he evidently does not listen to at all). [...] 200K people are less than 1% of the quorum... I know, I know that taken alone

68 Since the group *Attivisti in Rete per l'Acqua* was not directly controlling the event *Battiquorum*, the hopes of increasing the visibility of the group messages posting or tagging people on the event's page were highly overestimated. I tested this possibility by submitting a water-related YouTube video to *Battiquorum*. Due to the intense rate of activity, the video stayed on the page only for about two minutes. Furthermore, the number of views of the video on YouTube only increased from 162 to 165: two of the three new views were probably mine.

it is a very good number, but I would not focus only on this issue. (Male water activist, part of a national NGO – conversation on the Facebook page Water Activists on the Net)

From the first days of its creation, Water Activists on the Net supported small initiatives aiming at colonizing portions of Facebook and of the web, spreading water-related messages to the activists' friends, in the hope of creating a sort of viral circulation of content. For instance, the first of these messages was a poem, followed by a short call for a demonstration in Rome. The administrators and informal leaders of the group proposed a strategy of coordination in order to launch the first of these actions: they invited the other activists to share the text without any changes, asking them to post it in their individual profiles twice, at a fixed hour in the morning, and then again during the evening. Even if in this case the poem did not circulate in a viral way, this strategy is very interesting to observe because it shows how Facebook content that appears as emerging autonomously from independent users can, in some cases, be the result of coordinated actions. Other communications asked the participants to engage in a more active behaviour: for instance, one of the administrators noted a relevant article on a mainstream online journal, and she proposed to the activists to intervene by posting comments below the article, in order to informally colonize the page with their opinions.

In general, a very small group of core activists was proposing and discussing the initiatives, while most of the members reacted to these posts by simply asking for clarification, apologizing for being unable to participate, or intervening during the discussion on the effectiveness of the tool. A partial change in this group took place during the last month of the referendum campaign. In that period, the communication on Facebook regarding the referendum started to circulate on several pages in an autonomous way. From that moment, communication on the group started to be less structured and schematic, and other kinds of posts appeared: local initiatives, news, referendum fliers and videos started to circulate on this group, and the activity of 'sharing' became more relevant than the activity of 'creating' content or initiatives. In short, the group seemed to partially abandon its initial aims, and to become similar to the hundreds of groups belonging to the local committees, hosting and replicating content created elsewhere.

The group *Attivisti in Rete per l'Acqua* represented an interesting example of how activists can treat Facebook at the same time as their place of coordination (within the group boundaries) and as a strategic communications environment that they want to influence in some way. Regarding this second

approach to Facebook, the communication milieu that the activists traced was at least in part an imagined one, on a double scale. On the one hand, the group members saw Facebook as a place where they could mobilize new activists, while on the other hand, they were also referring to a wide, undetermined Italian Facebook sphere, where they thought that it was theoretically possible to enter into contact and influence millions of voters. In both cases, the group *Attivisti in Rete per l'Acqua* met serious obstacles in achieving its goals. One of the main problems that the activists perceived was the impossibility of understanding just how effective their messages were and how many users they actually reached with them. Furthermore, the main purpose of the group – to influence and coordinate the independent activities of a dispersed community of users – due to the exponential growth of the campaign finally proved to be more difficult to achieve, and at the same time less relevant for the referendum success. During the last months that preceded the vote the referendum content and initiatives started to appear on Facebook from various and completely uncoordinated sources. *Attivisti in Rete per l'Acqua* contributed to the circulation of these kinds of content, ultimately adhering to the wider communication patterns of the larger community of users, instead of trying – and needing to try – to coordinate them.

Although the group experimented with many kinds of communications strategies, it is interesting to note that its activists never adopted one of the most diffused and successful Facebook-based forms of action, which deeply characterized the initiatives of other organizations during the campaign. *Attivisti in Rete per l'Acqua* never proposed activities that crossed the boundaries between the offline world and the online environment: as their name suggests, the members of 'Water Activists on the Net' focused their attention only on the online sphere, probably because they were not sharing a common physical meeting place. The only exception that I encountered was the joint participation in a national demonstration for public water in Rome (26 March 2011), and the already mentioned preparatory meeting in February 2011.

The visual element: initiatives related to photos and images



The wide use of images and symbols is probably the element that mostly characterized the referendum campaign on Facebook: fliers asking to the people to vote, personal profile pictures, photos of the referendum flags, all testified to the support of users for one or more of the issues at stake. Although these images also circulated on the traditional web in the form

of banners, and in the real world in the form of stickers and fliers, the walls of Facebook proved to be the most relevant place where the activists could share these symbols and give them visibility.

During the campaign, the referendum sympathizers privileged three main different kinds of activities related to the circulation of pictures. The first is probably the most diffuse, but the most difficult to trace for a researcher, too. This category concerns the individual activities of posting photos of demonstrations, ironic pictures, and electoral symbols. Numerous logos and images circulated during the campaign, and it is interesting to note how they started to become personalized, and how people modified and merged them. For instance, various local committees presented similar, yet personalized versions of a logo (a bicycle with the two badges of the committee for public water and of the committee against nuclear power on the wheels), in order to present pro-referendum bicycle rides and critical mass. Slightly modified by some local activists, this logo testifies to the alliance between no-nuke and water activists, but it also shows how ideas were quickly adapted and circulated from one territory to another during the campaign. Due to the practical and ethical difficulty of tracing the individual activity of hundreds of thousands of people who contributed to the campaign by creating or sharing images, in this book I prefer to focus on more structured actions that involved organizations, and on widespread symbols.

Second, during the campaign, numerous users attested their support by changing their profile photos or including symbols related to the referendum on their profile picture. Since the campaign was largely uncoordinated – or coordinated by a plethora of independent organizations – various different profile photos of this kind circulated during the months that preceded the vote. These symbols, therefore, testified to the personal positions of the users, and their different interpretations or political shades became visible through them. For instance, some users decided to adopt a relatively moderate symbol stating ‘I’m going to vote: spread the word’, which the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* created when the campaign reached its peak. Others included in their photos one or more PicBadges, virtual pins that generally supported the issue of water, the opposition to nuclear power, or generic invites to vote: on this platform, at least 92 PicBadges connected with the referendum appeared during the campaign. The most diffused water-related badge (Figure 6.1, first symbol) represented the official logo of the campaign, which the activists themselves chose through an online survey on the FIMA website. Among the symbols that supported all the referendums, the most visible was a logo depicting

Figure 6.1 Two of the main profile pictures that the sympathisers adopted during the referendum campaign

<p>1st logo: official badge of the water referendums</p> 	<p>2nd logo: symbol created by Marco Caglioni</p> 
<p>Selected in January 2011 through an online pool on http://www.acquabenecomune.org Several media and the leading Italian wire service (ANSA) followed the poll. This collective selection of the main campaign symbol constituted a novelty in the Italian political landscape on 2011.</p>	<p>Elaborated in March 2011. Released with a Creative Commons License, it became ubiquitous, appearing on the website of numerous competing parties. The author traces the process of diffusion of the logo here http://tinyurl.com/logoCaglioni</p>

four ballots and four yeses (Figure 6.1, second symbol). Marco Caglioni, a graphic designer who was militating in 2011 in a local section of the *Partito Democratico* (Democratic Party) of the province of Bergamo, produced it in an independent way, sharing it online with a creative commons license. The logo quickly appeared everywhere: on Facebook, transformed in a profile picture or adopted as a PicBadge, on websites of competing political parties, on non-digital media (newspapers and television), and offline in the form of stickers or printed pages. After the electoral campaign, these symbols tended to disappear from the profiles. Nonetheless, the core of the water activists included this practice in their communications repertoires, starting to create new PicBadges to promote their current campaigns, or to support other struggles.

Images and visual elements contributed to a third, very complex category of actions on Facebook, which tried to reach viral forms of diffusion. In these initiatives, the promoters created a concept instead of a single picture, trying to convince dispersed groups of sympathetic social media users to adapt the initial idea, giving life to new, contextualized, and personalized

Figure 6.2 'Vendesi Mamma' initiative



pictures. Additionally, the initial promoters of these initiatives created 'places' on Facebook and on the Net, where they exhibited the results of these diffused efforts. Due to their complexity, these initiatives were in most cases the result of the work of professional and semi-professional activists, employed in the design and communication sectors. Three initiatives, among the many of this kind that appeared during the campaign, well represent this interesting category.

The first project is *Vendesi Mamma* (Mum for Sale), an action based on images that three young advertisers – famous for having reached 1,000,000 views on YouTube with an environmental video – created in Turin. Starting from the premise that 'privatizing water is like selling one's mother', these communications experts designed a yellow and black template similar to the Italian real estate signs, stating 'mum for sale' (see Figure 6.2). Through a well-designed Facebook page, they invited people to download and print the template, to photograph their mother (or a woman similar in appearance to the stereotype of the Italian mother) with the sign, and finally to upload the photo on Facebook. Moreover, they publicized the initiative through the creation of YouTube tutorials, posting fliers on offline public bulletin boards, and convincing people on the streets to participate.

The second initiative, simply called *Azione #2* (Action #2) worked in a very similar way: an informal group called *Società per Azioni* proposed to people

Figure 6.3 Rome, 13th June 2011. Tens of sawed blue flags represent the water referendum committee



that they write 'I vote' on a small piece of paper and putting it into a glass full of water. Then, the participants were expected to leave the glass in a meaningful position in their city, in general near a monument, and finally to photograph the glass and submit the photo on Facebook.

I noticed a third relevant initiative, which is at the same time similar to the previous ones, although less structured than they are. This was proposed by the FIMA secretariat in order to launch their most important electoral symbol, the water flag. The FIMA press agent suggested to Facebook users that they take a picture of themselves or of a local landscape including the flag. As a result, a very large set of photos started to circulate on Facebook, and on the traditional web, among the water activists. Furthermore, this offline object captured the attention of the web and then of traditional media in two moments. First, a photo depicting the flag in a church during a mass became viral, testifying to the intense participation of sectors of the Catholic Church in the campaign. Second, during the celebrations in Rome that followed the referendum victory, the no nuclear activists prepared a very large yellow banner, showing their well-known smiling sun symbol. The water activists, which were lacking a flag of a similar size, decided to show about 40 blue referendum flags in the nights that preceded the vote (Figure 6.3).

Viral appeals to vote

During the last period of the referendum campaign, the main aims of the referendum supporters were to inform dispersed communities of citizens about the vote, and to convince them to participate. On Facebook, among the initiatives that contributed most to this basic but difficult purpose there were a variety of appeals that circulated using the Facebook 'event' feature. Creating these appeals, the activists partially re-adapted the 'event' tool: while the creators of Facebook mainly conceive of it as an instrument for promoting on the online space initiatives that are happening at a physical location, the activists 'forced' this feature to mainly work on the online space, in order to reach very large populations of users. The most successful of these events was surely the *Battiquorum* (a wordplay that combines the Italian terms *batticuore* – heartthrob, and *quorum*), which the large Facebook political community *Il Popolo Viola* contributed to creating. By relying on their large number of followers (about 450,000 likes on their page, with likes for their posts ranging in the hundreds to 6,000), the event quickly went viral. On 20 April, it reached about 640 new users per hour, with an evening peak of about 1,200 invited people per hour. Finally, the invitations reached over 3,500,000 users, and about 700,000 of them signalled their support by clicking on the 'I am attending' button.

However, these extremely large numbers brought with them a limitation: the wall of the event hosted a flux of posts that was too quick to follow. Any new post remained visible on the page for a maximum of a couple of minutes, making it very difficult for the users to connect among themselves, to create forms of horizontal communication, and to constitute a community that could be able to launch new initiatives starting from this shared online space. Consequently, the administrators of the event *Battiquorum* created a parallel page, too, where the most interested and engaged participants created a community that sustained the initiative, launching new ideas and communicating in a better way. Starting from this experience, the logo of *Battiquorum* became a widespread electoral symbol, which also circulated offline in the form of fliers and stickers. Moreover, this community was able to create an interesting collaborative transportation service for the voters, which I describe in the following section.

Before the *Battiquorum* started to become popular, a very small group of young activists who jointly administrated a news-related page on Facebook organized a similar appeal to vote. They called their group *Nel Paese dei Furbì i Ribelli Sono gli Onesti* (In the Country of the Weasels, the Honest Ones

Are the Rebels), citing a line from a track by a famous Italian rapper.⁶⁹ The characteristics of this event are very similar to those of *Battiquorum*, except for two things. The first difference concerns the growth of the event: since the group that created it is very small, they initially aimed at reaching a maximum of 2,000 users. However, the event started to circulate beyond the boundaries of friends and acquaintances, and reached more than 70,000 people, most of them very quickly after a long period of stasis. The second difference concerns Facebook: in this case, the platform administrators decided to cancel the event when it started to go viral. Unfortunately, I could not investigate this topic in detail, for instance, by interviewing the administrators of Facebook; one of the creators of the online event, whom I was able to interview, stated that the appeal simply disappeared from the platform, from the internal search engine, and even from people's posts, from one day to the next. Of course, it might be that the behaviour of some activist broke the internal rules of Facebook. Nonetheless, it is interesting and important to note how easy is for the administrator of a social networking site to control and eventually erase large flows of information from their sites.

Crossing the Facebook/real-world divide: the relationship with the physical space

Although the Facebook users who supported the referendum proved to be innovative in many of the previously described experiences, they revealed a particular level of creativity in the way they treated the traditional barrier between the online sphere and the offline realities on the ground. Even though some small local committees tended to use Facebook simply to spread invitations to traditional events, such as evening debates, in most cases – and, in particular, within the informal, unstructured groups composed of younger activists – the online/offline barrier was often crossed through events that were happening at the same time on Facebook and on the ground. The FIMA press agent describes this behaviour well: “The paradigm “the virtual that influences the real” should be changed into “the real influences the virtual, which at the same time influences the real” (Faenzi 2011).

Combining forms of online presence and a geographical scale of action, most of the initiatives that I observed can be grouped into four different

69 Some Italian mainstream hip-hop artists strongly sustained the referendum campaign: in particular, the most viewed YouTube video connected with the vote is *Vota sì per dire no* (Vote yes to say no), created by the then-emerging rapper Fedez. The video (Fedez 2011) quickly reached 2,000,000 views.

categories. A first category includes those initiatives that mainly happened on the ground, and in a clearly delineated place. Most events belong to this group: meetings, distribution of leaflets, debates, demonstrations, concerts and human chains characterized the campaign, and constituted its widespread backbone. In this field, the FIMA activists were already very expert. On one the hand, they simply used Facebook as a way to invite a higher number of people to these events; on the other hand, they were increasingly using it to represent the physical meeting online, through photos and videos. Other kinds of events, such as flash mobs and critical masses, can be considered as variations within this group: in this case, the aim of the offline event should be to enter into the everyday offline routines of people, and surprise them. Therefore, Facebook was adopted in this case as a sort of backstage, a place to organize an activity online so that it can appear as spontaneous offline.

A second category includes events that were independent of a physical, well-defined space. Large-scale appeals like *Battiquorum* (see 6.3.3) are included in this category, together with the practice of sharing videos and pictures and of interacting with other Facebook communities. Since these kinds of initiatives are not linked with a material context, they can become quickly diffused online, and can contribute to spreading symbols on a national scale. Nonetheless, their failure or success depends on a different kind of geography, made of online connections and networks: those actions that were created within broad, well-connected online communities had more success, both on the web and on Facebook. The large number of people supporting the Facebook community *Il popolo viola*, *Acqua Pubblica* and *Referendum acqua* were, therefore, crucial resources for spreading these initiatives.

A third category, which I analyse in more detail in the next section, concerns the communities of activists hosted online. The community Water Activists on the Net is the example of this kind that I studied in more detail, but numerous groups of this kind emerged during the campaign, and organized in stable or flexible ways. This category combines two different modes of relating with the geographical space, since the relationship of these communities with Facebook depended on the geographical distribution of their members. On the one hand, they could be local circles linked with a territorial context: in this case, they tended to use Facebook as a tool for discussion, in order to maintain a full-time connection (or, in other words, a permanent assembly) among themselves. On the other hand, these communities could link dispersed activists, who oriented their action through the online environment.

In my opinion, the creativity of the referendum campaign concerned, in particular, a fourth category, which is relatively less widespread, and more complex than the previous ones. This includes hybrid initiatives,

where the activists adopted Facebook and the web as an online, spaceless infrastructure to promote numerous coordinated, local micro ideas. Some examples can well illustrate what I include in this category. A first activity that was able to bridge the online sphere with diffused local groups was the *Taxiquorum*, a self-organized free transport service dedicated, in particular, to the elderly, and organized as a spin-off of the viral *Battiquorum* appeal discussed in the previous section. Imitating the principle of car sharing – one of the most widespread and successful forms of interaction based on Web 2.0 platforms – the creators of this action asked participants to volunteer as drivers. Furthermore, they used Facebook, email addresses and telephone numbers to put volunteers in contact with the people they were to transport, and organized local travel timetables. Although in the *Taxiquorum* case the coordination worked mainly through emails, various other groups proposed similar events on a local basis, using the Facebook wall as an *ad hoc*, spontaneous meeting place between drivers and passengers.

Another very interesting example of interaction between the Facebook walls and dispersed local places was the event *Sfoggia l'elenco e chiama* (Flip through the Phone Directory and Call), organized during the last two days of the vote in a relatively small part of southern Italy. One of the administrators of the Facebook group of the local water committees launched the idea in a flow of comments regarding the low participation in the vote in various municipalities of the area. He posted a comment saying that 'we have to intervene on the lower end, even taking a phone book and randomly calling people': a few hours later he created the event, while some members started to monitor the vote rates, and to intervene using the telephone in order to convince random voters in these territories. Similar initiatives were not necessarily linked to Facebook: on Twitter, the hashtag *#iohovotato* (*#Ivoted*), which quickly became a global trending topic, permitted everyday people and politicians to declare online their participation in the referendum, connecting their local, individual action to a broader online discussion.

6.4 The Perception of Facebook

Why different perceptions are relevant

The activists involved in the referendum campaign whom I have interviewed and observed perceive the Facebook platform in different ways. I consider these different perceptions important because they substantively affected the way the campaigners communicated online, how they adopted Facebook

and, under certain conditions, the effectiveness of their communications efforts. Numerous factors contributed to influence the perception of the activists about this online milieu. Among them, the most relevant probably regarded the characteristics of the organization or of the community to which the activists were belonging. Furthermore, the role that the activists were playing within the local and national communications infrastructures of FIMA, the different communication strategies that the activists were aiming at applying to the campaign, and the feelings that they had developed in past experiences with Facebook similarly influenced how the water activists approached this social media platform.

Adopting the synthetic expression 'perception of Facebook', I refer, in particular, to three recurrent dimensions. First, how the activists perceive their 'public' on Facebook; second, how they describe the communications mechanisms and their strategies on this platform; third, the level of trust in the capacity of Facebook to help in community building. Combining these dimensions, three main ways of perceiving Facebook and, consequently, of using it emerged during the referendum campaign. The first approach was to consider Facebook almost as a mass media, a tool to spread a message to a wide population. The second approach described Facebook as being able to create and sustain communities, through the aggregation of activists or friends. Finally, a third approach conceived the platform as an environment where all the Italian activists involved in the referendum campaign could communicate, and where it could be possible to interact with them and coordinate their efforts.

Facebook as a quasi mass media

During the referendum campaign that I am investigating, one of the main motivations for using Facebook on a mass scale was the need to overcome the silence of the mainstream media. Therefore, various actors decided to communicate on Facebook with the specific aim of reaching a substantial portion of the Italian voters and to inform them by establishing direct contact and bypassing newspapers and television. Consequently, the activists who approached the platform with this perspective in mind tended to see Facebook as an instrument that could enable individual communicators to push their messages to a wide population of unconnected readers. Unsurprisingly, I found this approach in the most structured organizations, which were developing communications strategies on a national scale. For instance, in an interview a very central activist compared Facebook with a different online environment, the mailing list. While the mailing list was,

according to him, a platform for horizontal communication among activists, he depicted the people that followed the official Facebook community *Referendum acqua pubblica – www.acquabenecomune.org* as comprising a broader and disorderly public, which tended to be sympathetic with leftist issues.

On Facebook anyone can reach us [...] because at the end it is the Facebook mechanism: you click to like... I am following things that I couldn't care less about, then sometimes it comes to my mind and I cancel them. But in the meanwhile I read everything that they write. [...] There are a lot of people who are anyway sensible about both the environmental themes and... I have the impression, even simply looking at the profile photos, that everybody is close to the leftist milieu. [...] But you can also find people that have nothing to do with it. (IW 16a)

In this quotation, the activist described his initial perception of the users, and probably his desired Facebook audience: an arena of sympathetic readers where he could spread a message. Moreover, he indicated two mechanisms that he considered useful for his communication purposes: the inattentive support through the 'like' buttons, and the subsequent possibility for communicating with a large sphere of people, in particular, through simplified messages that are able to catch the fluctuating attention of the readers. For the activists who perceived Facebook in this way, the fact that this platform might help to build communities of engaged people and to foster the horizontal forms of communication is generally considered as not so relevant. Furthermore, they perceive the patterns of the horizontal communication on this platform as too chaotic and uncontrolled:

Q: Have you noticed if communication in the Facebook community sometimes operate in an autonomous way?

A: Well... but let's say that it autonomously operates in a very disordered way, because it clearly arrives from outside, so... it might happen that in a single... in five comments there are two stating the opposite things. For instance, a highly debated question is 'Is it possible to sign [the petition calling for the referendum] only in my municipality or everywhere?', and every five minutes there is someone saying 'Only in your municipality' and someone else then says that it is possible to sign everywhere. So, if someone does not control this, it might even become... even a factor of chaos. So, it is necessary to intervene there, and to say 'No, it works like this and like that', and to stop it. (IW 16a)

Nevertheless, sometimes the benefits of horizontal communication can become visible even to the actors who aim at a one-to-many communications on Facebook. For instance, when I directly asked to the same activist about the presence of organized actors within the Facebook community he was administrating, he adopted terms that are in partial contrast with his previous view:

Q.: Did some organizations adhere?

A.: Yes, yes, definitely, the territorial representatives, too. There are the territorial representatives who show where the desks are [for the petition], for instance. [...] If someone on Facebook asks, 'Where can I sign [the petition] in Salerno?' after half an hour it is possible that someone tells him where to sign it. This is an incredible thing. (IW 16a)

Although the secretariat of the referendum committee is the place where I encountered this approach to Facebook in a more apparent way, it also characterized other 'centres of communication' of the campaign, such as the creators of national-scale initiatives, or the coordinators of local committees who were attempting to communicate with a wide and diversified population. In these cases, the activists also tended to stress the capacity of Facebook to disseminate messages beyond the limits of the traditional audiences of the movements, and to initiate the viral circulation of content:

I am not on Facebook. This doesn't mean that this stuff is a tool, and an extremely effective one, to spread information. I can imagine to use tools that individually I would not use, focusing on their useful side. In my opinion, the useful side of Facebook is viral communication. The fact that you can contact an extremely large number of people in a very reduced amount of time. (IW 29a)

[Facebook] surely is a way to spread some news to the greatest part of the Internet public, to reach the larger public with messages that only a niche usually read. [...] A message that is published only once on the Net can be forgotten after a while; instead, here it is repeated, creating the possibility that everybody can sooner or later encounter it, we have the possibility of enlarging very much. [...] There are various centre-right oriented people [on my Facebook page], supporters of Berlusconi or of the *Lega Nord*. So, I have to say that this page is a very good tool to reach these people with some messages. (IW 14)

Facebook as a platform for communities

During the referendum campaign, various organizations and groups decided to adopt Facebook due to the need to aggregate and coordinate the communications efforts of different kinds of actors in their local areas. In this case, the activists stressed the role of Facebook in helping community building, conceiving of their connections not as with the external public, but as within their own group. Therefore, they gave more relevance to the patterns of horizontal communication than to the possibility of spreading messages to a disaggregated mass of people. This second way of perceiving Facebook appeared in different forms in local committees strictly connected with their territory, and in small groups of almost independent activists.

Among those who used Facebook to communicate at the local level, some activists described their own political experience on this online platform as a mirror of their real-life participation, a place where they could organize with other activists engaged in the same organization, as in the following quotation by a member of a spontaneous committee in a town of 4,000 inhabitants:

We contemporaneously created our committee on Facebook and in reality; that is to say, we spontaneously met in a group of about ten people, and from the moment that it was born on Facebook it slowly grew. [...] Making all of us administrators, everyone posted whatever he wanted, always connected with the campaign. (IW 3)

Similarly, many of these activists thought that their entire local realities – their town, their social connections, and significant aspects of their lives – were present online on Facebook, too. The people whom I interviewed underlined the fact that these real-world elements were being recreated online in a sort of empowered, better-connected form. According to them, it seemed easier on Facebook to communicate with other citizens, bypassing the limits of geography and the lack of meeting spaces. Consequently, this platform appeared to them as an interesting place for propagating political ideas at the local level, following the interpersonal, direct contacts of the activists. As a member of a spontaneous committee in a town of 4,000 inhabitants said:

I am not a great Internet or computer expert – I am quite useless with them. But with Facebook I was able to work, and I noticed that it is something really flexible. That is to say, it permits one to reach the people, it

is not demanding, and it has no cost. [...] This town, it is not really – as with many other towns of this area – it is not a big village surrounded by the countryside. This municipality is what I call a federation of parishes. In the sense that there are five or six agglomerates, far away one from one another, and which scarcely relate with each other. In particular, young people do not really ‘live’ the town. This is a residential place. On the Net, instead, if you want you can relate [with others]. I always think that it is the only current *piazza*.⁷⁰ (IW 19)

In other cases, the activists focused more on the ability of Facebook to foster new connections among people, thanks to both the characteristics of the communication on this platform, and the ability to create new political activities on it. In general, those who proposed this model pertained to informal groups gathered around friendship ties, which decided to participate in the last phases of the referendum campaign, without having been involved in the previous steps and without having strong and direct connections with the national structure of FIMA.⁷¹ As far as I have seen, this perception usually appeared in combination with a strong sense of enthusiasm towards this tool. In the following quotation, this enthusiasm well emerges. It is interesting to note, furthermore, how the interviewee continuously shifts his description from the offline relationships to the online ones, describing the low barriers and the connections that he perceived between the two fields. As a member of a spontaneous group in a town of 10,000 inhabitants said:

From the first moment after having created the event, it was being used as the main channel for the presentation of information, and to get to know people, too... Because [...] it has been a channel for... a starting point to materially get to know people, something that I did not expect. Because there were people that I physically did not know. Or, whom I knew but... I only saw them around, that's all, without even saying hello to them. Then, after our bicycle ride event [...] 30, maybe 40 people added me, because they wanted information, because they wanted to know what we were doing, just because they wanted to know me. But more than 40 people added me: people whom I used to see around, but whom I didn't

70 The interviewee used the Italian term *piazza* (square) as a synonym of the generic expression ‘meeting place’, since in Italy and in most southern European countries the two concepts strongly overlap.

71 For the characteristics that differentiate these ‘spontaneous’ informal organizations from the more formal and structured ones, see also Della Porta and Diani (2006: Chapter 5).

know. This is something that surprised me. It has been the starting point to move the relationships from the informatics realm, from computer to computer, to the physical realm. Because now, among all the people that I added, I meet many, and there is a discussion, a dialogue. It is something that I did not expect. Instead, I have always thought that Facebook was in part killing face-to-face communication. Instead, in this sense, if it is used in the right way [...] it could become something unique. (IW 8)

Facebook as a place for coordinating the efforts of dispersed activists

Most of the activists and groups that contributed to the success of the referendum campaign tended to organize their communications within their local communities by or referring to the external, national public. Nevertheless, while water privatization and the referendum were gradually becoming hot issues in the Italian public sphere, some organizations and activists started to conceive of Facebook – and the entire communications process connected with their campaign – in a new, more complex way. They observed a diffused support for their cause; in particular, they noticed that many activists and average citizens were independently communicating and creating initiatives for the referendum. Therefore, they started to consider Facebook as a place where they could try to contact and coordinate these dispersed and independent efforts. In particular, the group called *Attivisti in Rete per l'Acqua* (Water Activists on the Net, see Section 6.3), proposed a similar conceptualization, and started to use Facebook along the lines of this perspective.

The thing that we are now experimenting with, mainly on Facebook, the group that we created, is an attempt to coordinate a little bit better all the efforts that people separately conduct. Because there is a waste of energy even for a small blog that a committee or a small organization can maintain, because, if you don't promote the blog, nobody reads it, it is useless... But on Facebook, in some way this thing replicates, too; because the attempts that various people make in an uncoordinated way, in the end can only increase the mass of information that [...] is not intelligible anymore. Instead, by trying to coordinate the people who are already doing something with the same aim, this can amplify the result in some way. (IW 6a)

In this case, the activist considered two different populations as relevant. On the one hand, the dispersed community of activists and engaged persons.

They could actively contribute to the campaign, at least echoing a common message. Therefore, it was strategic to promote their communication and coordination. On the other hand, the external public, whom the interviewee conceived of in a similar way to the ‘almost mass media’ approach to Facebook discussed in the previous sections. As in that model, the main aim of communicating with this public was to go beyond the relatively small community of politically engaged people; however, as in the ‘community building’ model, the interviewee proposed interpersonal ties as the main channel for reaching this external public.

Yes, I have to say that I am thinking about the results of the first coordinated actions that we did, and surely there are many who are available and willing to share the messages that we send. The difficulty is, as usual, to go out from the circle of those already aware of the issue. On this point, it is easier [with Facebook] than with other tools because, for instance, you have 500 friends, of these 500 there are some who share your news, but they can have friends who are not as aware as most of your friends are. (*Ibid.*)

In other cases where activists perceived Facebook as a tool for connecting engaged groups across a broad geographical space, they proposed communication strategies that proposed to connect their local community with a network of other committees, which were not so easy to reach. For instance, in a medium-sized territorial water committee, the Facebook administrator considered both the so-called external public (i.e. citizens and interested people from his local community) and the activists from other territories as an interactive, engaged audience. Therefore, he invited both of these groups to join the local Facebook page, and to interact on it, combining the local level with a broader scale. As a person from a medium-sized town said:

[Our Facebook group] permits us to communicate [...] with many people from our province, but also with many of those who work with other committees. For instance, through Facebook we are able to maintain a network-like relationship with other local-based committees. [...] So, in this sense, Facebook can compensate for the problem [...] of the blog with the interaction. Through Facebook we are able to reach other people, because many committees all over Italy use Facebook, so we are able to communicate through Facebook with the other committees, too. [...] And then, we use Facebook a lot to contact those people that we know in the territory, those who can help us to organize something. I mean, if tomorrow I need to organize a petition desk in our city, I know that

there is the possibility... I go on Facebook and I send a message to them through Facebook. I use Facebook also in this way. (IW 11)

Conclusions

Facebook proved to be a very relevant communication resource for the activists promoting the referendum mobilizations regarding public water and the two other connected referendums. In particular, I can affirm that during the last month of the campaign this social media became the leading communications environment, at least for what concerns the circulation of symbols and the increase in wide, national-scale attention towards the vote. However, in this chapter I also tried to show that the water and referendum activists adopted Facebook for numerous different purposes, giving life to different initiatives, and moving from divergent perceptions towards the platform and its main function for activism. The activists adopted Facebook in order to reach nationwide audiences, or to gather very local communities; they chose this platform in order to publicize an online video, or to invite people to a bicycle ride; they communicated with highly engaged people, or they tried to cross the boundaries of the activism environment in order to reach less-interested citizens. Moreover, in some cases these activists adapted their communications strategies to the new environment, as happened with the group *Attivisti in Rete per l'Acqua*, but also with the FIMA press agent, who increasingly appreciated the spontaneous, uncontrolled communication patterns emerging on the page he was controlling. In other cases, the activists were able to adapt the environment of Facebook to their strategies, as in the case of the virtual appeals to vote *Battiquorum*.

Taking into account this great heterogeneity of behaviours and experiences, it is very difficult to answer the main question that newspapers and online commentators have posed since the referendum victory: Was Facebook crucial to overcoming the silence of the mainstream media, or did activists simply 'export' their resources and creativity to the platform? The answer probably sits somewhere between the two options: I have the impression that the activists, or at least some of them, successfully utilized some of the potentials of Facebook, creatively adapting them.

In particular, I think that four potentials emerged in this campaign. First of all, Facebook proved to be a place where even those groups with fewer resources – in some cases even individuals – could experiment with new solutions and initiatives without dedicating large amounts of time to them. Furthermore, the platform enabled some highly interesting initiatives to

emerge beyond the local territories, and to circulate. Second, Facebook helped the activists to communicate beyond the boundaries of their organizations and communities. In particular, some activists perceived and used it as a tool for reaching less engaged and politicized people, who would never visit the website of a social movement organization. Third, the activists used this platform to engage with their personal connections and acquaintances. In the last phase of the campaign, in particular, Facebook helped to quickly activate these networks of friends, in order to involve new people in the campaign. Moreover, it is important to note that the circulation of simple and funny content and initiatives, such as humorous videos, bicycle rides or human chains on the bridges of a town, seemed to be the most effective elements in moving these new and less engaged people to action. Fourth, Facebook enabled some groups and individuals to connect their online communications with their activism on the ground. Several other technologies and communications environments can allow this connection: mailing lists are probably more effective in order to organize flash mobs and critical masses, and photo-sharing portals are probably best suited for hosting the photos of demonstrations. However, during this campaign Facebook proved to be a faster and easier-to-use solution, in particular, because it is widely adopted, and because it could serve numerous purposes at the same time.

Together with these potentials, during my research I encountered some of the limitations of Facebook activism and communication. I still have to analyse in detail the issue of privacy, which most activists tended to consider as not very relevant, and the issue of control, which caused some problems and gave rise to some protests among them when Facebook eliminated an event and a group from its space. However, another limitation emerged during this research: this concerns the difficulties in observing the presence and the evolution of wide communications phenomena on Facebook. This platform tends to suggest unconnected chunks of communication to the users, and to focus their attention on new posts and images. In my opinion and in my experience, the communication flows seem to be centred on the individuals, to appear as blurred, and to become almost impossible to observe after a short period of time. This difficulty affects, of course, researchers interested in observing Facebook. However, it similarly affects the activists who are interested in preserving a memory of their experiences and initiatives, in mapping the movement they pertain to, and in observing how their coalition communicates. In other words, the people who collectively create a campaign on Facebook also generate enormous amounts of data, but Facebook restricts the ways in which the data can be investigated or reconstructed.

7 Reinterpreting the Data

New theoretical perspectives and methodological proposals

In this book, I explored the 2011 referendum on water privatization as an example of well-developed, large-scale, diffused campaign that relied on online resources to develop. During this investigation, I had the opportunity to observe, in particular, how the water activists faced different communications needs through their campaign, how they adapted their actions to various digital communication spaces, and how they combined online actions with different forms of direct, offline initiatives directed to a vast groups of citizens and organizations. Furthermore, in this research I chose to follow the activists where they slowly decided to communicate: even if I reserved a certain level of attention to websites, blogs, and even traditional non-digital communication, this book mainly shows how the activists gradually colonized a new communications space, the Italian Facebook sphere. Through diffused, distinct experiments, the water activists used social media to encounter less engaged citizens, establishing a new kind of relationship between organizations, initiatives, and a sympathetic population. Finally, on Facebook, the water activists promoted a widespread circulation and remix of symbols, opening new models of communication that proved to be effective, in particular, because they combined local personalized actions within a common national framework.

This concluding chapter, divided into three sections, aims to discuss, from a different perspective, key findings of my research, evaluate the methodology that I applied, and present my proposals for further research.

The purpose of the first part of these conclusions is to summarize the results of my investigation, re-observing the data that I produced adopting three different theoretical lenses, which I have already introduced throughout the book. Firstly, I concentrate on the very high internal variation of communications strategies within the online campaign that I observed. More specifically, I discuss two different causes for this variation: the large number of actors involved, and a 'strategy of differentiation' that some key organizations decided to adopt. Secondly, I focus on how the activists' online communication evolved during the campaign, paying particular attention to the tension between centralized and diffused communications strategies, to the introduction of Facebook, and to how the activists conceived of the digital environment. Thirdly, I discuss in detail how the activists played with the boundaries between the online and offline environments. In

particular, I represent a useful classification (already adopted in Chapter 6, Section 3) of four different models of interaction between digital resources and geographical space.

I dedicate the second part of this concluding chapter to making some comments on the methodology that I adopted in this research. I direct these comments, in particular, to researchers who may decide to study online campaigns and other similar complex digital-related phenomena in the future. More specifically, I present both the new possibilities and the difficulties that I encountered in my research due to the methodological choices that I introduced. Obviously, I focus on the two main methods that I adopted: the reconstruction of online networks among sites, and the digital ethnography of different online and offline spaces.

Finally, I dedicate a third section to proposing new lines of research that I would like to follow in future academic contributions. While most of these ideas propose that I will provide new interpretations of the data that I have already collected during this research, the final idea that I introduce suggests a different way for developing an effective research design in order to observe the phenomenon of online political campaigning.

7.1 Three Final Perspectives for Observing the Referendum Campaign

Internal variation of communication strategies during the water referendum campaign

In this research, I propose a detailed and fragmented description of very different communication activities, which activists and organizations elaborated during the same referendum campaign. I consider this recognition of the coexistence of numerous independent strategies within the same campaign as one of the main results of my work. As explained in Chapter 6, I mainly observed this variation on Facebook, a platform that groups very different features and that can permit, therefore, communication to be shaped in very different ways. In particular, activists adopted web resources to achieve different goals, perceived these resources in opposite ways, privileged the creation of horizontal online communities or, in contrast, the use of digital technologies to ‘inoculate’ a message within a large group of Internet users. Furthermore, they elaborated initiatives that were rooted offline, that were based on the web, or that were linking both of these spaces. Finally, they sometimes considered digital resources in an instrumental way

(for example, a social media group as a tool to connect dispersed activists) or as a fragmented environment in which to develop the campaign (for example, the activists' coordinated messages posted on the comment space of the main online newspapers).

This variation mainly derived from the large number of organizations involved, from their very different characteristics, and – in particular, during the last phase of the campaign – from their freedom of action. Therefore, in my analysis I tried to link the characteristics of these online communication strategies with some aspects of the activists or of the organizations that were promoting these choices. Of course, in this research I never considered these characteristics as variables that I could systematically observe in their hypothetical correlations.⁷² However, I noted that local groups and relatively new organizations were largely promoting a horizontal use of digital resources: in particular, they perceived social media as places of interaction, and strongly linked online communication with their offline activities. In contrast, central actors representing core organizations tended to focus on the need to use web resources to spread a consistent, controlled and homogeneous message, and on the need to reach less interested people, too. Furthermore, professional and semi-professional actors more often adopted the idea of viral diffusion and of re-adaptation of messages in their work. Finally, as I will better explain in the next section, almost every actor started to conceive of the web as an environment of interaction during the last phase of the campaign, substituting a previous focus on digital resources as tools.

The large number of organizations involved clearly explains why online communications varied during the campaign. However, part of this multiplication of initiatives and communication styles depends on a strategic choice, which some very central organizations – including the central office of the Forum – started to conceive in the period that preceded the campaign. These organizations began to diversify their online (and offline) activities, in order to reach different sections of the public, to involve a higher number of sympathizers, thus providing them with practical tasks that were easy to personalize, and simply to experiment with numerous strategies at the same time, looking for the most efficacious ones.

Table 7.1 provides an interesting example of this planned variation. A single organization based in Rome planned, during a brainstorming session, the 38 activities listed in the last column shown in the table. Of

72 I consider the possibility of adopting a comparative focus, investigating the communication strategies of different social media campaign, as an interesting task for further research.

Table 7.1 Set of communication strategies elaborated by a single organization

Purpose	Properties (where & how)	Actions	
Provide tools to become active	On the Net	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Templates for letters - Fake videos - Videos directed to elder people - Banners for blogs 	
	Offline	Individual actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Viral actions with stickers/posters - Postcards - Dinners for water - Stickers for bicycles - Water flags
		Street actions in groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Flash mobs - Happenings in swimsuit/naked
	Not specified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Blog for first-time voters - Games for kids - Connect with other associations - Video games 	
Increase the visibility of the movement	Street/urban art	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Poems - Guerrilla marketing - Stencils - Diffuse performances on the web - Attract media attention - Connect territorial and national level 	
	VIP involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A song for water - Artists for water - Small ads (with testimonials) 	
	Other ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Musical bands - Connect with music clubs - Intervene on Yahoo answers - Communicate during sport events 	
Create interactive/dynamic communication	Self production of content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Songs, dance contest 	
	Other idea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Photos of supporters (I'll vote Yes) 	
Launch coordinated actions		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Respond to the 'No' committees - Comment on online newspapers - Video actions 	
Community building (fostering the sense of being part of a community of voters)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Symbolic objects - Ask young voters to talk with their grandparents - Demonstrations - Applications for Mac and games 	
Connect existing web resources		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 45 websites/blogs 	

The table re-elaborates a mind map emerged from a brainstorming activity. Militants applied most of these strategies, thanks to Facebook and to a page (www.referendumacqua.it/attivisti) on the main campaign site.

course, variation is an obvious result when a group applies the technique of brainstorming to plan its strategic choices. However, other interesting aspects emerge from this table, and from the meeting that it represents. The organizers of the session were looking for a very large set of possible communication tactics. Interestingly, the activists involved suggested to them initiatives that both conceived of digital resources in different ways, and that played with the link between online and offline actions differently. Furthermore, the organization that planned this brainstorming session applied most of these very different strategies in numerous online and offline places during the months that preceded the referendum. In some cases, therefore, divergent models for conceiving of the digital resources emerged and coexisted within the same organization.

To summarize, the water referendum campaign manifested a high level of internal variation for what concerns the initiatives based on the use of the web and social media. Scale of action, conception of the online sphere, interaction between online and offline plans constituted the main dimensions that characterized this variation. In general, large-scale organizations privileged less interactive, more homogeneous and easy-to-control perceptions of the online space, while the idea of Facebook as a place that hosts communities emerged in local or spontaneous groups. Finally, an idea of the digital spheres as spaces of interaction slowly substituted the previous idea of the online technologies as tools.

A relationship in evolution: activism and digital technologies

The creation of a wide communication campaign can modify in numerous ways the activities of the organizations that support it. In particular, in this book I show that the referendum mobilization in numerous cases required an evolution of the actors' communication strategies, in particular, as concerns the digital environment. In particular, I identified three main aspects that characterize this evolution of the online initiatives.

First of all, two communications strategies were in a dialectical contrast during the year that preceded the vote: a centralized vision towards online communications, on the one hand, coexisted with an opposing, decentralized strategy. To a large extent, this phenomenon replied a similar tension among the actors of the *Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua* (hereafter FIMA). On the one side, some organizations were encouraging an increased centralization and a certain level of institutionalization for the water coalition and, on the other side, some organizations strongly opposed the creation of centralized structures involving paid professionals,

asking for the Forum to remain a very horizontal network of connected territories instead (see Cernison 2016).⁷³ While similar tensions are very common in coalitions and social movements, it is interesting to observe that during the referendum campaign they began to concern the sphere of digital communications, too. More specifically, the campaign that I observed evolved from at first having a centralized strategy (for example, through the creation of a single official Facebook account, or a strict control on the messages published online), to a very diffuse and uncontrolled communications scheme. However, it is important to note that in this case the word 'diffuse' does not necessarily mean 'horizontal' and 'democratic'. Blogs with a large number of readers, authors of Facebook pages with thousands of 'likes', and organizations that could count on skilled and professional activists played a crucial role during the campaign. In other words, powerful communications actors quickly emerged within a multi-centric and diffused campaign.

A second aspect of this evolution concerns the different and widespread use of Facebook. While the organizations of the Forum were already using the platform on different scales before the start of the campaign, and the coalition had the support of some Facebook 'stars', this social network became the leading resource adopted in the campaign only during the final months preceding the vote. Numerous key activists who had influenced communication in a very pertinent way during the campaign were already looking at Facebook as a unique way of interacting with a broad, sympathetic audience, without recurring to the mainstream media. However, the campaign probably moved onto this platform due to numerous diffused, uncoordinated decisions. It is very difficult to summarize in a very brief way the effects the adoption of Facebook had on activism, organizations, and campaigning: Chapter 6, while presenting the complexity and variety in how the activists used the site, already provides some answers to this question. Nonetheless, I can suggest here three additional synthetic dimensions, which the activists often mentioned, adopted, and took into account. First, on Facebook the propaganda images and symbols widely circulated in an easy way, surpassing the traditional borders of the movements. However, this high level of circulation might simply result from the effectiveness of the campaign, or from the number of activists involved. Second, the water activists demonstrated the ability to adopt a single platform for different

73 In general, the organizations opting for a centralized communication tended to present two other characteristics: a very pragmatic focus, and an emphasis on the role of professional activists.

functions, such as the creation of online communities or the diffusion of messages (e.g. petitions and invitations to events). In this case, I am persuaded that Facebook, as a medium, helped the activists to increase this ability, providing them with a single place in which to meet and communicate. Third, on Facebook the water activists were able to interact with a public that was wider than that of the activists' community. In my opinion, the social media environment obliged the water activists to enter into relations with different people, who were often sympathetic, but at the same time were less likely to have expertise or training in politics. These different users, furthermore, had the opportunity to organize in a semi-independent way during the campaign. As a result, the FIMA actors sometimes had to restate their line, for instance, contrasting incursions of militants of the Italian extreme right within marginal sectors of the campaign. Once more, the data that I have does not allow me to understand whether this opening process derived from the use of Facebook, or from the fact of creating a campaign: however, the two factors probably influenced each other, and social media use at least fostered the adoption of a very open style of campaigning.

A final aspect that widely characterized the evolution of online communication during the campaign regards the transition from a mainly instrumental view towards the digital resources, to a view that conceived of the web as a communications environment, made of neutral spaces of communication, but also of possible allies and opponents (see Chapter 5.1). In particular, this change resulted from the new needs that emerged during the campaign, above all the need to connect with a very broad number of less active sympathizers and, at a later stage, of citizens and voters who were not interested in politics. Following these needs, activists entered new online spaces: they 'invaded' the comments under online articles, looked for visibility on blogs dealing with non-political issues (including food blogs), appeared in highly visited online places such as Yahoo Answers and, of course, on Facebook. To explain this strategy towards the web, some activists ironically told me that they wanted to capture, in a very pragmatic way, a significant space on some famous platforms hosting porn videos, too. To conclude, it is important to mention another aspect that influenced – among numerous others – this evolution regarding the online communication strategies. The collaboration with external experts and the increased relevance of the paid professionals in my opinion contributed to the introduction of different views and the increasing complexity of numerous initiatives elaborated during the water campaign.

Connecting offline and online actions

The relationship between online communication and different offline geographical contexts, which the activists shaped differently during the referendum campaign, proved to be one of the most interesting and enlightening analytical dimensions that I encountered in my research. When I started to plan my investigation, I conceived of the two environments (online and offline) as well-defined, separate milieus, and my main purpose was to exclusively focus on the activities based on the web. In contrast, this research slowly moved in the opposite direction, investigating how the activists combined in their initiatives actions that were being developed on both the web and offline, often crossing the boundaries between the two. On the one hand, this evolution of my research design depended on the methodology and on the epistemological perspective that I adopted. Having derived to a great extent this perspective from the work of Christine Hine and from the (very different) approach of the Digital Methods Initiative of Amsterdam, a complex focus on the interplay between online and offline activities emerged. On the other hand, the activists whom I interviewed and observed clearly proposed complex (and divergent) descriptions of the interactions between the two environments, which were impossible to observe with a research design exclusively centred on a virtual and isolated web space.

In observing how the organizations combined digital and offline actions in their initiatives differently in the case of Facebook, in this book (Chapter 6.3) I introduce a classification that distinguishes four possible ways to 'play' with physical space while acting online. These categories characterize web communications in general, but the most complex ones were easier to find on the social media platforms. Since this classification might be a useful tool for further analyses on online campaigning (see Earl and Kimport 2011), I consider it useful to briefly summarize it in this concluding chapter.

The first category that I introduced (see Figure 7.1) groups events that the activists organized in a clearly delimited geographical place, which they made public through web communications on different platforms. In this case, the activists adopted the online resources as media tools, in order to attract more people to their initiatives or to spread information. The communication model that they applied, therefore, is not very different to the one adopted while distributing leaflets or writing a press release. Other minor elements can produce a slightly more complicated relationship between the digital and the offline observed milieus: for instance,

Figure 7.1 1st Model of online/offline interactions

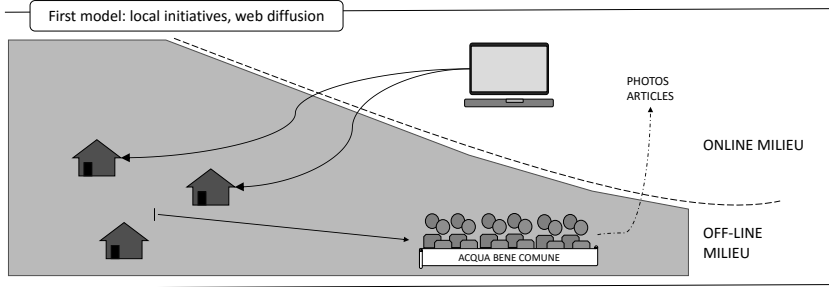
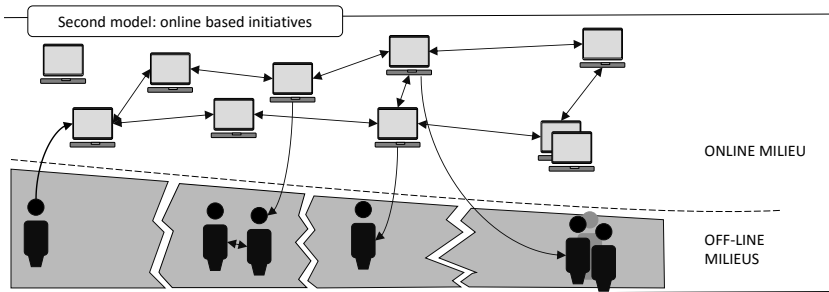


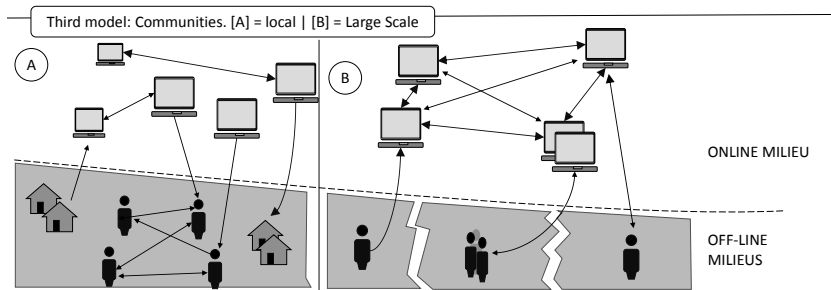
Figure 7.2 2nd Model of online/offline interactions



on Facebook the activists were able to represent their offline events in an easier way (for example, posting photos of a demonstration, charging videos, but also tagging people who were present and starting an online conversation on the initiative). Furthermore, digital resources often helped in the organization of these local events (for example, creating a ‘backstage’ that enabled the discussion and planning needed to develop a flash mob), and sometimes contributed to give life to stable conversations among the users, and even to the creation of formal associations that emerged after having participated in an isolated initiative.

A second category (Figure 7.2) includes the events that were developing primarily online. Of course, this category is internally very fragmented: it groups, for instance, the dissemination of photos and symbols, appeals to vote, and coordinated online actions of dispersed activists against the website of an opponent. In this case, the offline space can still play a role: as I explain in detail in Chapter 4, the online sphere often responds to cultural or geographical divisions and connections. However, since these phenomena mainly develop on digital platform, researchers can observe them with an exclusive focus on the internal ‘geography’ of the online space.

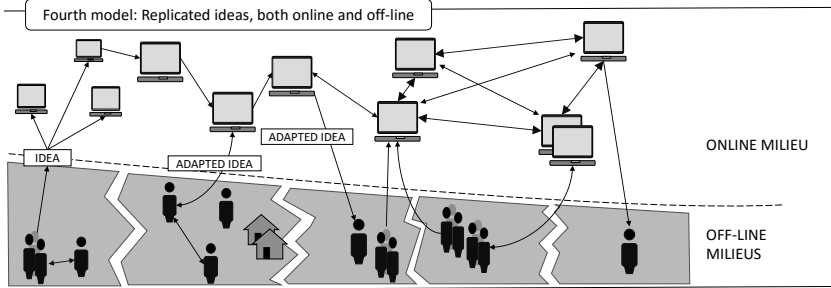
Figure 7.3 3rd Model of online/offline interactions. Sub-models A & B



On the web, in these cases, different users connect among them, without considering in a direct way their territorial limits.

The third model that I propose includes the communities hosted online. The characteristics of the online communities are, however, very different from case to case, and researchers tend to dedicate entire academic contributions to these complex spaces of interaction (see e.g. Fuster y Morell 2010). In particular, online communities can relate to the offline places differently. In order to better represent them according to the offline/online dimension explored here, I divided them into two sub-categories, which I observed in my research. On the one hand, a local community of activists can integrate their continuous offline contacts by adopting online forms of communication (Figure 7.3 – A). In these cases, web communications can help to reinforce pre-existing ties, and the group appears to be always connected, in a continuous but informal assembly. The boundary between offline and online communications are therefore continuously crossed, and the activists' discussions, content and range of actions are rooted in their local territory, even when they emerge online. On the other hand, an online community can appear with the aim of maintaining alive some channels of communication among activists who are geographically dispersed (Figure 7.3 – B). In this case, their communication is almost always happening online, even if periodic meetings and assemblies take place. As I had the opportunity to observe, the online community of this second kind that I could investigate in this work strongly considered the web and online resources as their territory and as their main field of action. In other words, they largely applied a perspective of the online milieu that conceived it as an environment of interaction and of struggle, instead of as a tool of external communication.

Figure 7.4 4th Model of online/offline interactions



The last model that I introduced groups a series of complex initiatives, based on the idea of a local reinterpretation of a given format. They mainly emerged during the campaign because some external experts, professional activists or organizations often dealing with complex media strategies developed them (Figure 7.4) (for a detailed description, see Chapter 6, section 3). Generally speaking, in these initiatives the activists launched an idea on a particular web platform (in most cases, a social media platform), and asked a broad community of users and sympathizers to replicate it in a re-adapted, personalized and contextualized form. In most cases, the idea implied a first offline action (for instance, taking a photo of a water flag), followed by a further online action (in general, posting the photo or sharing some information online). Furthermore, the idea very often guaranteed a certain degree of personalization of the initiative (for example, the participants could decide a particular place or context to perform the action), a recurrent symbol, and a common online repository (a Facebook page, a website section, or only a very simple Twitter hashtag) to collect the results of the initiative. These initiatives, relatively new in the Italian context, proved to be particularly interesting to observe through the lens of online/offline interactions because they continuously cross the boundaries between these two milieus: they connect dispersed local contexts, but at the same time they root the action within numerous territorial milieus.

These four models are, evidently, simplifications of an interplay between online and offline spheres that will probably become more complex in the future. However, I am convinced that a refined version of this categorization could be a useful analytical tool to adopt in order to identify different strategies of online communications during online campaigns.

7.2 On Methods: strengths and weaknesses of a combined methodological approach

In this study dedicated to the referendum against the privatization of water I analysed this large-scale communications campaign by relying on a complex combined methodology. The reconstruction and analysis of networks of links among websites, the interviews with activists and the complex ethnography between online and offline spheres are the three main methods that I applied to investigate how the campaign developed.

I introduced this heterogeneous methodological approach as a necessary correction to my initial research plan, which was completely centred on the concept of the network. More specifically, when I first designed this research, my main purpose was to contribute to a growing discussion in the literature, which connected three fields of research: social movement studies, social network analysis, and web studies. Adopting the definition of movements as networks (Diani 1992) and bridging this concept with the idea that the web is a network made of sites and links, I aimed – as numerous other scholars have done over the last decade – to trace how social movement organizations connect online and appear on the web. Therefore, I was planning to adopt social network analysis, in a version adapted to the online environment, as the methodological core of my research, with the secondary goal of improving and testing new methods for investigating social networks online. Moreover, I was designing this research as a comparative study, with the aim of observing and investigating the online activities of different movements in various phases of mobilization.

I decided to extend my set of research methods, and to deeply review my research design and plan, for three reasons. First of all, because the water-related mobilization that I was starting to observe suddenly evolved, growing in scale and complexity: this intensification convinced me to limit the analysis to a single, internally fragmented and interesting case study. Second, I considered the continuous evolution of the campaign through time, in particular, as regards the communications strategies of the activists, as useful and illuminating elements to take into account in my research. Since social network analysis presents numerous difficulties in the description of longitudinal data, I decided, therefore, to look for a method better able to describe these time phases. Third, in 2011 social media, and, in particular, Facebook, quickly became the most important online places that hosted the activists' campaign communications efforts, providing (with some difficulties) vast amounts of unexpected data for my research. Therefore, I

considered it too reductive to describe the referendum campaign by focusing only on the pattern of ties among traditional sites. I felt the need to find new and flexible methodological tools to explore the social media environments, in a context where it was difficult to precisely define in advance which groups, pages or events could become relevant for the analysis. Moving from these three premises, I started to convert the relatively simple and preliminary task of choosing a method into an independent research question, which I evaluated and which guided different stages of my research. I expressed this additional methodological question in the following way: How can a researcher successfully investigate the evolution of a large-scale, polycentric campaign that is happening in different physical places and online platforms?

In attempting to answer this research question, I achieved one of the most relevant results of this research: I explored, tested and developed methodological solutions that permit us to investigate how social movement actors communicate online during a campaign, keeping a focus that constantly moves from local activists to the campaign in its entirety. I achieved this result, at least in part, by combining methodological approaches – and in some cases, theoretical insights – that are usually held as distinct in the literature. On the one hand, I relied on the already mentioned ‘versions’ of social network analysis based on the web structure; on the other hand, I explored the qualitative/holistic digital ethnography tradition, in this case extended to non-digital environments, too, and integrated with a dense series of interviews with the activists.

As I have mentioned numerous times in this research, I did not combine these two approaches in order to triangulate them and compare their results. My aim was, instead, to describe the campaign at two different levels. Through the ethnographic qualitative approach, I explored the complex online and offline interactions among the activists, the perception of the activists, and other unexpected concepts (e.g. the relationship with space) that directly emerged from the analysis. The network approach completed the analysis by providing a wide, schematic image of the relationships between the numerous organizations involved in the campaign, which were difficult to trace using exclusively qualitative methods.

Both the network analysis and the digital ethnography revealed strengths and weak points. In the next two sections, I individually evaluate these components of my methodology, in order to provide some final suggestions to those researchers who are planning to extensively investigate similar online campaigns created by social movement organizations.

Network reconstruction and analysis of the referendum web domain

The fourth chapter of this book explores the communications sphere connected to the referendum campaign by adopting an online version of social network analysis: it investigates web domains using the Navicrawler software, mainly following a protocol elaborated by Jacomy and Ghitalla (2007). This approach, which I adapted to my research purposes, proved to be a very solid tool for investigating large web phenomena, mainly because it gives the researcher the ability to control every phase of the network reconstruction process, and of the analysis of its properties. While other programs and methods – such as the more famous IssueCrawler – provide users with faster ways to trace networks of sites in an automatic way, Navicrawler permits and requires continuous human control during the process of network tracing. Therefore, the researcher plays a more active role: he (or she) has the power to define the limits and the depth of the analysis, the websites that will become part of the network and the online resources that can be excluded from the examined structure. This last characteristic, in particular, is becoming increasingly helpful because it permits us to trace thematic networks even when highly linked and visible sites (such as Facebook, Google, Twitter and YouTube) have too great an influence on the web structure. Another useful characteristic of this method is its flexibility: after having traced the network, I was able to easily attach new attributes to the nodes, and to test numerous ways to analyse the collected data.

In comparison with other methods of online network tracing, the Navicrawler approach demonstrated some difficulties, too. First of all, it is relatively slow: although its speed is reasonable for investigating a relatively small ‘portion’ of the web, in my work I had to manually explore hundreds of websites, a process that required months of full-time work. Furthermore, at the moment of writing the software is made available in an old, unstable version, which works in combination with obsolete versions of the Firefox web browser. Therefore, it tends to crash during large-scale investigations. An upgraded version of the program and of the research protocol is, however, expected soon. In the meantime, the slow pace and the instability of Navicrawler can create, unfortunately, serious limits for research. In particular, the analysis through time of the evolution of a web network becomes almost impossible to achieve due to these software limitations. For research projects involving the time dimension, more automatized protocols and software like IssueCrawler are, therefore, a better choice.

A second limit of this research protocol concerns the analysis of the traced network. The most notable investigations that the core group of Navicrawler

creators and researchers work with are particular kinds of online networks, representing, for instance, ethnic groups in the diaspora or political spheres with polarized positions. In these cases, it tends to be easy to distinguish subgroups in the traced network. In other words, some attributes of the sites (e.g. political ideas, issue treated) tend to vary according to their position in the network. In the case that I followed in this research, the online 'water' network of websites has relatively different characteristics, and it is not fragmented into subgroups or polarized positions in an apparent way. Its characteristics are, therefore, less easy to visualize. A web network remains interesting to observe in this case, too. In particular, I hope that my analysis of the different roles that the main hubs played in this web domain attracted the attention of the reader. However, researchers can obtain results which are easier to present and more able to attract the reader's attention if they decide to map web phenomena where an internal fragmentation into groups, 'tribes' or polarized positions might be expected.

A third, obvious limit that the social network analysis protocols applied to the web are encountering is that they are techniques created for the traditional web: they aim at exploring relatively simple and stable connections, made of links or – in some recent and still experimental research – of likes and retweets. Online communication is increasingly varying, combining on the same platforms not only different content, but also different models of interaction. For researchers, these changes mean difficulties in the creation of databases, and in the possibility of adopting in advance well-defined techniques of investigation. This notwithstanding, among the numerous emerging kind of data adopted in this field, flows of text in posts and comments within representative Facebook groups, conversations in Twitter and data on citizens who sign online petitions are proving to be useful and widely adopted tools for research. However, the reconstruction of networks of traditional sites is a well-tested and almost established method. It gives the researchers solid results, which can be compared with those of other scholars adopting the same methodology.

Digital ethnography online and offline

Different types of activists shaped the campaign that I studied through day-to-day strategic choices and interactions, which were continuously 'jumping' from the online platforms to offline spaces, or from one kind of digital milieu to another one. The squares of small towns, national or local mailing lists, monuments, beaches, Facebook groups, and comments under articles in online newspapers were some of the intertwined places

where activists developed the campaign. As it is easy to understand, the characteristics of this complex and fragmented environment are very interesting to observe by relying on qualitative methods, and, in particular, by adopting an ethnographic approach.

In particular, the form of digital ethnography that I developed and tested in this ethnographic research approach proved to be useful for three reasons. First of all, it permitted me to analyse the referendum campaign without imposing previously designed concepts to the phenomena under study. In many cases, the observation helped me to produce unexpected analytical categories that were very different from my original ones. For instance, I understood through this research that my initial, technologically driven view of web communication was too focused on the horizontal and 'democratic' interactions that digital technologies seem to permit. In contrast, I observed that one-to-many communication patterns, together with a distinction between a public of readers and a small amount of key content producers characterizes in many cases the online campaigns, too. Second, the ethnographic approach permitted me to quickly re-orient the investigation towards platforms and web phenomena that were emerging as relevant in a previously unexpected way: small Facebook groups situated in peripheral contexts suddenly emerged as 'the main place to be' during the last phases of the campaign. Third, digital ethnography – with the crucial help of interviews – proved to be very useful for focusing the analysis on the interactions of the activists during the campaign, rather than on the content that they were writing online. I consider this focus on the interactions to be crucial for observing the link that connected online communications with traditional, street-based actions during the campaign.

Similarly, I distinguish three main limits to the digital ethnographic approach when applied to a large-scale campaign organized by a dispersed group of almost independent actors. The first limit regards the difficulty of tracing a representative image of the entire campaign. Due to the very large number of groups and actors involved, it was necessary to focus only on some groups and initiatives, and I was able to observe the activities of and to interview only a relatively limited number of key activists. In other words, my field of research was too wide for a proper ethnographic study: for this reason, too, I felt the need to include a different methodological approach, based on the reconstruction of web networks, in the analysis. The second limit of the ethnographic approach is that it proved able to depict the complexity on the referendum campaign well, but was less suited to reorganizing the data into new categories, in order to obtain a final simplified image of what happened during this complex communications

effort. A third limit of this method concerns the fact that a very large number of activities that contributed to shaping the campaign were happening in private places. Activists and less engaged sympathizers were sending messages or reading web content from their houses, or from their own digital devices. Unfortunately, my analysis seldom had the opportunity to interact with this peripheral and fragmented form of web communication (even though in some cases the activists arrived to host me in their houses).

To conclude, in order to mitigate against the effect of these three limitations while adopting an ethnographic approach to web communication, it is probably better to reduce the scale and to find case studies where the field of observation is easier to delimit. Actions that happen at the local level, campaigns organized by a single organization, initiatives that emerge on a single Internet platform are surely easier to observe. Furthermore, a focus on similar smaller cases can enable a researcher, or a team of researchers, to introduce a comparative perspective in their analysis, which surely is especially useful for observing how activists shape their strategies differently, according to the dimensions that emerge from the research.

7.3 Five Directions for Further Research

During my research, I did my best to cover as many aspects as I could of a communications campaign of such unexpected dimension, complexity and diffusion. To a large extent, however, my work required a continuous selection between, on the one hand, which aspects of the campaign I should consider relevant and, on the other hand, which research directions to exclude from the analysis. In particular, the availability of time, my methodological expertise, the internal congruence of topics within the book, and the accessibility of data were factors that played a crucial role in guiding these continuous choices. Nonetheless, after a final re-examination of the interviews and of the information that I collected, I can distinguish five themes that I should explore in detail in future contribution.

The first line for further research that I would like to cover in the future concerns the active role of commercial social media in shaping online campaigns. More specifically, I will shift my attention from a perspective that observes Facebook (and other social media platforms) as a 'neutral' platform, where people connect and shape different forms of communication and activism, to a perspective that considers Facebook as a platform created by a media corporation. This actor, of course, has its own aims, introduces its own strategies, and can influence online activism in intentional or unintentional ways.

In this book, I deliberately excluded this perspective on social media for two connected reasons. First of all, because the activists whom I interviewed very seldom described the commercial social media as non-neutral places: in the large majority of cases, they conceived of them simply as a new kind of online environment, where it was possible to interact with a broader population, to organize, and to spread messages. Even when I deliberately proposed to the activists questions regarding privacy, or their ability to maintain control over their online communication, they tended to pragmatically focus the discourse on the new possibilities that social media were offering them. Second, I decided to exclude a perspective of commercial social media as actors because, as far as I was able to observe, they rarely played a visibly active role in the development of the campaign. In general, they provided the activists useful platforms for communication, which could appear in most cases as neutral environments. This notwithstanding, I consider it useful to work in the future by adopting the opposite perspective, mainly because the rare cases when Facebook played an active role in the campaign are particularly interesting to analyse. In one of these cases, in particular, the main Facebook page of the referendum committee – an enormously relevant communications tool for the campaign organizers – disappeared for almost one month, and the press agent of FIMA had to prove to the administrators of Facebook his right to communicate on behalf of the entire committee. In this case, Facebook administrators decided to act in a way that shows their ability to control and to set the rules of online communication on the platform.

A second interesting line of research that I would like to pursue in the future introduces a sort of ‘archaeological’ vision of online campaigns, and of the water referendum campaign, in particular. The research question that I propose to explore, starting from the data that I have already collected, concerns what remains of a complex online campaign after its end. In particular, online campaigns increasingly imply the creation of very creative communications products: interactive websites, symbols that circulate online and on the ground, online communities of activists and sympathizers are only some of the many possible initiatives that can emerge from these campaigns. Furthermore, the creation of similar online products usually requires professional or semi-professional skills, which a coalition of organizations can find within its boundaries, or by establishing new (ephemeral or long-lasting) connections.

Starting from these premises, I consider it particularly interesting to observe which ‘strategies’ the activists adopt towards the online resources and the communications skills established during the campaign. Intuitively, online communication seems to follow the fate of the coalition that created

the campaign. If a stable organization or movement emerges from the campaign, some core actor might invest resources in maintaining or adapting the online resources (Facebook pages, websites, and similar spaces) produced during the mobilization. Otherwise, these online resources disappear, or other actors can even try 'recapture' them. For instance, this is the case of the domain www.referendumacqua.it, which FIMA had to abandon after the end of the campaign: another actor bought the web domain, including some pro-privatization content on the site.

A third aspect that I plan to explore in the future concerns the circulation of symbols and images in different online platforms during a campaign. In Chapter 6, I briefly discussed the relevance of visual elements during a campaign, in particular, on Facebook, and I described different kinds of initiatives that aim at spreading visual elements online. In this book, however, I never observed these symbols as connected cultural elements that appear in online networks. In future contributions, I would like to apply to pictures and images the techniques that I already adopted in Chapter 4 to observe the online circulation of keywords. In this research, I have developed the expertise to create a database of images extracted from the online pages that supported the campaign: a similar database, combined with the adoption of social network analysis techniques, can provide very important information on the circulation of symbols on the web.

A fourth direction of analysis concerns the relationships that activists create with the wider online environment during a campaign. In this case, too, I have partly explored the phenomenon in this research, presenting my conclusions in Chapter 5. However, in Chapter 4 I deliberately limited my network investigation to social movement actors, without observing how activists and organizations established direct connections with mainstream media and other institutions. Jacomy and Ghitalla, while conceiving Navicrawler and the connected analysis of web domains, suggest useful relational techniques (in particular, what they call the 'analysis of the frontiers') to explore the links between campaign actors and their surrounding environment. Furthermore, I should dedicate even more attention in future contributions to the role of external media experts and designers in social movement campaigns. Atypical 'movement' actors who are deeply connected with the traditional media market, these professionals can constitute an interesting bridge between the practices of communication that characterize grassroots political communication on one side, and business environments on the other.

A final idea that emerges from this work regards a possible future contribution in the fields of online campaigning and digital activism. The

concepts and the dimensions that emerged during my research represent interesting aspects of online communications during a campaign. However, they might produce better results if adopted in comparative perspective to smaller and simpler cases. In the future, therefore, I will attempt to observe whether different ways of relating the online and offline spaces, different models of online actions, and different perceptions towards some particular tools and digital platforms tend to emerge in association with the characteristics of organizations and coalitions in several, relatively small campaigns. For the same reasons, my future contributions will probably focus on the variation of a limited number of characteristics of online communications, for instance, observing whether the relationship between activists and social media is different when a communication campaign is linked with a well-defined physical space, or when a campaign is less rooted in a specific offline territory.

List of the Interviews

For each interviewee, I indicated the gender and the approximate age, recurring to a code.

[AGE 1] → between 20 and 29 years old.

[AGE 2] → between 30 and 45.

[AGE 3] → older than 55 (no interviewees were aged between 45 and 55).

- IW 1 Activist with a scientific background, part of the water committee of Genoa. [Male |AGE 2].
- IW 2 Activist of the organization 'Mani Tese' in Bergamo. [Male |AGE 2].
- IW 3 Young activist in a spontaneous committee that emerged in a village in Tuscany. [Male |AGE 1].
- IW 4A Water activist in the water committee of Turin, with a tendency towards digital forms of activism (Meetup & Facebook). [Male |AGE 2].
- IW 4B Same activist as IW 4A; (follow-up interview after the vote).
- IW 5 Expert media activist linked with the water committee of Rome. [Male |AGE 1].
- IW 6A Professional activist in a small organization of Rome, with a strong expertise on web tools and in the creation of campaigns. [Male |AGE 2].
- IW 6B Same person as IW 6A (follow-up interview after the vote).
- IW 7 Long-time activist of the left, who actively participated in the Social Forum process. [Male |AGE 3].
- IW 8 Informal leader and first-time activist in a spontaneous group (mostly young people and social media users) that emerged in a large town in Umbria. [Male |AGE 1].
- IW 9 First-time activist in a spontaneous group (mostly young people and social media users) that emerged in a large town in Umbria. [Male |AGE 1].
- IW 10 First-time activist in a spontaneous group (mostly young people and social media users) that emerged in a large town in Umbria. [Female |AGE 1].
- IW 11 Informal leader of a small social centre in a large town in northern Italy. [Male |AGE 1].
- IW 12 Responsible person in a municipal office in a large town in Tuscany where the local administration

- actively supported the water campaigns from the start. [Female |AGE 2].
- IW 13 Video maker and activist in a semi-institutional local committee (see IW12) in a large town in Tuscany. [Male |AGE 2].
- IW 14 Mayor of a small town in northern Italy, active on the issue of water and creator of several online campaigns on environmental issues. [Male |AGE 2].
- IW 15 Activist in a student network and a strongly engaged water activist in Friuli Venezia Giulia. [Male |AGE 1].
- IW 16A FIMA press agent. [Male |AGE 2].
- IW 16B Same person as IW 16A (follow-up interview after the vote).
- IW 16C Same person as IW 16A (follow-up interview in 2015).
- IW 17 Activist with a scientific background, part of the water committee of Genoa. [Female |AGE 2].
- IW 18 Journalist in an alternative magazine, active on the issue of water since the start of the campaigns. [Male |AGE 2].
- IW 19 Local activist in the Democratic Party, who started a small water committee in a village in Tuscany. [Male |AGE 3].
- IW 20 Administrator of a political Facebook page (about 6,000 likes, young public). Launched an event in support of the vote that became viral. [Male |AGE 1].
- IW 21 Professional fundraiser who created *Pro Bono*, a FIMA campaign. [Female |AGE 2].
- IW 22 Activist in a water committee in a small town in northern Italy, who created a blog on the issue of water. [Male |AGE 2].
- IW 23 Leader of a leftist peasant organization in central Italy. [Male |AGE 3].
- IW 24 Young activist in the water committee in Rome. Blog administrator. [Female |AGE 1].
- IW 25 Water activist and paid worker in the FIMA central office. [Male |AGE 2].
- IW 26A Webmaster of the FIMA website. [Male |AGE 1].
- IW 26B Same person as IW 26A (follow-up interview after the vote).
- IW 27 Water activist and paid worker in the FIMA central office. [Male |AGE 2].
- IW 28 Lawyer engaged in the water committee of Turin. [Female |AGE 2].

- IW 29A Webmaster and activist for the water committee of Turin. [Male |AGE 2].
- IW 29B Same person as IW 29A (follow-up interview after the vote).
- IW 30 Designer, one of the creators of the campaign *Vendesi Mamma*. [Female |AGE 1].
- IW 31A Key water activist of Tuscany. [Male |AGE 2].
- IW 31B Same person as IW 31A (follow-up interview after the vote).
- IW 32 Informal leader of the water committee of Turin, long-time activist and politician. [Female |AGE 3].
- IW 33 Activist in the water committee of Turin. [Female |AGE 2].
- IW 34 Activist in numerous leftist organizations and campaigns in Tuscany. [Female |AGE 2].
- IW 35 French blogger. [Male |AGE 2].

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