

# **Radical Communication and the 2009 G8 Summit in L'Aquila**

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(DRAFT: Please, do not quote)

## **Introduction**

In this paper I explore the communication emerging tactics that citizens committees and movements in L'Aquila, a center south Italian town, implemented during the Group of Eight (G8) summit, July 8-10, 2009. I describe these tactics as 360 Degrees communication, an illuminating case-study in 'citizens' media and post-disaster political machinations.<sup>i</sup> In this paper, I propose to look at L'Aquila's citizens committees' communication in its totality. My intent is to pay attention to the intersection among three main forms of communication: interpersonal communication; movements' relationship with mainstream media; and finally, citizens' use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Indeed, by looking at how these three aspects wave in and out of each other, we might develop a more organic representation of movements' emerging tactics and avoid the temptation of separating aspects of communication that are in fact not separable phenomena.

This study also challenges dominant notions that civic virtues and participation in organized parties and associations are necessary foundations for active political engagement. More specifically, it disputes a commonly accepted view according to which political life in the south of Italy is based on nepotism and on a subservient relationship between power elites and citizens (Putnam, 1993).

## Background

The Italian government had decided to move the location of the international meeting from *La Maddalena* (in Sardinia) to L'Aquila, after a massive earthquake a few months earlier had destroyed this medieval central Italian town and surrounding villages, leaving more than 300 people dead and approximately 80,000 homeless. Hosting such a meeting, might have meant global attention to the area and its plight. Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi had visited the region on many occasions since the quake, and had made the recovery phase a matter of personal pride and, obviously, political gain. He often proclaimed that the rebuilding of L'Aquila and its surrounding villages was going to be a new Italian miracle, an example of post-earthquake reconstruction for other nations to follow.

The Civil Protection Agency was the government organization in charge of emergency procedure and reconstruction, and it operated in complete autonomy from local administrations. Many residents resented the approach taken by the agency, especially the fact that no input from citizens was sought. Although the government prided itself for its efficient emergency response, its promises for a quick recovery were based on unrealistic expectations. Indeed, by the time the G8 summit began on 8<sup>th</sup> July, still tens of thousands of people were living in government-run tent cities, or in hotels and rentals scattered across the region.

## The Citizens' Organizations

In protest against the lack of transparency during the reconstruction phase, and lack of democratic participation, a few citizens organized themselves in movements and committees (there were 14 of them by July 2009), which joined in a network of movements (*la rete dei movimenti*). Their goals were to create networks of solidarity with other regions, nationally and internationally, for promoting a sustainable recovery, transparency in allocation of funds to construction companies, and ensure citizens' participation in all these efforts. Two of those

citizens' groups, the *Epicentro Solidale* (Solidarity Epicenter) movement and the 3 e 32 committee (3:32 a.m. was when the quake stroke on April 6, 2009), occupied a city park (the UNICEF park) soon after the quake where they decided to build, together, a Media Lab. Both organizations were born after the quake and their names reflected those origins. The first comprised more politically diverse and moderate activists; those in the Solidarity Epicenter were mostly from the far left.

### **The G8 Summit**

The decision to move the G8 summit to L'Aquila was welcome by those who thought that more international visibility might mean more attention, and possibly funds, to the region. However, critics considered this choice a masterful political move to achieve two main objectives: 1) Promote globally the media spectacle of a miraculous recovery; 2) hold the G8 summit in a place where the Global Justice Movement and NO-G8 movements could be kept under even closer surveillance than elsewhere. Indeed, control over means of communication and access to the town had already been put in place, while a red zone, closing off the entire downtown perimeter, made it impossible for local residents even to access their homes without firefighters escort.

With wrecked buildings everywhere, L'Aquila looked as if it had been under heavy aerial bombardment. With the continuous threat of more quakes, and army check points all over the red zone perimeter, very few demonstrators would have had the courage to infiltrate the maze of medieval streets and squares to carry out their protest. Although the local network of movements obtained a permit for the NO-G8 march, it was agreed that the route would go on for kilometers through wheat fields outside town and approach its medieval walls to the south only at the end.

The L'Aquila G8 summit was going to be a media spectacle and blot out the horrible memories of the previous Italy-run meeting in Genoa in 2001 (Juris, 2005).

### **Theoretical Framework**

For the activists, the conditions in which they found themselves represented an unrepeatable historical opportunity. They knew that their voices, rather than those of profit-seeking politicians and builders, could be decisive in developing ecologically sustainable reconstruction plans, aware of the importance of maintaining and creating public spaces, respectful of the geographic, artistic and historical patrimony of the region. For this, communication was crucial.

The movements' strategy was to seize the moment, to modify the structures of power "before the dust settles in" (Frezza, 2009) by taking advantage of what the earthquake had exposed. Centuries old government buildings and churches, as well as more recent dwellings, including the hospital and the University of L'Aquila's students dormitory, reduced to miserable rubles, served as a potent illustration of the vulnerability of power structures: of those institutions that should have protected the population with better preventive measures but did not, of those who should have ensured that anti-seismic building codes were observed but did not always do that.

After everything had been ripped off and torn apart, having a space to meet and re-connect filled a fundamental longing for normality. At the most fundamental level, L'Aquila's movements were in search for what Castells describes as a "new connectedness around shared, reconstructed identity" (Castells, 1996, 23): In fact, re-constructing people's identities was not even a choice, rather a necessity. Reconstruction was not only a matter of rebuilding dwellings but also public spaces: communication was essential to this project and radical communication

was necessary to promote a new kind of participatory grass root democracy, something that, perhaps, L'Aquila had never experienced before. In order to re-create social connections and elaborate new identities, not only was it necessary to counter national government's plans for top-down re-construction, it was also vital to oppose the media spectacle that represented a town whose citizens, according to Berlusconi, had accepted what the government was doing.

Indeed, the citizens' committees felt that mainstream media were failing to report what was really happening: in the words of an elderly tent camp resident: "reality is the complete opposite of what they show [on TV]" (in Puliafito, 2009). Although there were disagreement on how to deal with out of town demonstrators or the global media, or whether to participate—for example, some citizens' committees decided not to take part in the NO-G8 march because they did not share the same ideological or political concerns and, more fundamentally, because they feared that the march and the possible violence might have changed the focus from what mattered the most (reconstruction and democracy in L'Aquila), *la rete dei movimenti* decided to take the opportunity offered by the media exposure during the G8 to counter mainstream media representation of the town. They decided to use the global forum to highlight the discrepancy between what passed for reality on official channels and people's lived experience.

As such, the forms of media and communication that the citizens enacted can be defined as radical media (Downing, 1984; 2000): small scale media operations (a Media Lab, equipped with six computers, a printer, a scanner, a couple of walkie talkies, paper, markers, and fast speed internet connection, was the citizens' main media headquarter located in the UNICEF park), whose purpose was indeed "to suborn an oppressive status quo and propose defenses and alternatives" (Downing 2003, 342). Indeed, radical media's value is not assessed by easily quantifiable data, like audience share: nevertheless, historically they have been fundamental in

creating counter hegemonic public spheres and the momentum necessary to subvert the status quo (Downing, 2002, 216). Some examples of radical media in Italy are the anti-government press during *Il Risorgimento* movement for the country's unification in the mid-1800s, the anti fascist media of 1922-1945, and the free radio movements of the 1970s. Other, more recent examples of radical media include the work of media activists, including Italy's Independent Media Center (IMC Italia), which played a crucial role in reporting the brutality of Italian police against demonstrators during the G8 summit in Genoa, providing information that were not covered by mainstream media (Juris, 2005).

## Literature Review

Communication has always been a crucial element for promoting and improving social movements' organizational and mobilization strategies. Indeed, interpersonal, face to face communication has often been recognized as a vital element to promote social action. Scholars have investigated the relationship between social networks and participation in social movements in an attempt to understand whether and how networks might predict individuals' involvement in movements, and the role that information plays in this process as the "capacity of networks to create opportunities for participation" (Kitts quoted in Diani, 2004, 345). Even in an era of computer-mediated social networks, a shared identity, personal relationships, spatial proximity, and mutual trust, still represent "important facilitators of collective action" (Diani, 2004, 352). The power of those connectors to spur social and communication actions was palpable in L'Aquila, where the residents-turned-activists were moved by a thirst for re-establishing personal ties and re-creating lost public spaces.

In the words of a young activist, for them it was vital to find ways to break the 'semantic glass' (Alessandro, 2009) that had been thrown over the city since after the quake. In order to

disrupt it, interaction with mainstream media was necessary. Such interactions can be vital for social movements' communication strategies and indeed some attention has been devoted to exploring the fruitful relationships between social movements and mainstream media. Building from her own experience as a media and social activist, Charlotte Ryan has provided valuable insights for movements to develop a 'grounded strategy' of communication, where getting mainstream media coverage is considered one crucial part of a comprehensive plan to mobilize consent and reach out to a variety of publics (Ryan, 231).

In order to inform and mobilize, activists implement any tool at their disposal, including communication technologies (ICTs). Due to the rapid development of ICTs, this field of scholarship has grown considerably by focusing on how social movements are shaping emerging media, making use of the Internet to create informal networks, facilitating communication within the movements, re-enforcing face to face communication, and providing a space for information and perspectives that might, otherwise, receive scarce attention on mainstream media (de Donk, Loader, Nixon, and Rucht, 2004). Various scholars have explored the expanding possibilities for grass root democratic participation represented by the Indymedia network (Juris, 2005a; Pickard, 2006a and 2006b; Milioni, 2009) and the growing opportunities offered by the Internet to support and provide spaces for the articulation of radical democratic practices and cultures (Dahlberg and Siapera, 2007).

However, as McCurdy underlines (2009), scholarship has typically addressed movements' communication strategies separately, focusing discretely on the use of single technologies or on the binary opposition between alternative/radical and mainstream media. The danger of such approach is that we might "overlook... areas where one technology overlaps with another in the course of activity" (McCurdy, 2009, 88). I argue that by doing so we might also

overlook the intersections among various forms of communication. Indeed, “grassroots art activists such as puppeteers, banner designers, T-shirt designers, street theater actors and musicians” (Downing 2005, 217) have greatly contributed to counter hegemonic protests. Therefore, as Downing points out, it would be difficult to “understand the roles of radical media ... unless we link all these forms of communication and expression” (2005, 218). Even at the apex of the use of digital technology for counter-information, he warned not to “blind us to the extraordinary combination of the most banal forms of communications technologies with ‘whiz-bang’ hi-tech” (2005, 218). Even in a fully networked society, contemporary movements continue to “root themselves in their local lives, and in face-to-face interaction” (Castells, 2007, 250), while the connection between social actors and society at large, of which social movements’ interactions with mainstream media is a vital element, is crucial. All this was evident observing how L’Aquila’s activists developed their communication. Plain print outs without any elaborate graphic or color, homemade banners, handwritten flyers, T-shirts, pins, body tattoos, street musicians, etc., went hand in hand with more technologically developed forms of communication, including the Internet and mobile communication.

### **Exploring the Birth of Citizens’ Activism**

Before exploring L’Aquila’s movements’ communication, some questions need to be addressed: How did those movements come about? What is the history, if there is one, which made them possible? What is the substratum that allowed them to spring to life?

L’Aquila is the capital of the central south Abruzzo region, one where, according to Putnam, an American scholar of civic republicanism, citizens’ engagement in local governing bodies and organized political associations and civil society has been weaker than in other Northern regions. For Putnam, the reason for stronger civic engagement in the north was to be



found in the history of citizens' participation that characterized the northerner *città-stato* [city states] of the Renaissance. Thanks to such history, those living in the north were able to tap into a richer tradition of civil society organizations, which, according to Putnam, translated into more active engagement in local governments (Putnam, 1993, 109). In the south, instead, because of the absolutist monarchies that had ruled the area for centuries, political involvement was characterized by clientelism, a practice based on a relationship among un-equals. Putnam concluded that the reason for the poor performance of southern regional governments was due to the long tradition of corruption and lack of civic participation.

Putnam's analysis, however, mischaracterizes the south by failing to take into account the differences among the various regions. The American scholar's approach embraces a deterministic historiography, based, on the one hand, on an idyllic notion of citizens' civic virtues during the Renaissance, and, on the other, on an equally superficial negative interpretation of the Bourbon and Hapsburg dynasties. Indeed, his analysis, which assumes civic republicanism as the main measurement for democratic participation, cannot explain the plurality of forms of political participation. Furthermore, it fails to examine the unavoidable formation of power in society, and the potent, propulsive force that conflict and the collective consciousness of inequalities might generate. It also assumes civic republicanism and the form of democracy that it entails, as rational processes where contradictions and inequalities are non-existent. Therefore, his theory is unable to account for the strength of passions and emotions, which is the fuel for the kind of counter hegemonic political actions and radical democracy (Mouffe, 2005) that progressive social movements often advocate for.

In fact, Putnam's analysis cannot explain the development of social movements in the south (like those in the cities of Palermo, Naples, and Salerno, to cite only a few among the most

vibrant centers in the south) or the birth of citizens committees in L'Aquila. In the case of the Abruzzo capital, a crisis of such large dimensions like the April 2009 earthquake, seems to have unleashed new forces, to have quickly generated interconnectivity tissue, stirred passions, unveiled what had been covered up for decades (including corruption of local governments, allegations of malpractice in the construction business and of mafia infiltrations). L'Aquila's large research University, the town's small but vibrant community of artists and intellectuals, and some experience of counter cultural movements from the 1970s might all have contributed to the humus from which the new movements have evolved. Although we do not know whether those movements will continue to exist in the future, the history of L'Aquila and its citizens has changed, in fundamental ways, forever.

## **Methodology**

This study is based on ethnographic, qualitative methodologies of data gathering including observations and in-depth interviews with leaders of local movements conducted between June 20 and July 20, 2009. The validity of qualitative methodologies for the study of social movements and their communication strategies has been amply established in the literature (Pickard, 2006; Della Porta, 2007; Juris, 2005a, 2005b, 2008).

L'Aquila is my home town and, given its tight knit social structure, I knew directly or indirectly many of the people whose lives had been affected by the quake. Indeed, many of those who were part of the committees were high school friends and/or their children. My role as a media researcher who is, on one hand, an outsider (I live most of the year in the U.S.A.), and on the other, a native (my own apartment and that of my father, both seriously damaged by the

quake, are located about 200 meters from the park), oscillated between being an observer and a participant.

At a time when the attention of the world had descended on this otherwise provincial town, activists seemed happy to be interviewed by somebody they knew, one who could empathize with them, one who was not there just for the excitement of the moment. They often expressed appreciation for the fact that the interviews were in-depth and that I was obviously not looking for sound bites.<sup>ii</sup>

The fact that Italian is my mother tongue was very important; the fact that I also speak the local dialect, which is not well known even in nearby towns, probably gave me another advantage as I could tune in to some of the subtle aspects of activists' communication. Indeed, they often used L'Aquila's slang and its spelling in order to communicate among themselves. Many of their email postings, for instance, usually contain expressions that only native speakers can understand, like "quatrà" [*Guys*], "frà" [*Bro*], "jamo" [*come on*]. The use of those expressions, especially during the G8 summit when reporters and activists from all over Italy and beyond were in town, contributed to maintaining a sense of camaraderie, and to reinforce activists' strong attachment to their identity, defined, first and foremost, by their common origins and experiences.

I first visited the tent camp where the *rete dei movimenti* had established its headquarter (the UNICEF park) before the summit: besides my professional interests, I went there because it was the only place where one could sit down at a bench and chat, re-connect with old friends, have a taste of the kind of social, person-to-person interactions that this small town, with its many squares and various parks, had always offered. During the week of the G8, I spent time

every day at the park, observing, participating in meetings, assemblies, marches, and other activities. I used my audio voice recorder, small hand held camera, and field notes for recording purposes.

On the eve of the G8 summit, there were about 70 local activists in the park (a few of them had actually been living there since it was occupied). Ten or fifteen activists were most involved with the Media Lab, although this number grew during the G8 week. There was a very tight knit group of people, most of whom knew each other from before the quake. However, their political affiliation was diverse: some of the older activists came from sharply opposing militant experiences in the 1970s social movements of the extreme right and the extreme left. Most had University degrees (they were lawyers, University professors, medical doctors); many of the younger ones were university students in Naples, Rome, and L'Aquila. Very few had previous media experience, some were students of L'Aquila's *Accademia dell'Immagine* (the Visual Academy of L'Aquila). Most of them came from the middle- or upper middle class. The movements' virtual community comprised hundreds of sympathizers in L'Aquila and beyond (according to the number of subscribers to their list servers). That number has grown significantly since the G8 summit.

As the start of the international meeting neared, out of town activists flooded the park, and, at first, some of them were allowed to put up their tents. However, after the police raided the park one night and arrested two out of town demonstrators, the local committees, worried about bad publicity and possible violence, decided not to allow any new person to spend the night.

During the interviews, I asked open-ended questions aimed at addressing the following concerns: How were activists planning to develop their communication campaigns during the G8

week? How did they plan to reach out to L'Aquila's residents who had fled the area and those who were living in surrounding villages? How did they plan to reach out to national and international audiences and link the town's very personal tragedy with broader global issues? The result of my observations and interviews is a story, which I will tell in chronological order following the events that unfolded during that week.

### **360 Degrees Communication and the UNICEF Park**

From a communication point of view, the G8 represented a "golden opportunity" (Frezza, 2009) for the movements. However, none of the activists knew how to give an interview, what to expect from the media exposure, how to best exploit it. Many meetings and assemblies preceded the start of the G8 week during which it was agreed that the main goal was to use any possible tool to perforate the media spectacle and reach out to local residents, to people in Italy and internationally. Very few activist had previous media experience, some of the campaigns that they developed had been in the making for a month or so, and some were created hours before they were staged. The result was a comprehensive use of communication forms: from face to face communication, to frequent interactions with mainstream media, to the use of communication technologies. They all became elements of what I define as '360 degrees communication,' an all-inclusive, all-encompassing communication.

The UNICEF park was the core of the citizens' communication emerging tactics. After the quake the park had become a small, but safe oasis right outside the city's medieval walls (where the red zone began) on the west side of town. In the absence of other public spaces, the park was the "meeting place for the citizens groups... representing the only alternative form of socialization outside the logics of the market, a meeting point always available for those...who needed answers or just needed to talk" (Vegni, 2009).

By the end of June, a Media Lab, a small 20 square meters wooden locale, had been built by the activists, with funds from private donors. By the same time, a legal center and a women's center (called 'Magnitudo Lady', a name that refers to a quake's 'magnitude') had also been established. These initiatives all contributed to animate the park, "rendendolo piazza per tutti, di tutti" [*making it the assembly point for everybody, belonging to everybody*] (Vegni, 2009). Meetings and assemblies were usually conducted in the mornings or early afternoons. At night, the recreational tent and the small amphitheater pullulated with cultural and artistic initiatives, including techno music dance parties, concerts by local and national bands and musicians, theatrical plays, and projections of movies. If democracy is indeed more than a simple exercise in rationality, then all these initiatives made the park a "permanent democratic presidium for [everybody]" (Vegni, 2009). It is in the intersection of those communicative activities that the park, and with it, the Media Lab, came to life.

**Radio Broadcasting:** The network of movements benefitted from the arrival of media activists and reporters from all over Italy and Europe. Free radio stations, including Radio Onda Rossa [Red Wave Radio, based in Rome], Radio Popolare [People's Radio, in Milan], Radio Sicilia (based in Palermo), Radio Brescia, had been especially important, reporting from L'Aquila since the quake. Radio Popolare, for instance, had its own mobile studio desk on the porch of the Media Lab. From there, they broadcast a live, two hours talk show every night throughout the week of the G8. The show was hosted by a 'Radio Pop' announcer, originally from L'Aquila. On his show, which broadcast nationally, members of citizens committees, movements, freelance media activists, but also local residents and artists were invited to talk. One important cultural element is that the announcer and the guests made a point of using the very distinctive local inflection and dialect during the broadcasts.

### **The internet**

The committees had set up their own email listservs, while the network of movements had also a centralized listserv and its own Facebook page, which was used for organization, information, and publicity purposes. *Epicentro Solidale* and *3 e 32* used Web 2.0 applications to facilitate interactivity and sharing of information across platforms. Freelance media activists posted their videos on YouTube, on their own Facebook pages, and other social networking sites. The language of use on most of these postings was Italian.

The Independent Media Center Abruzzo, the regional chapter of IMC Italia, was at the Media Lab and IMC media activists posted videos, comments, news updates. Although they had had a crucial role in sparking interest among the various committees about the importance of creating autonomous spaces of information, and the IMC itself was considered as the “mother of independent communication” (Frezza, 2009), it was not the preferred platform of L’Aquila’s activists, some of whom considered it too much of an ideologically tinted project and preferred other platforms for sharing information.

### *Citizens’ Activities during the G8 Summit*

***The Silent March, 5th-6th July:*** the first big public event sponsored by the network of movements for the G8 summit was the march of 5-6 July 2009. Long preparation and discussions preceded this event. Activists were concerned that somebody might find a pretext for violence during the march but no violent action could be acceptable in a city as devastated as L’Aquila. Another concern was how to make sure they could reach out to the L’Aquila diaspora, those tens of thousands of citizens who had fled the area.

Although the network of movements was united under the “100%” campaign,<sup>iii</sup> tensions existed among its various ‘souls’, especially between more militant members (mostly within the

Solidarity Epicenter movement) and the more moderate activists like those of the ‘3 e 32’ committee. For example, it was unclear who would lead the march, or what to do in case violence erupted (from the demonstrators or the police). A decision was reached that the committee founded by the parents of the University students who had died under the collapsed dormitory would be in charge of the march and coordinate security.

The march was advertized in every possible way: via word of mouth, with flyers and hand-written posters distributed in tent cities, when and if authorization to do so was granted by the camp manager; via mass text messaging, via the network’s email server list, via the many Facebooks groups of “L’Aquila’s Friends” that had been created since the quake, via the various local news websites. Regional newspapers (like *Il Centro*), widely distributed along the Adriatic coast where much of L’Aquila’s diaspora had fled, dedicated ample coverage, before and after the event. The *Centro* reporter had lost his children during the quake, which contributed to his writing being rich with in-depth, personal reflections. When the march began, at 11:30 p.m., more than four thousand people had gathered. Most of them had left the area and drove to town just for the occasion.

Although riot police, dispatched to L’Aquila in thousands for the summit, displayed an impressive show of force, the march was peaceful and solemn: people walked for hours in complete silence, holding torches. Indeed, silence was the citizens’ form of communication for that night. Free lance reporters, many of them from out of town, documentary film makers, reporters for local radio and TV stations as well as national newscasts, were there. Only a spokesperson for the parents committee addressed the crowd using a megaphone, expressing her determination to denounce those who were responsible for not observing anti-seismic building codes. Escorted by the firefighters, the march reached the Duomo (the city’s main church) inside



the red zone by the early morning hours, in time for the formal commemoration of the victims, scheduled for 3:32 a.m., exactly three months after the quake.

Besides the flyers, small or large, printed out in the media lab, published on the Internet, distributed through listservs, handed out to residents in tent cities, posted on every wall, placed on the ground of the park to be visible from the helicopters that were flying continuously over the area, large manifestoes signed by Mafalda, the Argentinean comic strip, were posted on one particular wall in front of the city's bus station. One of those manifestos displayed large photos and the voting records of senators who had voted against allocating funds for reconstruction so that, as the march passed by, everybody could see it. As demonstrators walked by the UNICEF Park, activists from the Media Lab projected a slide show with photos of people and rescue workers taken in the days following the quake.

*L'Aquila Social Forums, 7th July*: The L'Aquila Social Forums were held under the large recreation tent in the park. A representative of L'Aquila's network of movements chaired the panels, where representatives of social movements (including Indymedia Abruzzo, the *No Dal Molin* committee [Molin is a small region in the North East Italy whose residents have long been fighting against the enlargement of a NATO base nearby], the *Brigate Attive della Solidarietà* committee [the Active Brigades of Solidarity, one of the very first groups of volunteers who arrived after the seism to set up self-administered camps], the Greek Social Forum, the Argentinean 'La Vaca' cooperative, and others) participated in discussing topics related to reconstruction, transparency, and participatory democracy.

Father Alex Zanottelli, a missionary priest very close to the Global Justice Movement in Italy, was one of the panelists. In his address, he encouraged activists to engage in face to face

communication with fellow residents. This was the most radical intervention of all, he said, as it went to the roots of our history and tradition of oral, person-to-person interaction. This, according to Zanottelli, was the way to honor the history of L'Aquila and its deeply rooted relationship with its surroundings; the only way to spark social change and empower people. "Go out there, in the tent-cities, in the small villages. Sit down with people; listen to what they have to say!" (Zanottelli, 7 July 2009).

His encouragements hit one of the movements' core problems: the lack of participation of L'Aquila's non-activist residents. How to reach out to them was a topic that had often emerged during assemblies and meetings. There were objective difficulties: for instance, it was difficult to reach those who lived in the large tent cities. Although they themselves were free to leave the camp, no activist could easily visit them. Meetings and assemblies could not be held in the camps. In fact, camps' managers had the last word in determining who could get in, and often they would cite security reasons for not allowing activists to enter. During the G8 summit, only reporters from official media were allowed to enter the camps, although some free lance reporters and media activists were able to get in as 'friends' of camp residents. This curtailed basic freedoms of expression and assembly, which are officially protected by the Italian constitution. After the G8 summit, the citizens committees ran national campaigns to sensitize public opinion about what was happening inside the government-run camps and how freedom of information was in danger in L'Aquila.

However, there were also more substantial reasons for non-activist residents' lack of participation. First of all, there was a certain distrust and suspicion toward the committees' political affiliation and especially about the influence of a few institutional political parties of the left on some of them (including the Democratic Party—one of the leaders of the *3 e 32*

committee is the son of a prominent PD senator, for instance; and the Communist Reconstruction party, whose members were part of the Solidarity Epicenter movement). Other reasons were cultural: residents in surrounding villages had often resented L'Aquila's centrality and power in the region and wanted to keep distance. Some of them organized themselves in their own self-administered communities; some organized their own freelance reporting and printing operations.

One very noticeable example is the one page paper titled "*Rialzati Abruzzo*" [Stand Up Abruzzo], published by Antonio Venti in a tent in the Rugby Camp in Paganica (a small village, 5 KM from L'Aquila). Venti, a free lance investigative reporter and the president of the local chapter of *Libera* [Free], a national citizens' organization against organized crime and mafia, runs a very small operation, with the help of only one person. As billions of Euros have been flooding the area for reconstruction, Venti has been writing about mafia infiltration in the reconstruction business and bidding processes. During the G8 summit, his *articolo di fondo* [editorial] appeared also translated into English in an effort to reach out to international audiences; some of his articles have since been re-published on the national influential daily *Il Manifesto* and on numerous news web sites.

***The Yes We Camp! Campaign, 8th July:*** Activists were determined to "perforate Berlusconi's media spectacle" (Alessandro, 2009) thrown over the city, and to connect with international audiences. Early on the morning of July 8<sup>th</sup>, when Barack Obama and other heads of state were scheduled to land at a nearby airport east of town, about 20 activists drove to a mountain side bordering L'Aquila's valley to the east, to place large letters on the ground that read *Yes We Camp!*. The slogan, in English, was designed to capture the interest of international media at the beginning of the G8 summit, playing on Barack Obama's presidential campaign slogan, *Yes We*

*Can!*. This was the slogan that had been formulated by the movements as their main media campaign to call attention to the plight of the local populace.

The words could not be missed by anybody getting in or out the compound where the world leaders were residing, including the thousands of reporters stationed in the official media headquarters inside the G8 compound. Free lance media activists, including photographers, documentary film makers, reporters for independent TV stations, but also some reporters for mainstream newspapers (*L'Unità*, the Democratic Party's paper, most noticeably), accompanied the group to the mountain site. On that same day, *Yes We Camp!* T-Shirts, pins, street banners, flyers, appeared all over town.

In the afternoon, after an informant had told activists that Obama was supposed to drive through a certain cross road sometime soon, they rushed to the site holding one of their *Yes We Camp!* banners. Although riot police promptly formed a cordon in front of them trying to hide the banner, the campaign was, overall, a success: by the early afternoon, pictures of the writings on the mountain side were all over the Internet. Even *The New York Times*, in an editorial the day after, reported the initiative and a short interview with the spokesperson of the Solidarity Epicenter movement, Stefano Frezza (NYT, 9<sup>th</sup> July, 2009). National newspapers like *L'Unità*, *Il Manifesto*, *La Stampa*, *Repubblica*, *Corriere della Sera*, reported the event. One reporter for *L'Unità* declared that the *Yes We Camp!* campaign did more than anything else to disrupt the government's attempt to portray a perfect G8 meeting (Fierro, 2009).

### ***The Last Ladies March, 9<sup>th</sup> July***

Although many activists were women, gender representation was at times unbalanced. During the L'Aquila's Social Forum, for instance, the lack of female activists' representation among the speakers in the morning panel was striking. This was quickly noticed, and Sara Vegni

was elected as the movements' representative to chair the afternoon panel. By the day after, women seemed to have taken a more central stage: for instance, a woman activist was one of the two spokespersons who briefed the official media; the same activist was also interviewed by the news bulletin of RAI's TG3 as she, together with others, occupied an empty apartment in town to protest against local governments' decision not to make private dwellings available to earthquake victims. Women activists were also in charge of the march and staged activities scheduled for 9<sup>th</sup> July, the second day of the G8 summit, the so-called *Last Ladies* campaign.

Given that the politicians' First Ladies would be touring L'Aquila's ruins downtown on that day, activists proposed to launch the *Last Ladies* campaign intended to underscore the distance separating the visiting 'first ladies' (living in luxurious anti-seismic apartments) from the resident 'last ladies' (living in precarious conditions in the tents). It was agreed that the 'last ladies' would march holding food trays (the hallmark of life in the tent cities), banners, and chanting slogans, in order to call attention to the plight of local populations. It was also decided that, whoever felt like doing it, would march solely in their underwear to symbolize that L'Aquila's residents had been stripped of everything. Reporters from mainstream media were present at the meeting when the campaign was decided and promised to be at the event. Indeed, the march was covered by local newspapers and some national newspapers, and by a large contingency of media activists.

#### *The NO-G8 March, 10<sup>th</sup> July*

The NO-G8 march divided the citizens' committees. The '3 e 32' committee did not participate for fear that violence might erupt and that media attention would concentrate on it rather than on local populations' issues. On the other side, Epicentro Solidale supported the right of the global justice movement and other anti-G8 movements to demonstrate and indeed had been actively

involved for months with other national movements to organize the march. Careful coordination was necessary to make sure that: 1) out of town demonstrators were aware of the particular circumstances of the hosting town; 2) that people were aware that no violence would be tolerated; 3) that the number of demonstrators from other countries should be limited; 4) that L'Aquila's committees and the firefighters would lead the march. Local organizers were the ones who were in charge of security.

Some members of 3 e 32 participated although the committee had dissociated itself from the march; *Epicentro Solidale* was present. For the most part, L'Aquila's residents did not join. Demonstrators came from various regions of Italy; very few were internationals. National unions, activists from social movements, and far left parties were at the march.

Apart from some organizational problems at the beginning, the demonstration was uneventful. As the demonstrators approached the red zone check point, a small group of masked youth confronted the police and began throwing rocks at them. After the initial confusion, local organizers formed a cordon separating the demonstrators from the police to de-escalate tension. Hundreds of reporters from mainstream media (including *Corriere della Sera*, the satellite all news channels Ski News Italia and RAI News24, among others) as well as alternative media and independent reporters followed the march. The police also had their own reporters and cameramen. A reporter for *Corriere della Sera* noticed jokingly that there were more reporters than demonstrators!

**Mainstream Media:** Interactions with mainstream media were very frequent. Indeed, one could say that the activists' campaigns were designed to catch their attention. Reporters from leftist national TV stations (RAI3, for instance) and newspapers (like one from *L'Unità*) were stable

presences at the UNICEF Park. For instance, whereas most official news bulletins would cover the summit from the media headquarter inside the G8 compound, some media outlets sent reporters to the UNICEF Park. In particular, TG3, the news bulletin on RAI's third channel, covered citizens committees' occupation of empty, habitable apartments (built before the seism) in protest against local government's refusal to expropriate them to benefit the homeless. Enrico Fierro, a reporter for *L'Unità*, who had wrote extensively about previous post-earthquakes reconstruction, including the one in Irpinia, followed most activists' initiatives and filed his daily reports on various topics, including the *Yes We Camp!* campaign, the *Last Ladies* and the NO-G8 march.

## Conclusions

During the G8 summit, the Media Lab became the heart of citizens' emerging communication tactics. In the words of a young activist, "the media lab [was their] life journey" (Mattia, 2009). It was the center of the movements' project to re-design a space where people could re-build their social identities. Indeed, the Media Lab was the center of the 360 Degrees communication, which remained well anchored on local issues, while attempting to saturate the social and physical environments in every possible way, including face-to-face interactions, the use of the Internet and its open sources publishing applications, and interactions with mainstream media.

As the sociology of social movements points out, it is important to "depict movement survival beyond protest mobilization" (Della Porta, 2007, 2). Some important questions are: Would L'Aquila's citizens committees and movements be around in the future? Would this

continue? Would it have any impact? Is such a project sustainable? How will their communication evolve?

There was concern within the network of movements that, once the G8 summit was over, L'Aquila's activists would miss all the media attention and that their difficult living conditions would have taken a toll on their ability to maintain the momentum. However, the relationship established with reporters (for mainstream media as well as independents) continued to bear fruits. For instance, RAI3 continued to produce some important pieces of investigative journalism. Since after the summit, an enormous quantity of audio, visual, and print material has been circulated (including novels and documentaries, translated also in English, as well as music performances, stand up comedies, and photographic exhibitions). Communication continues to be at 360 Degrees: town hall style assemblies are held once a week, silent marches are organized every 6<sup>th</sup> day of each month, listservs are very active with an output of five to six new postings on average per day, newsletters and publications come out regularly. Female activists (most of them young University students) are among the most prolific writers of daily accounts of assemblies, press releases, and theoretical elaborations about communication and citizenship, on the various listservs.

Activists have archived audio, visual, and written documentation of their activities, which is stored in the main computer in the Media Lab. IMC Abruzzo is also an important, although limited, repository of archived material. They have organized media production workshops with the support of media professionals and produced the first two issues of *Il Cratere*, using Web 2.0 applications. In September 2009, the network of movements occupied a new structure, a former psychiatric hospital, which became the site of the winter Media Lab.



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<sup>i</sup> Throughout this paper, I will use the term "citizen" stripped of its legal meaning. "Citizens", which is the term of choice of the movements, indicate anybody who wants to be actively involved with the town's reconstruction. I will also occasionally add the adjective "active" to emphasize the difference between citizens and city's residents in this story.

<sup>ii</sup> Although I could certainly empathize with the activists' experiences, I was certainly not considered as 'one of them'. That was clear when I offered to drive a group of them to a street happening and they did not even take my offer in consideration ("we drive ourselves," one of them said nonchalantly); or when I asked if I could purchase one of their signature T-shirts (the "*Forti Si, Fessi No*" shirt) and was told that, for the particular event planned on that day, only activists could wear those T-shirts.

<sup>iii</sup> 100% democratic participation from below in the reconstruction; 100% transparency during the process of rebuilding to prevent mafia-infiltration in the construction business; 100% government funds for the reconstruction.