

Activist Media Practices and Communication Repertoire in Complex Media Environments

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Introduction

Despite the central role that the media play in social movement processes and in the political arena in general, only a few studies attempt to understand what unconventional political actors do with the media in complex media environments. This is also a matter, the paper claims, of lacking conceptual redefinitions when dealing with complex media environments. After a brief literature review and some methodological remarks, the paper presents and discusses two key sensitizing concepts that can be fruitfully employed in the field of social movement studies, but that are also applicable to other types of unconventional and conventional political actors: “activist media practices” and “communication repertoire”. In short, the paper argues that activist media practices are made up by three relevant dimensions – media perceptions, media representation/recognition and media interactions – which intertwine one another when activists operate in complex media environment. Activist communication repertoires, instead, can be seen as the whole potential set of activist media practices available to a certain activist group or to an entire social movement coalition in a given space and time.

A critical literature review

Social movements challenge societies at the symbolic level, since their struggles are “aimed at the foundations of power in complex societies, at its more extreme claim to impose the codes governing our relation with the world. [...] Contemporary movements strive to reappropriate the capacity to name through the elaboration of codes and languages designed to define reality, in the twofold sense of constituting it symbolically and of regaining it, thereby escaping from the predominant forms of representation” (Melucci 1996: 357). In this vein, social and political actors involved in social movements engage in a twofold symbolic task which passes through the media without beginning or ending there. When mobilizing, social and political actors also engage in the definitional work that the development of collective identification processes implies. At the same time, they seek visibility and a voice at the public level in order to seek legitimacy for themselves and their claims, and, eventually but not exclusively, to participate in the agenda building process (Lipsky 1968). The result is not only the establishment of new political actors within societies, making claims and demands through unconventional political means, but also the attempt to spread alternative discourses, innovative systems of meanings and new “cultural grammars” (Virno 2004) about a varied range of contentious

issues. In sum, communication in the broadest sense seems to be central to social movements and many scholars have already investigated this topic.

The literature on media and social movements may be split into two fields of research.¹ In the first, scholars consider how the media, and especially the mainstream media, represent social movements. In the second, scholars concentrate on how social actors that engage in social movements interact with different types of media outlets. In particular, there are those studies that consider the interactions between social actors and the mainstream media, seen as an external and powerful social actor able to shape and redefine the meanings attached to social movement processes. There are, in addition, studies that focus more on how social actors participating in social movements develop their own media, mostly but not exclusively labelled as “alternative media”. In recent years, moreover, many scholars have focused on how social actors use various types of ICTs for both instrumental and expressive purposes.

Many studies investigate to what extent and in what form the mainstream media represent specific contentious issues and social problems around which social movements also develop, alongside other, competing social and political actors. The starting point here is media discourse. A relevant and well-known piece of research that represents this type of investigation was carried out by Gamson and Modigliani (1989), and focuses on media discourses about nuclear power in the U.S.A. from 1945 to the end of the 1980s.² On the whole, studies related to the reconstruction and analysis of media discourses about specific contentious issues empirically illustrate the existence of this asymmetric relation between the media and protestors, who act in a highly competitive environment where the attention of mainstream media is a scarce resource.³

The same issue is at stake in another type of investigation, this time focusing more on the construction of media discourses through competitive interactions among a variety of social and political actors, all mobilized about one specific issue. A good example is Ferree, Gamson et al’s work on the emergence and development of the contested abortion issue in both the U.S.A. and Germany

¹ Neveu offers a seminal critical literature review or, better, a “scientific cartography”(Neveu 1999, 23) about (mainstream) media and social movements. In arguing that this field began to exist only from the mid 1980s, Neveu considers the work by Gamson (Gamson and Modigliani 1989) (Gamson 1992), Gitlin (Gitlin 2003) and Champagne as the three most important branches of research about (mainstream) media and social movement. Champagne and other French scholars address the topic from the point of view of sociology of journalism, hence paying attention to micro-interactions between activists and journalists, seen as “allies-rivals”. Neveu also develops his own theoretical framework which drawn on Bourdieu’s field theory as it is applied in the sociology of journalism field (Benson and Neveau 2005).

² Starting from a similar theoretical perspective and employing a different research strategy, protest event analysis scholars have also demonstrated that mainstream media, and in particular the press, are strongly biased against social movements and should, therefore, be treated as problematic secondary data sources for those seeking to reconstruct the history and characteristics of social movements (Danzger 1975; Snyder and Kelly 1977; Rucht and Ohlemacher 1992; McCarthy, McPhail et al. 1996; Mueller 1997; Oliver and Myers 1999; Smith, McCarthy et al. 2001). Although some variables influencing news coverage were eventually proposed, this debate is mainly related to quantitative methodological issues, and downplays the micro-level of interaction between journalists and mainstream media.

³ Speaking about the (mediated) public sphere, Koopmans also stresses that “the public sphere is a bounded communicative space in which a variety of organizations, groups, and individuals compete for the scarce resources of public attention and legitimacy” (Koopmans 2004, 377).

(2002). Their aim is to understand the role of the media in shaping the discourse about this topic and the degree of success of political and social actors involved, amongst which are social movement organizations, in rendering visible their own collective frames. According to the authors, there are two criteria to establish the success of social and political actors: standing, that is the possibility of “having a voice in the media” (Ferree, Gamson et al. 2002: 86) and framing, that is the relative prominence that a given collective frame gains within the media discourse.

Finally, some studies investigate the micro-level of social interaction between activists and journalists, by analyzing the negotiations occurring in social movement processes related to mainstream media. In a pioneering piece of empirical research, Gitlin (2003) analyzes how the mainstream media covered the New Left movement from its birth to its institutionalization during the 1960s, how activists reacted to this mainstream media coverage, and its general consequences on the social movement.⁴ This piece of research renders visible the important role the mainstream media play with regard to social movements, and vice versa. The metaphor the author uses to describe the complex set of interactions between journalists and social movements is that of a “dance” between the New Left movement and the media which had different stages, each characterized by a different configuration of interactions between activists and journalists.⁵ Another interesting piece of research that takes into consideration interactions between activists and the media from a micro level perspective is by Couldry (1999; 2000), who investigates how a particular type of non-media people, namely activists, react to the presence of the media during protest events. The focus is on the early stages of a protest that took place in Brightonsea (UK) against live animal exports in 1995, and was organized by people without any previous experience in social movements. This means that protestors interacted with police and journalists for the first time in their life. The investigation singles out different types of denaturalization of the media frame.⁶ What seems to be important is the consequence of the experience on activists. On a short-term basis, activists very often engaged in direct conflicts with media narratives, in the sense that there was the strong perception of a contradiction between what the media said about the protests and what the activists experienced. On a long-term basis, the denaturalization of the media frame led to a broader conflict with the media, in the sense that those who were involved in the protest radically changed their news consumption and general attitudes towards the media. They became, indeed, more suspicious of mainstream media coverage. This study highlights the disruptive influence of media

⁴ In this work, the theoretical perspective regarding journalism, partially supported by participant observation inside newsrooms and in-depth interviews with journalists, is linked to the concept of hegemony developed by Gramsci (1968). News routines served dominant hegemonic principles, so that social movements that contradicted them hardly received any media coverage. Nonetheless, in a situation of political crisis, such as that in the U.S.A. during the 1960s, hegemonic principles usually shift as do mediated frames about certain collective social actors or contentious issues.

⁵ The same metaphor, namely dance, is also employed by Molotch who argues that “media and movement are dialectically bound, always in motion and alert to one another's motion - be it embrace, flight, or thundering blow. The most appropriate metaphor to describe their relationship is dance-sometimes a dance of death” (Molotch 1979, 92).

⁶ According to Couldry (2000), the denaturalization of the media frame occurs when individuals belonging to a particular audience see mainstream media mechanisms at work and question them through their own mediation processes.

power from the perspective of those involved in events that are then transformed in news: what is normally perceived by non-media people as a natural product, namely news, is suddenly seen as an artificial construction based on negotiations between social actors.

On the whole, the three types of investigation differ in terms of the empirical phenomena they investigate, although they maintain a similar theoretical perspective according to which the mainstream media are much more powerful as social actors than those engaged in social movement processes and that, therefore, an asymmetric relationship between mainstream media outlets and social actors mobilized in societies exists. The rationale here is that new systems of meaning created in the context of social movements have to gain a broad circulation in societies if they are to reach potential bystanders, allies, protestors and opponents that are not directly involved in mobilizations. This is needed because it is only in this way that mobilized social actors may participate in public political discussions about contentious issues they care about. Due to the important role that the media play in contemporary societies, social movements need the mainstream media to address broad audiences. The visibility provided by the media is crucial for these social actors which seek to participate in both the agenda-setting and the agenda-building processes (Graber 1980).⁷ Social movement protests are perceived by public opinion only if the media cover them: “like the tree falling unheard in the forest, there is no protest unless protest is perceived and projected” (Lipsky 1968: 1151). In short, the mainstream media play an important role with respect to social movement processes, but the contrary is not equally true, since “most movements need the media, but the media seldom need movements” (Rucht 2004: 35). When addressing the media, therefore, many social movements scholars start from this preliminary theoretical standpoint and hence see the mainstream media both in terms of opportunities to gain visibility in societies and constraints since social actors need to adapt to the media perspective if they want to gain visibility.

Studies about the mainstream media and social movements generally assign little agency to activists in the media environment. When scholars look at alternative media, however, the level of agency that activists have in the media environment increases. A quick glance at the literature shows that the expression “alternative media” has more than one meaning and is frequently questioned. Some scholars, indeed, prefer to employ other labels, such as “radical media” (2001, 203), “citizen media” (Rodriguez 2001), “activist media” (Waltz 2005), and “autonomous media” (Langlois and Dubois 2005). Far from being the mark of a sterile disagreement among scholars, the occurrence of so many expressions mirrors the vivid debate in a flourishing field of investigation. It also signals the existence of several points of view according to which scholars may look at alternative media. It seems, indeed, that many of these expressions are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they highlight some aspects of

⁷ The agenda-setting process is the effort made by collective actors to increase the likelihood that a social problem will enter the public and political agenda, while the agenda-building process is the attempt to influence the interpretation of a social problem once it has entered the public and political agenda (Graber 1980).

alternative media while leaving others in the shadow. This, in turn, suggests that alternative media are far from simple phenomenon to investigate, since they rest on a complex set of social interactions involving citizens producing their own media “outside mainstream media institutions and networks” (Atton 2007, 18).

While it is difficult to elaborate a consistent theoretical concept able to capture the complexity of alternative media, it is possible to find some common points on which scholars seem to converge. I have already suggested the first of these in the above. Explicitly or implicitly, nearly all scholars agree on the fact that alternative media are produced in sites, situations and contexts that are different from those in which mainstream media are. One of the implications of this is that people engaged in alternative media do not attempt to secure the same audiences as mainstream media. In this regard, the frequently low circulation of alternative media is a peculiarity rather than a problem to be solved: it is not possible to measure the success of alternative media simply by assessing the extent of their diffusion (Dagron 2004, 48). The second point concerns the very nature of alternative media. Independently of how they are labelled and defined, scholars do not consider alternative media simply as texts circulating in the media environment. The focus of investigations is frequently also, and sometimes only, on social interactions between either individuals or groups of people when creating alternative media. Alternative media and their role in societies may be better understood, then, by considering them as complex and varied media practices. They are complex because the people who perform them engage in several social interactions at a time. They are varied because alternative media may involve a number of technical forms of support and mediums: from posters to radio, from television to theatre, from graffiti to stickers (Downing 2001).

In the last decade, studies about how information and communication technologies (ICTs) intervene in mobilizing structures, opportunity structures and framing processes in social movements have also flourished (Garrett 2006; Loader 2008). In this literature, scholars address alternative media created in online and virtual environments, such as informational websites (Coyer 2005, della Porta and Mosca 2006, Morris 2004), and also how social movements use ICTs to foster mobilization, especially at the transnational level (Bennett 2003, della Porta and Mosca 2005, Kahn and Kellner 2004). Concerning mobilizing structures, the literature on ICTs and social movements focuses particularly on their intertwining with organizational and identification processes. Organizational processes are linked to goals broadly seen as instrumental to the movement itself, including tasks such as the concrete organization of protest events or the coordination of protest campaigns. At this level, the impact of ICTs on protest organization is widely recognized by scholars of social movements, who consider them a crucial resource that sustains and transforms grassroots political participation and collective action (Freschi 2003). The network infrastructure behind the internet, in particular, provides a peculiar organizational pattern to social movements (Castells 2001, 135-136) in which various nodes, such as

individuals, activist groups and even other social movement networks can be connected in a non-hierarchical and fluid way. Taking this aspect into account, some scholars have analyzed social movement networks as they are visible on the web, where activist groups create on-line connections through hyperlinks (Caiani and Wagemann 2009). Due to the relatively low costs, those social and political actors involved in social movements which lack material resources gain a powerful tool for the coordination of their offline collective actions in ICTs. Among ICTs, the rise of the Internet in particular has seen the foundation of a unique environment, cyberspace, where activists can perform new kinds of collective action that fall under the labels of “cyber-protests” and “hacktivism” (see Jordan 2002; Jordan and Taylor 2004). Concerning this aspect, an entire branch of the literature explores the emergence of new, on-line forms of mobilization due to ICTs, rather than the use of ICTs for performing off-line protest activities (McCaughey and Ayers 2003; Earl and Kimport 2008)

Some conceptual proposals

The critical literature review presented above illustrates that the relations between social movements and the media can be explored according to different theoretical perspectives and different levels of interaction. It also shows, however, that there is a tendency among scholars interested in this topic to treat these levels of interaction as separate from one another. Those pieces of research dealing with the mainstream media and social movements, for instance, do not take into consideration the use and creation of alternative media in the context of social movements. At the same time, those scholars focusing on the use of ICTs in social movements often fail to differentiate among the variety of technological applications used: the potentialities and use of mobile phones, for instance, are different from those related to websites that are, in turn, different from those concerning mailing lists.⁸ In addition, scholars focusing on ICTs often fail to adopt a broader perspective able to include their work in a broader media environment in which other types of mediums still exist and overlap with ICTs. This gap in the literature is almost certainly due to the complexity of the topic, which leads researchers to focus on one specific aspect while leaving others features related to the intertwining of the media in social movement processes in the background. In my opinion, however, it would be worth investigating this topic from a more comprehensive perspective, able to provide an exploration of how social movements intertwine with various other media outlets – from mainstream to alternative media – and media technologies – from the press to the web.

One relevant attempt that moves in this direction is the quadruple-A model developed by Rucht (2004), according to which social and political actors engaged in social movements have four types of reactions to their lack of resonance in mainstream media. These lead to the development of four types of strategies: *abstention*, when the focus shifts away from mainstream media to inwardly-directed group

⁸ Relevant exceptions are the work of Kavada (2005) and Hogan (2008).

communication; *attack*, when social and political actors decide to openly criticize mainstream media and sometimes organize violent actions against them; *adaptation*, when the mainstream media logic is accepted and strategies towards mainstream media are developed accordingly; and *alternatives*, when social and political groups engaged in mobilization create their own media to establish a different space in order to communicate both amongst themselves and with broader audiences. This model shows that the direction of communication (inward vs. outward) and the amount of resources needed to develop a certain reaction (high vs. low) are the two main features according to which social movements and the media intertwine.⁹ Unlike other studies, this contribution constructs a model that suggests the existence of overlapping practices for dealing with the media developed according to different logics and purposes. Mainstream media, however, remains at the centre of this model since all the strategies activists may potentially adopt are seen as reactions to a lack of mainstream media coverage. In this dissertation, I begin from a different perspective revolving around the concept of “media environment” as a whole in which and through which activists develop multiple “media practices” that frequently overlap. The remainder of the chapter further elaborates these two concepts, whose redefinition through empirical research form the core of this dissertation.

Grouping different types of media outlets and different types of media technologies together, I conceptualize the media environment as an open, unpredictable and controversial space of mediatization and communication, made up of different layers which continuously combine with one another due to information flows circulating within the media environment itself (Terranova 2004).¹⁰ The primary feature of such a media environment, therefore, is that it is fluid and not fixed, dynamic and not static. The media environment, however, is not something external to the daily lives of media and non-media people. Rather, it is continuously created and recreated through complex interactions among subjects and objects, individuals and technologies. While the media environment exists as a consequence of these interactions, the networks of relations that shape the media environment frequently survive them. For this reason I argue that the media environment lives in the interactions between a variety of subjects and objects, and as such is strictly anchored to their daily experiences of it, but also continues to exist after them, and as such is something that people also perceive as existing independently of their own interactions with it.

⁹ Brinson suggests that the focus on mainstream media in social movement studies often contributes to the downplay of other types of interactions between social movements and media outlets. In fact he argues that activist groups can avoid adaptation to mainstream media rules and routines through two strategies: “movements can circumvent mainstream media altogether by using alternative” and “they can work to reform the media, thereby changing the rules and structures that govern movement-media relationships” (Brinson 2006, 544).

¹⁰ I use the term “media environment” rather than the more common “mediascape”, because the latter can be better understood as a consequence of the existence of the former, since it was originally defined as the landscape created by media-images in which we lead our daily lives (Appadurai 1996, 35-36).

To better understand this concept of media environment, it is useful to start from an analogous but distinct concept, whose definition is still debated in literature: that of the (general) public sphere. Amongst other authors, Gerhards and Neidhardt (1991) define the general public sphere in which public discourses originate and circulate as an environment consisting of three layers: daily encounters among people, public assemblies and the mass media. These layers are not isolated, but continuously interact in a circular manner, from chat and talking to mediated mass communication and back again. In the same fashion, I consider the mass media layer as more complex, and in turn multilayered, than the mainstream media alone. Different types of media outlets and media technologies circulate, intertwine and inform the media environment. More stable networks of relations established around a homogeneous set of media outlets and technologies create different layers in the media environment, which however remain permeable: media texts circulate through various material supports and forms, creating discourse flows which cross the media environment and may indeed pass from one layer to another.¹¹ In this vein, Bennett (2004) suggests that the internet should not be considered independently from the traditional mass media. In addition, speaking about social movements and the media, Cottle suggests that “how the different flows and networks of the contemporary media sphere interpenetrate and reciprocally influence each other will, inevitably, become a key area for future research (as well as a methodological challenge)” (Cottle 2008, 859). Finally, Gillan, Pickerill and Webster recently investigated contemporary anti-war movements in the U.K. and found that complex “information circuits [that] flow between different media, groups and actors” (Gillan, Pickerill et al. 2008, 30).¹² In a nutshell, these authors implicitly suggest that social movements scholars interested in understanding the role of media in mobilization should bear in mind the complexity of communications flows that shape contemporary, media-saturated societies. The empirical research on which this dissertation rests explores mobilizations against precarity from this theoretical standpoint.

In conceptualizing the media environment as a complex set of relations among subjects and objects, social actors and technologies, I was certainly inspired by the work of Couldry (2001), who proposes we speak of the media as a transformation process, named the mediation process, defined as “a very powerful and complex process, which certain people perform at a particular places and times, with effects on other places and times” (Couldry 2001: 5). Though I draw on this definition of the

¹¹ According to Silverstone, the media are characterized by a “double articulation” in that they are both technological objects that occupy a space in the daily environments of individuals and medium that conveys messages to the same individuals who use them in a rather active way (Silverstone 1994).

¹² The authors start from a definition of (war) media environment revolving around the concept of “information sources”. Accordingly, they speak about the existence of an information environment defined as a “full range of information resources available to the public, which may extend from recollections of returning combatants to newspaper reportages, from personal experiences of conflict to satellite television coverage” (Gillan, Pickerill et al. 2008, 19).

media, I depart from Couldry's direction by suggesting that there is not the media, but rather a media environment made up of and lasting beyond interactions among subjects and objects. Despite this difference, however, I maintain the complexity that Couldry evokes when defining the media as mediation processes, and I also attempt to include the author's concern about the need, when dealing with the media, to overcome the classical division among media producers, media sources and media audiences. When considering mainstream media only, the maintenance of such a division may still be useful for analytical reasons, it is certainly true that in complex and multilayered media environments individuals simultaneously play different roles, especially in particular situations of protest, mobilization and claims making. To adopt such a theoretical perspective, in addition, means placing at the centre of the media environment interactions among social actors and technologies and looking empirically at the main dimensions characterizing such interactions.

The conceptualization of the media environment outlined in the above implies bringing activist agency back into the equation. As I have shown, many scholars interested in this topic frequently look at the media as the mostly constraining structure to which activists must adapt if they are to gain media coverage. I do not claim, here, that media power does not exist. Rather, I suggest that further empirical investigation is needed to fully understand how activists interpret this structure and to what extent they might have agency, that is to say a more proactive role, concerning the media environment in its entirety. According to Couldry (2006), this is a more general concern that media studies should also take into consideration with respect to a variety of social actors: it is important, indeed, to grasp how "people exercise their agency in relation to *media flows*" (Couldry 2006, 27) within a complex media environment through the analysis of their media practices.

This approach is also proposed in the sociology of journalism, where scholars calling for a less media-centric approach have shifted their research towards the study of news sources. For instance, Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) investigate the media practices and perceptions of the media environment of resource-poor sources, such as pressure groups, in the criminal justice field. In this way, the news making process is no longer investigated from the internal point of view of journalists, but from an external examination of journalistic news sources, how they act and in which ways they approach the media. In a similar vein, one piece of research about the Northern Ireland Information Service (NIIS) shows that resource-poor sources are aware of media mechanisms and production routines, since "the differential targeting of some messages implies that the NIIS recognizes and exploits the varying work routines of different groups of journalists. It operates what we might call a 'hierarchy of access'" (Miller 1993: 88). Here, it is evident that the degree of agency of social actors contributes to transforming the media environment itself, since news sources become more and more acquainted with the news making process and are thus potentially central to the production of public discourse. In other words, "learning to exploit the journalists' hunger for stories becomes a

campaigning tool in the postmodern, mediated political environment which characterized the times" (McNair 1998: 156).

In line with these studies, this dissertation focuses on activist media practices in a complex media environment. Like the concept of media environment, the concept of activist media practices was not clearly defined at the beginning of the empirical research, whose overall objective is to grasp how activist media practices in a complex media environment take place. I therefore began the fieldwork with only a vague definition of media practice, namely that "media practices are things that people do with the media" (Couldry 2004). This was a useful starting point to understand activist agency in a complex media environment from a grounded theory research strategy (which I adopted during the fieldwork, as explained in the next chapter). As I continued the research process, however, I understood that the data I had constructed and analyzed also spoke volumes about the very concept of "activist media practices", another sensitizing concept whose main dimensions became clearer and clearer as the empirical research unfolded. In what follows, therefore, I discuss a tentative theoretical model for "activist media practices" which revolves around three dimensions: media representation, media perception and media interaction. Before doing this, the next section discusses some methodological aspects of the empirical research.

Methods

I adopted grounded theory as a research strategy (Glaser and Strauss 1965; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Titscher, Meyer et al. 2000; Charmaz 2007) in which coding holds a central position. In developing the research, I was especially inspired by the "constructionist grounded theory" perspective, according to which the point of view and the voices of participants are crucial to construct new categories of data (Charmaz 2000; Charmaz 2008). I employed a (comparative) case study approach based on a small number of case studies (Snow and Trom 2002; George and Bennett 2005). In order to construct the sample of case studies, I chose mobilizations that differed on five dimensions: the territorial level at which they were organized; the labour market sector(s) in which they were rooted; the number of activist groups sustaining them; and their overall goal. Since the case studies are different in so many respects, their analysis with regard to media practices was more likely to highlight different aspects and, at the same time, single out common features concerning interactions between the media and social movements. The resulting sample is made up of five mobilizations whose main differences are outlined in the following table: the Euro Mayday Parade, the *Reddito per Tutti**, the No Moratti, the *Serpica Naro* and the *Precari Atesia* protest event.

	Euro Mayday Parade	<i>Reddito per Tutti*</i> direct actions	No Ddl Moratti	<i>Serpica Naro</i> fashion show	<i>Precari Atesia</i> strikes
Territorial level	Transnational and National (Milan)	National (Rome)	National (Rome)	Local (Milan)	Local (Rome)
Labour Market Sector	Cross-sector	Cross-sector	Higher Public Education	Fashion and Communication	Call-Centre
Activist Groups Coalition	Transnational social movement coalition	National social movement coalition	National social movement coalition	One Activist group	One Activist group

I interviewed thirty–four activists selected as a result of their participation in the organization of at least one of the mobilizations investigated.¹³ I chose the interviewees according to snowballing or network sampling (Weiss 1994; Blaikie 2000). I thus constructed a sample of interviewees which is not representative in a statistical way, but that covers a broad range of activist groups and provides a tentative picture of those who actively organized protests against precarity.¹⁴ I completed the interview sample of activists involved in the cycle of protest against precarity with four semi-structured interviews with journalists: three journalists employed by the sympathetic media *il manifesto* and one journalist employed in the sympathetic media *Liberazione*.¹⁵ I also collected more than 100 social movement documents and a sample of 200 media texts related to five mobilizations under investigation.

I employed the three data sets (semi-structured interviews; social movement documents; media texts) to reconstruct activist media practices and some dimensions linked to collective identification processes. In the case of semi-structured interviews, which were the central data set, this was achieved in a systematic manner through Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDA), a tool that proved powerful in analyzing this data set according to the grounded theory research strategy (Muhr and Friese 2004). In a nutshell, the data analysis revolved around the coding process, made up of three steps. The first consisted of a rough pre-coding of interview transcripts in which I looked for general macro-areas related to specific sensitizing concepts. Then, as a second step, I relied on open-coding

¹³ Activists I interviewed, therefore, reproduced the point of view of those activist groups that more actively participated to the organization of mobilizations. For this reason, the results presented in this dissertation mostly concern the specific point of view of specific minorities of activists within social movements and not the more general point of view of more loosely committed protest participants.

¹⁴ Twenty two of the interviewees were men and nine women. Detailed information about socio-demographic characteristics of the sample are available under request.

¹⁵ I named sympathetic media those media outlets that occupy an intermediate position in the ideal continuum running from mainstream, profit-oriented media to alternative, non-profit media, a separate place is occupied by those media outlets which either sprung from past cycles of mobilization or position themselves within the radical left-wing arena but are not directly managed by social and political actors involved in social movements. The concept of sympathetic media should be intended as a sensitizing concept emerging from the analysis (Mattoni 2009).

within each general label in order to create more specific sub-categories. Finally, I compared the codes obtained according to each protest event so as to discover similarities and differences within mobilizations against precarity. I applied the same analytical process, though manually, to social movement documents and media texts.

Activist media practices

The central dimension of activist media practices emerging during the data analysis was what I name *media interaction* according to which activists interact with objects and, in particular, with a variety of media technologies. In certain cases, these interactions follow a simple path, in that activists interact with one media technology at a time. Most of the time, however, activists develop more complex interactions involving different media technologies. During the data analysis I found plenty of examples in which more than one media technology was used. One relevant example was, for instance, the Euro Mayday Parade's live broadcasts at the transnational level, in which one Italian activist based in Milan combined interactions by mobile phone, website, irc chat channels and the radio in order to interview another activist participating in the parade in Leon, Spain. As other scholars have noted when analyzing anti-war movements in the U.K., it is exactly when "connecting multiple technologies into relatively novel communication structures", as also happened in the example recalled above, that activists explore "further horizons of technology use" in social movements (Gillan, Pickerill et al. 2008, 150-151).

Apart from the relevant role of interactions with media technologies, activists also interacted with different types of media texts circulating in the media environment and continuously channelled in a variety of communication flows. The most relevant example, found in the whole set of mobilizations against precarity, is the use of mainstream and sympathetic media texts that are transferred from the press to the web when activists upload them onto alternative media outlets such as Indymedia Italy. However, I also showed that the opposite took place, especially with regard to iconic media texts created in the context of the Euro Mayday Parade, such as the patron saint of all precarious workers, *San Precario*.¹⁶ When such interactions crossing different layers of the media environment occur, objects are re-contextualized and become something other than their original versions. Due to these interactions, the media environment itself is temporarily reshaped, since boundaries between mainstream and alternative media outlets are blurred as a result of this travelling of objects through different layers of the media environment. To put it in other words, interactions between objects and subjects in complex media environments change both the objects in point and the media environment in its entirety.

¹⁶ While studying anti-war movements in the UK and at the transnational level, Gillan, Pickerill and Webster also highlighted the existence of two information flows: from established media to anti-war movement activists and from anti-war movement activists to mainstream media. According to the authors and in line with my own findings, the former information flow is more frequent than the latter.

Another type of interaction that occurred during the mobilizations against precarity mainly involved subjects, namely journalists and activists. Most of the time, these interactions happened in face-to-face settings that activist groups had created for the purpose. Here again, the dissertation unearthed several examples of such interactions, how they were prepared and actually occurred. Different forms of press conferences, for instance, took place, oscillating from the adaptation to the reinvention of this form of routinized interaction between journalists and news sources, in this case activist groups. Objects, from more official press releases to less formal leaflets, were also a part of such interactions, expressing the collective voice of social and political actors mobilized against precarity. In some cases, the mediation of objects was greatly important according to activists. The example of activists involved in distributing a cd-rom with the Global Project brand containing links to the Global Project website is a good example of this. In other cases, activists tended instead to use media technologies and the media texts created through them as substitutes for face-to-face interactions with journalists, for instance by publishing press releases and leaflets related to protest events in alternative media outlets, which was considered a way of communicating with different audiences – including journalists - at the same time. Interactions with journalists, therefore, rested on a complex network of relations among subjects (activists and journalists), objects (cd-roms, pieces of paper, web pages). These networks of relations developed across different media technologies and revolved around different media texts. As such, interactions with the large variety of objects and subjects operating within and through the media environment often crossed the inner boundaries among mainstream, sympathetic and alternative media outlets.

Having considered media interaction as the main dimension of activist media practices, the analysis made it clear that *media representation* and *media perception* were important as well. The former dimension, media representation, is related to the degree of recognition granted to a mobilization in the media environment and to some extent integrates with collective identification processes enacted in social movement processes. The analysis showed that different dynamics of recognition were at work in the media environment or, more specifically, in media texts circulating within the media environment. Far from being isolated from one another, these media texts created flows of communication that crossed different layers of the media environment, although some correlations between certain types of media outlets and certain types of dynamics of recognition were more stable than others. Through the analysis of the latter dimension, media perception, I illustrated that activists were well aware of such dynamics of recognition: they developed specific knowledge about the media environment in its entirety and showed a high degree of media literacy when approaching media texts related to mobilizations. They decoded and deconstructed these texts both individually and collectively, producing an imagined map of the media environment in which media outlets were seen more as social (and often political) actors than spaces in which to engage in public debate with their opponents, allies

and potential supporters. The production of perceptions and knowledge about the media environment as a whole was important because this sustained, to some extent, media interactions. The main point here is that such knowledge encompasses the media environment as a whole: while activists certainly made differences between alternative and mainstream media outlets, for example, they also developed a sort of holistic idea of the media environment based on diversified yet homogeneous knowledge related to different types of media outlets, technologies and texts. In other words, media literacy here does not only denote the ability to read and understand mainstream media texts, but also that of reading and understanding the whole range of interactions in which they are embedded, namely the media environment in all its complexity.

A tentative model of activist media practices, therefore, should put media representation, media perception and media interactions into relation. As I already suggested, interactions among objects and subjects are the founding elements of the media environment. Without being exhaustive, objects that might contain different media texts resulting from different media technologies could be: pieces of paper, web pages, irc channels, or laptops. The use of such media technologies, in turn, produces particular objects which are media texts. These may circulate as they were created or they might be transformed through the recursive use of such technologies. From a different perspective, media texts can be seen as “artifacts” resulting from activist media practices which “usually intentionally, but sometimes unintentionally become available as the foci and/or the raw materials for subsequent performances. Although embodied in concrete form, artifacts are no less than the original performances that created them and which they often represent (Johnston 2009, 15). As for subjects, in the particular case of mobilizations against precarity I focused on two types of subjects, activists and journalists, although I am aware that many other subjects may also interact in the media environment, such as protest participants, bystanders and allies.

The media environment, therefore, resembles a network whose nodes are not homogeneous, in that they include both subjects and objects, and are made up of clusters of more stable interactions and clusters of less stable interactions. The latter contribute to the fluidity and dynamicity of the media environment, while the former sustain more routinized sets of interactions focusing on specific layers of the media environment. In such a model, of course, each subject carries its own perception of the media environment and, at a more sophisticated level, a certain amount of knowledge. Though in this dissertation I have mostly discussed knowledge with regard to activists, it is of no doubt that journalists also have their own knowledge and perceptions related both to social movements and the media environment. In the interviews with sympathetic journalists, for instance, it was evident that the same subject(activist)-subject(journalist) interaction was also performed and evaluated from different perceptions related to the “other” in the interaction. Apart from media technologies, media texts also circulate in the media environment which, once created through various subject-object-subject

interactions, remain in the media environment ready to enter into new, transforming interactions. Just as subjects carry and carry out their perceptions and knowledge related to the media environment, media texts carry and carry out their representations and recognition of mobilizations against precarity in the case studies at stake. It is clear, therefore, that simple patterns of interaction, like the following subject(activist)-object(media technology)-subject(journalist)-object(media technology)-object(media text), are embedded in media representations and perceptions.

Finally, on a long term basis and taking into consideration more experienced activists, such as those interviewed for the empirical research, it is possible to think of activist media practices as chains of media interactions-representation-perceptions-interactions situated in time and space. This was evident when I reconstructed how activists elaborated their knowledge about the media environment: activists' experience in previous cycles of protests formed the basis for further knowledge of the media environment which was then used in other types of mobilizations. That said, it is also true that the knowledge activists elaborate from their previous experiences is just as dynamic as the media environment itself. Adopting a rather pragmatic stance, for instance, they may decide to interact with relatively new media outlets such as mainstream free press instead of devoting time to constructing and/or reinforcing relations with mainstream and sympathetic media outlets. This is a clear example of creative and pragmatic adaptation, not to the mainstream media as such, but to the broader and quickly occurring transformations of the media environment as a whole. In this regard, the analysis showed the existence of a tension between a sort of "common sense" related to the media environment and direct experience of the media environment. This was particularly evident in the case of sympathetic media: some activists simply took it for granted that this type of media outlet would support mobilizations against precarity and (progressive) social movements; others regarded sympathetic media as problematic potential allies with their own specific political agendas that ignore some others. On the whole, activist media practices towards sympathetic media developed consistently with this tension. Like other social practices, therefore, activist media practices also rest on a dialectic relation with knowledge. On the one hand, knowledge implies a "set of internalized social rules and norms" (Savolainen 2008, 29), in this case related to the media environment as a whole and to the variety of objects and subjects which populate that environment. On the other hand, knowledge rests on actual experiences of and in the media environment, such as difficult interactions between sympathetic journalists and activists. As a result, "these rules and norms are not stable; they may undergo changes, due to their reinterpretation, as the actor pursues everyday projects" (Savolainen 2008, 29-30). It is worth observing that such a tension between the "already supposed" and the "to be known" of the media environment is socialized into activists in social movement settings, where activist media practices are often collectively discussed and decided.

To conclude, in dealing with activist media practices, this dissertation may also be linked to the broader theoretical tradition of the sociology of practice, which seems particularly relevant to understand the issue in hand.¹⁷ Activist media practices, indeed, are first of all a particular type of social practices which could be defined as the “routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood” (Reckwitz 2002, 250). The same author argues that although many social practices have a routinized form, social actors may also perform social practices in a creative way, either by redefining existing social practices or by inventing new ones. Drawing on this general definition of social practice and on the analysis of activist media practices taking place in mobilizations against precarity, the concept of activist media practices can be generally defined as 1) both routinized and creative social practices that; 2) include interactions with objects (such as mobile phones, laptops, pieces of paper) and subjects (such as journalists, public relations managers, other activists); 3) draw on how certain things (such as media texts and media technologies) are described or, better, perceived and; 4) on how the world, in this case the media environment, is understood and known.

Communication repertoire

Both individual activists and activist groups chose and then performed different types of activist media practices, which varied according to different combinations of media representations, media perceptions and media interactions. They chose from among a broader set of potential activist media practices which they know how to perform. The literature on social movements includes a similar concept related to contentious performances. Some scholars, indeed, speak about the existence of a specific “repertoire of action” (Tilly 1978), “contentious repertoire” or “contentious performance” (McAdam, Tarrow et al. 2001; Tilly and Tarrow 2007). These authors define the latter as “relatively familiar and standardized ways in which one set of political actors makes collective claims on some other set of political actors”(Tilly and Tarrow 2007, 11), and the former as “arrays of contentious performances that are currently known and available within some set of political actors” (11).

What I propose here is the concept of the communication repertoire as emerges from the empirical research on mobilizations against precarity.¹⁸ I ground this concept, therefore, on the analysis of activist media practices and I assume that when social and political actors mobilize against a certain issue they rely on both contentious and communication repertoires. While the former is explicitly

¹⁷ According to Reckwitz (2002), theories of practice are inserted in the broader tradition of culturalist theories, which aim at “explaining and understanding actions by reconstructing the symbolic structures of knowledge which enable and constrain the agents to interpret the world according to certain forms, and to behave in corresponding ways” (Reckwitz 2002, 245-246). Theories of practice, in particular, look at social realities, taking into consideration social practices as the basic unit of analysis, and push researchers “to regard agents as carriers of routinized, intersubjective complexes of bodily movements, of forms of interpreting, knowing how and wanting and of the usage of things.” (Reckwitz 2002, 259).

¹⁸ Teune also presents a preliminary definition of communication repertoire (2009). Other authors, moreover, updated the concept of ‘contentious repertoire’ to the online env

focused on forms of collective action, the latter is related to forms of communication. Similarly to the conceptualization of the contentious repertoire and the contentious performance, it is possible here to conceive of the communication repertoire as a combination of activist media practices that are, in turn, made up by precise combinations of media representations, media perceptions and media interactions. Like the contentious repertoire, communication repertoires also exist only in the realm of possibility: it is difficult to empirically assess the whole range of activist media practices contained in a particular communication repertoire. It is possible to look at which types of activist media practices are at work in a certain type of mobilization and, from there, to deduce the existence of a certain communication repertoire, also based on the knowledge activists have of the media environment. Activist media practices are, therefore, the concrete expression of the broader communication repertoire, here tentatively defined as the entire set of media practices that an activist group might conceive as possible and then develop in a particular protest context and according to different goals, amongst which the most general are communication within the social movement *milieu*, and communication outside the social movement *milieu*. Both of the latter contain objectives that are in turn more specific. For instance, the latter may include activist media practices oriented towards mainstream media with the aim of becoming visible to broader audiences, including potential allies and opponents, while the former may comprise activist media practices oriented towards independent media, with the aim of establishing coordination among various activist groups participating in the same protest event. Two goals, however, does not mean that two different communication repertoires are at work. Rather, it means that activist media practices guided by different logics, such as informing potential supporters or attracting mainstream media attention, belong to the same communication repertoire. Departing from such a concept allow us to consider the actual occurrence of one, specific type of activist media practice as part of the same broader set of practices towards the media environment as a whole, that is the communication repertoire.

Drawing on the empirical research, it is possible to think of the communication repertoire as a potential set of activist media practices developed around the same style of communication. The *Serpica Naro* fashion show, for instance, was based on a communication repertoire that revolved around creative activist media practices aiming at subverting existing codes of communication both within the social movement milieu and in the broader media environment. Though different in many respects, activist media practices developed in the context of the *Serpica Naro* fashion show all held the subversion of specific codes in common. The Chainworkers Crew thus implicitly evoked a similar set of activist media practices that had already been employed in other protest contexts. As I stressed earlier, this reference was to the communication guerrilla tradition, which in turn rests on situationism. This example suggests two other concerns when defining the concept of the communication repertoire. Similarly to the contentious repertoire, the communication repertoire may also change slowly over time:

though situational, therefore, it seems to rely on previous cycles of protest in which certain activist media practices emerged and then stabilized in the collective memory. This leads to the second concern, linked to the question of to whom does the communication repertoire belong? Authors employing the concept of contentious repertoire affirm that this is linked to the type of political contention at stake. The most obvious example, here, are political conflicts between workers and employers (Tilly and Tarrow 2007), as already explained earlier when speaking about the contentious performances used during mobilizations against precarity (§ 3.3.2). When they mobilize, workers know that they can employ a certain set of contentious performances in order to target their bosses through contentious collective actions: strikes and pickets are two well-known and widely used contentious performances that characterize this specific type of contentious repertoire. In the case of the communication repertoire, however, it is not so much to the type of political conflict as the type of political culture to which activist groups implicitly or explicitly refer that appears to shape the communication repertoire. Indeed, it was not by chance that the Chainworkers Crew played ironically with a communication repertoire which, in their opinion, represented the cliché of the stereotyped activist evoking the so-called post-autonomist tradition in mainstream media outlets.

While the concept of the communication repertoire is useful for relating different activist media practices to one another, it is certainly true that the boundaries of this concept are fuzzy at the empirical level, since it may overlap with the contentious repertoire concept already introduced above. It is true, indeed, that contentious performances contain strong communicative elements that aim at opening channels of communication with a variety of audiences and publics (Alexander 2006; Johnston 2009). As such, the choice of a certain contentious performance already evokes the existence of a certain communication repertoire. According to many of the activists I interviewed, indeed, the most important sites for communication between activists and potential publics were those where contentious performances occurred, such as the occupation of *La Sapienza* University during the mobilizations against the *Ddl Moratti* in 2005. In my opinion, however, it is worth separating the two concepts for analytical reasons, as while it is true that many contentious performances can be seen as communicative tools that activists consciously employ, the contrary is not equally true. Many activist media practices are not contentious performances. During contentious performances, moreover, activist media practices can develop, but many activist media practices exclude the development of contentious performances. It is possible to think of the two repertoires as developing in parallel during social movement processes, with some contact and reciprocal influence. The choice of a specific contentious performance also implies certain activist media practices and these, in turn, also affect the contentious performance itself. One example of this is one of the two *Reddito per Tutti** direct actions, which took place in a Panorama mall during the morning. Activist groups organizing the direct action decided to stress its communicative nature by inviting journalists. Journalists, therefore, and

interactions with them, were conceived as a part of the contentious performance which was supposed to prevent misleading representations of what activists planned to do in the supermarket, that is ask for a collective and symbolic discount on the prices of the goods sold in the supermarket. Another example in which contentious and communication repertoires crossed was the organization of press conferences after mainstream media represented the demonstration against the *Ddl Moratti* in a misleading and negative way, highlighting the (isolated and brief) clashes between a small group of protestors and the police at the very end of the day. There, the need to maintain the definition of the contentious performance at the public level pushed activist groups to develop a specific type of activist media practice, guided by a logic of adaptation.

Conclusions

This paper introduces two relevant concepts to understand how activist groups involved in social movements activities interact with and in complex media environments. Unlike the majority of the studies in this field, the paper rests on an empirical research which put at the centre social and political actors instead of media outlets and technologies. Assuming this perspective, in fact, seemed to be useful to grasp the different ways in which the media are used in the context of politically oriented activities, like mobilizations, by citizens usually excluded from the journalistic profession. While being empirically grounded, this paper also operates at the conceptual level in that it suggests that considering activist media practices as a whole, instead of investigating only one aspect of them at a time, can reveal how diverse media outlets and technologies are embedded in specific fields of societies and, from a micro-perspective, on the lives of those citizens involved in grassroots politics.

Drawing on the concept of “contentious repertoire”, this paper also claims that unconventional political actors such as grassroots activist groups rely on specific communication repertoires encompassing the whole spectrum of media outlets and technologies available in a given moment in space and time. Despite a certain activist group develop different types of activist media practices, it is indeed possible to recognize a common communication style characterizing them. To look at how unconventional political actors communicate within and outside their milieu from the perspective of their communication repertoire it is important to understand the complexity of current media environment, the intertwining of different media practices and the challenges to (mainstream) media power. It is a first step towards our understanding of how social movements act in media saturated societies and with what consequences.

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