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New forms of political communication in Italy: “Tocca a noi” MTV’s campaign for young people participation to political life¹

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1. Introduction²

On November 18th 2008 Mtv Italia launched the campaign “Tocca a noi! Le cose non vanno cambiamole ora” (It's up to us! Let's change things now) to promote political activation and participation among young Italians.

The initiative, which represents a case of direct political participation, is aimed at processing, writing and supporting a bill on an issue selected by Mtv’s audience. Mtv’s spectators participate using the blog and the forum on the web page devoted to the campaign, www.mtv.it/toccano.

The bill will be presented to the Parliament to be approved. Mtv Italia described “Tocca a noi” as «*Un esercizio di Democrazia diretta e di E-*

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Democracy per aiutare i giovani a far sentire la loro voce, partecipare e costruire in prima persona il loro futuro»³ (“An exercise of direct democracy and e-democracy to help young people to making their voice heard, to participate and to build their future themselves”).

“Tocca a noi” uses the power of television influence (it uses both MTV’s free channel and satellite channels) together with the possibility of mobilization encouraged by the Internet. Thus, the campaign seems to be an interesting case study on agenda building because it aims is to influence the political agenda: *«So, whether we study television producers, interest group activists, or actions by U.S. senators, the process of influence, competition, and negotiation as carried out by issue proponents is a dynamic driving the agenda-setting process. [...] A better under standing of the agenda-setting process lies at the intersection of mass communication research and political science. Agenda setting can directly affect policy»* (Dearing and Rogers, 1996: 4).

2. The event

From November 18th 2008 the television channel Mtv Italia launched the campaign “*Tocca a noi. Le cose non vanno cambiamole ora*”, an initiative planned and developed only in Italy:

[“Tocca a noi”] Is the result of a ten years work of Mtv Italia on social campaigns... [...] The main difference [...] is that through “Tocca a noi” we ask them to act directly. [...] The main aim of “Tocca a noi” is to build with youngsters a path of civic education and participation one year long trough which they can discover how they can actively participate to the political and social change in our country⁴.

“Tocca a noi” is thus not the first social campaign developed by Mtv but it is the first one that explicitly asks its spectators to activate and participate. Moreover, the initiative represents the development of an other event organised by Mtv Italia: on April 14th 2008 (the latest Italian political

³ Press release from www.mtv.it/toccano

⁴ Answers given by email by Francesca Ulivi, *Head of News, Factual and Pro-Social* di Mtv Italia S.r.l.. Translation from Italian made by the author.

elections run on the 14th and the 15th of April 2008), the “Election day” was organised, during which the channel’s programming was devoted to awaken the audience to political election. On this day, thanks to the Mtv’s web site, it was possible to spectators to ask specific questions to the future Presidente del Consiglio (Prime Minister) using emails and sms. The “Election day” had a website⁵. The portal was rich of information and news and had a playful and interactive approach to elections: there was a page hosting all the videos of the short civic lessons given by the vjs of Mtv; in the section “Fai sentire la tua voce” (Make your voice heard) there was a blog that gave information about the initiatives “on the field” to awaken and to involve young people to the importance of political elections, and a forum to discuss about politics and participation. There was also a page with videos of youngsters asking questions to politicians. Furthermore, the section “Tutto quello che devi sapere” (All that you have to know) contained information about how to vote and a glossary with all the words that are in a way linked to politics (as ‘welfare’ and ‘vote of confidence’).

«“Tocca a noi” originated after the “Election Day” not to leave youngsters’ questions without answers. [...] Work, school, university, environment, better possibility to access to politics: these were the themes that reached the biggest number of questions of young Italian people to Italian institutions. From this experience and from the long activity that links us to young people arose the idea of “Tocca a noi. Le cose non vanno, cambiamole ora”. That is to say using the tools of our Constitution to be able to present to our Parliament a bill proposed by the people and activate our audience⁶.»

“Tocca a noi” consists of many different phases. During the first one, that took place from November 2008 to January 2009, 13 short civic lessons by all MTV Italia’s vjs have been broadcasted on all Mtv Italia’s television channels, both free and satellite: they gave information about the mechanisms that rule democratic life and they invite people to get informed. Each lesson ended inviting to visit the web site www.mtv.it/toccanoit, that has been created ad hoc to follow all the activities connected to the initiative.

⁵ The home page is still visible at http://www.mtv.it/speciali/index.asp?speciale=elezioni&from=spot_tv

⁶ Francesca Ulivi. Translation from Italian made by the author.

The importance of the Internet is stressed by Francesca Ulivi:

«The aim of everything that is broadcasted is always to link to the web site [...]»⁷.

From December 2008 to January 2009 the web site's users could choose on which of the 4 pre-proposed themes ('access to politics for young people', 'environment', 'work', 'school and university') would be the subject of the bill. During this period, over 290 thousand votes have been expressed on the Mtv's web site and the theme 'school and university' won with a little more than 109 thousand votes (37% of the total votes)⁸.

It is interesting to note that 'school and university' was the most voted issue because in the same period of the voting in Italy there were a lot of manifestations of students protesting against the reform of school and university proposed by the Government and these protests had great visibility. Thus, we may suppose the existence of a link between the news in that period and the final result in the Mtv's spectators voting.

In the second phase – in Spring 2009 – three Universities were chosen (the Faculty of Law of the University of Cagliari, the School of Specialization in Studies on the Public Administration –Spisa- of the University of Bologna and the Center for Research inter-universities for services of public utility – Crisp - of the University of Milano Bicocca) to each writing a bill on the same subject, with differences following the specificity of each institute.

After the preparation of the three bills the third phase began: from the 13th of June to the 3rd of July 2009, the Mtv's web site users were asked to vote the bill they preferred. They could also leave comments and suggestions to retouch the bills. At the end of this period there were more than 1 million 300 thousand votes: 57% to Spisa of Bologna, 41% to the Faculty of Law of the University of Cagliari and 3% to the Crisp of the University of Milano Bicocca.

The main actor of the fourth phase was the University "author" of the winning bill. In fact, during the Summer, the University was responsible

⁷ Translation from Italian made by the author.

⁸ The second most voted theme has been 'work' (25%), followed by 'environment' (22%) and 'access to politics' (15%).

for working out a definitive version of the bill, taking into consideration the voters' suggestions on the forum of www.mtv.it/toccanoit. The Promoting Committee of the bill was composed of students from the University of Bologna who participated in writing the law, young people supporting the initiative and artists and people working for Mtv Italia.

The fifth phase started the 7th of September 2009 and had a maximum duration of six months. During this period of time, 50 thousand signatures were collected, following the requirement of the article 71 of the Italian Constitution regarding the presentation of a bill to the Parliament. Signatures were collected both during the events organized all around Italy by Mtv (such as the "Mtv Day" concert that took place in Genova the 12th of September 2009 and "Trl on tour") and using volunteers all over the country: on www.mtv.it/toccanoit is always showed where and when is possible to sign

After the presentation of the bill to the Parliament, Mtv Italia will follow the political discussion (sixth phase).

Some Italian music celebrities are involved in the campaign. Jovanotti, a famous Italian singer, participated to a meeting to awaken young people's attention to this initiative (on February 2009, at the Marconi high school in Milan). J.Ax and Marracash, two Italian singers, wrote the song "Tocca a noi", performed also by other Italian artists as Giusy Ferreri and Le Vibrazioni, through which the aim of the campaign is showed: the song has also a video that is broadcasted by Mtv Italia from June 12th 2009.

3. Preliminary remarks

Before developing our analysis of the campaign "Tocca a noi" it seems relevant to stress some elements that could be useful for a better understanding of the specific media environment. The first one is the particular case of Mtv Italia, a TV channel that has a well defined audience of people from 12 to 35 years old⁹. Thus, "Tocca a noi" addresses an audience that has a well defined way of using media. The analysis made

⁹ Data given by Francesca Ulivi.

by Censis (an Italian institute for statistics) in its 42° *Rapporto annuale sulla situazione sociale del Paese* (42th Annual report on the social situation of Italy, 2008: 521) shows that, among people from 14 to 29 years old, 83% uses the internet one or two times a week, while 73,8% uses it at least three times a week. There is a growing number of young people who does not watch “traditional” television, since 87,9% of them watched it in 2007 while in 2003 they were 94,9%. At the same time, the audience of satellite television is growing (from 25,2% in 2003 to 36,9% in 2007 among young Italians). The importance of this preliminary annotation is twofold, since it shows the specificity of the author promoting the campaign and stresses the peculiarity of a commercial subject promoting this kind of initiative. That is why “Tocca a noi” can be also considered an example of what Beck called “sub-politics”, since «*On the one hand, a political vacuity of the institutions is evolving and, on the other hand, a non-institutional renaissance of politics*» (1997:98).

The second aspect that is important to underline is that the four themes (‘access to politics by young people’, ‘environment’, ‘work’, ‘school and university’) that have been voted to become the subject of the bill have been chosen by an audience that is well-defined by age and by the use of free time as the one of Mtv. That is why the issues proposed represent the concerns of an auto-selected part of a precise group of people.

These two aspects we stressed are important because, on the one hand, they limit the number of people who participate to the initiative, which itself seems to be “self sufficient” since it has been created and developed by Mtv Italia starting from its audience and for its own audience. On the other hand, they underline the fact that the campaign has been organized to take advantage of a set of tools to contact the young public of Mtv: “traditional” television, satellite channels, the internet, events on field. That is why we think that “Tocca a noi” is an interesting case study because it could represent an example of a new approach to political communication, in general, and particularly to agenda setting.

4. A new kind of political communication?

The Mtv Italia's initiative puts together the use of a traditional medium (television), the use of a new medium (the internet) and a "classic" tool of participation (signature collection): in this panorama, the internet is the *trait d'union* between television and the field and it is also the heart of the entire campaign. That is why "Tocca a noi" seems to be strongly addressed to 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001), who are the main part of Mtv's audience.

Thus, "Tocca a noi" is an example of the bidirectional communication fluxes obtained thanks to new media (Pittèri, 2007: 128) but it shows also how the integration between new technologies and ICTs allow the realization of brand new forms of communication (Bentivegna, 2003: 33).

The Mtv Italia's initiative, even if it is more a way to awaken young people's attention to politics than to promote the specific theme sustained by the campaign ('school and university'), has some of the characteristics of the 'third phase of political communication' as defined by Blumler and Kavanagh (1999). These two authors explain that contemporary political communication is strongly different from that of the previous ages thanks to the great media abundance. In fact, it makes possible a diversification of contents and improves the possibility of communicating to precise targets¹⁰.

"Tocca a noi" perfectly fits with Blumler and Kavanagh's analysis: the channel has a specific and well defined audience thus it has the opportunity of strongly targeting its programming and, in particular, the campaign is a good way to interact with its audience. It is an innovative way to reach a specific target of people and "to communicate politics" and to awaken their attention on the importance of participation to political life: *«What seems to matter most when it comes to internalizing political*

¹⁰ «In the abundance of Age3, however, there are more channels, chances, and incentive to tailor political communication to particular identities, conditions, and tastes. This reduces the size of the mass audience, both generally and for news. It facilitates the diversification of political communication forms (i.e., mass mediated vs. computerized; "old" vs. "new" political journalism; nationwide vs. subcultural discourse). It creates opening for previously excluded voices to express their views and perhaps even be noticed by mainstream outlets. It creates opportunities for would-be persuaders to seek more efficient impact by selectively focusing their communications on preferred population sectors» (Blumler e Kavanagh, 1999: 221-222).

messages is their content and framing and their manner of presentation and message interaction with the existing beliefs, attitudes, and opinions of various audience members» (Graber and Smith, 2005: 490).

The campaign represents also an example of the integration between on line and off line participation that some authors identified as an important tool to better involving youngsters in political participation: *«when young people's action is looked for, rather than focusing on what they are not doing, it becomes clear that even groups of young people traditionally assumed not be active social agents are in fact demonstrating forms of political participation and action»* (Skelton and Valentine, 2003, in Rheingold, 2008: 98).

Furthermore, we affirm that "Tocca a noi", thanks to the medium by which it is promoted, contains some particular characteristics of the centrifugal diversification as defined by Blumler and Kavanagh (1999:221), in particular '*Readier pursuit of identity politics*' and '*Multiplication of political agendas*'. Mtv Italia's campaign also has a lot of the elements classified by the two authors among those considered powerful to influence audience reception of politics (1999: 223). Particularly '*Inadvertency*'¹¹ and '*Fragmentation*'¹² – because it is a television channel that broadcasts lessons of civics and that promote political activation and participation among its audience – but also '*Redundancy*'¹³ e '*Flexibility*'¹⁴, since the initiative is developed using different communication tools: television (both free and via satellite), the old medium that constantly refers to the internet, the new medium that is fundamental in every phase of the campaign. It is also important to stress the fact that the signature collection is promoted trough Mtv Italia's web site, where it was also possible to participate as volunteer to collect signatures on the field.

¹¹ «[...] *since relevant material can crop up anywhere at any time and not always in genres or formats that are designed as 'political'*» (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999: 223).

¹² «[...] *since political communication pops up as bits and pieces more often in more outlets of more diverse kinds and contexts*» (ibidem: 224).

¹³ «[...] *as the same message is carried in a multiplicity of outlets, repetition is built in*» (ivi).

¹⁴ «[...] *for abundance multiplies and diversifies the possibilities of patronage across a very wide range of media and information sources, enabling some people to be "specialists", spending extensive amount of their time consuming favourite materials, and others to be "eclectics", sampling broader varieties of media fare*» (ivi).

5. The problem of the agenda

The agenda setting theory refers to the continuous competition among different issues to obtain attention from media, public and politicians (Marini, 2006; Dearing and Rogers, 1996). This is linked to the idea of agenda building, that refers to the way society selects some issues to propose them to institutions so that they could discuss them and take decisions (Marini, 2006: 83).

We think that “Tocca a noi” is a case study of agenda setting, in general, and of agenda building, in particular, since it has been created as a possible example of bottom up democracy.

First of all it is important to stress the way the initiative is far from the treble scheme of agendas that constitutes the process of agenda setting, since it gets into perspective the concept of public agenda and it introduces a brand new element, the ‘personal agenda’.

The Mtv’s campaign, on a hand, limits the public agenda it focuses, that is the agenda of its audience, on the other hand it gives great importance to its audience’s ‘personal agendas’ that become its basis and its *raison d’être*.

“Tocca a noi” is used by Mtv Italia to make its audience’s concerns heard: the issue ‘school and university’ has been the most voted among the four themes suggested as more relevant, so to say that they were on the top of each youngster’s personal agendas. Thus, new media have been used to take on the top of Mtv Italia’s public agenda the issue on the top of its audience’s agenda. The issue ‘school and university’ represents the result of the sum of the personal agendas of people who watch the Mtv Italia’s television channels and who go on its web site: that is why it is possible to say that Mtv Italia carries on one of the mass media functions as described by Lippmann (Takeshita, 1997: 15) since it is supposed to be the link between the images in its audience’s head and the world outside.

The issue ‘school and university’ has become the concern promoted by “Tocca a noi” and, thanks to the Mtv Italia’s organization, it has become the issue reflected by the channel to the public arena to enhance the participation of its audience. In this way it has been possible to start a

virtuous circle to activate young people to put the bill (and the concern) on the political agenda: «*Attention to an issue, whether by media personnel, members of the public, or policymakers, represents power by some individuals or organizations to influence the decision process.*» (Dearing and Rogers, 1996:3).

That is why we think that it is a case of agenda building that uses in an original way the possibilities of Mtv.

The campaign “Tocca a noi” puts together the power of television influence with the power of mobilization promoted by the internet becoming an action to influence the political agenda.

Thus, the initiative is a pseudo event that sums different forms of communication and different symbols that show the reasons of the proposal of and to the audience but that also communicate the image of the promoter (Marini and Minchielli, 2005).

The pseudo-event we analyzed is also particular because its promoter is also the medium through which it is broadcasted.

As we know, pseudo-events can be successful when they obtain a usual access to media: power, authority and reputation are fundamental. In this case, in a way “Tocca a noi” has access to an important “niche” of media, the one of media for young people, and it already has legitimacy in this “niche”. In the other way, since a strong and reliable subject as Mtv Italia promotes the campaign, it has a strong advantage in obtaining access to the media arena.

“Tocca a noi” is justified and gain legitimacy thanks to the fact that represents Mtv’s audience’s opinion thus it constitutes a marketing tool for the television channel because it can strengthen its image of “socially active” and “socially responsible” subject both in front of its audience and in front of the “external” audience.

“*Tocca a noi*” can thus be seen as a good example of ‘external initiative’ (Marini, 2006) to promote an issue: in fact, the idea comes from outside the institutions and tries to obtain consensus and participation to its concern so to create a group of supporters. In this case, the campaign has been organized for sustaining a concern that in a way can be considered the result of an ‘internal initiative’ (*ibidem*) of Mtv Italia, since it has been

chosen by the channel's audience among four issues proposed by the same audience. It is possible to say that the campaign we are analysing has a double initiative. Firstly it has an 'internal initiative' run by voters who promoted one issue out of the four pre-proposed by the audience, in April 2008. Secondly, it has an 'external initiative' that is carried on by Mtv Italia and its audience from September 2009.

Analysing "Tocca a noi" we have to consider also the problem of legitimacy. Following the scheme proposed by studies about agenda building, the problem of obtaining legitimacy in the media arena is much more important than gaining it in "niche" arenas (Marini and Minchielli, 2005). Even if we can say that Mtv Italia already has legitimacy in the niche of channels for youngsters, it is too early to evaluate the effects of the campaign "Tocca a noi" in the wider media arena and in the political agenda.

The question to be asked now is: do we enter a new era of political communication? However, in the specific context of the present case, one cannot answer this question unambiguously. Firstly, one has to take into account that 'Tocca a noi' is currently still going on. In this way, it is too early to already verify some clear consequences. Secondly, the present case seems to be departing from the more traditional and classical categories of political communication since the campaign's promoter represents political context that is not part of the traditional political field. It is necessary to wait until Spring 2010 to evaluate completely this initiative.

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