Social Media Activism

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1 Models of Online-Related Activism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A broader perspective: ICTS and activism in literature

Since the end of the 1990s, various researchers have observed the web and other forms of digital communication in order to better understand or to represent the characteristics of social movements or mobilizations. Just to give some examples, researchers have studied the Chiapas Zapatista movement (Garrido and Halavais 2003; Russell 2005), environmental networks (Pickerill 2003; Van de Donk and Foederer 2001), and the global justice movement (Della Porta and Mosca 2005; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2004; Rosenkrands 2004) with these purposes in mind. More recently, scholars have initiated a new wave of contributions dedicated to this issue, observing how activism comes into contact with the most diffused, privately owned social media, such as Facebook and Twitter (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Comninos 2011; Neumayer and Raffl 2008). During the so-called Ukrainian Orange Revolution, for the first time the link between social media and activism started to attract the attention of both the academic community (Goldstein 2007; Kyj 2006) and the global media. However, the definitive impulse to explore this relationship in detail arrived in 2011. Following the almost contemporaneous emergence of the Arab Spring, of the Spanish 15-M (better known as the Indignados), and of the #Occupy mobilizations, newspapers and scholars (e.g. Gaby and Caren 2012; Howard et al. 2011;
Micó and Casero-Ripollés (2013) started to investigate the role of Internet and social media in protests, looking for methods and concepts to explore these new environments.

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

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

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5 See Farrell (2011) for a general review of the topic.
Online communication: networks and relational phenomena

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

This argument has been particularly relevant in the discussion on social movements, because these social phenomena are increasingly described in relational terms. In particular, Diani’s definition of social movements as ‘networks of informal interactions, between a plurality of individuals, groups or associations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity’ (Diani 1992: 13) stresses that a movement is always composed of relations between actors, which are partially independent and heterogeneous. Starting from similar perspectives on social movements and activism, researchers have proposed that the use of ICTs may have influenced the way in which organizations and activists connect (see Postmes and Brunsting 2002; Garrett 2006). In particular, Kelly Garrett (ibid.), in her review of the topic, observes that several authors (among them, Diani 2000) have explored the link between the use of ICTs and the capacity for sustaining dispersed communities of activists who are in contact with each other, an aspect perceived as crucial for transnational actions. Similar observations emerged again during the 2011 wave of mobilizations, which included the Arab Spring, the 15-M movement and Occupy. In this case, scholars have conceived of social media as being able to accelerate the spread of protests, in particular, permitting activists to share content through their interpersonal connections (e.g. Gaby and Caren 2012; Comninos 2011).
Although the link between movement networks and ICT networks is not yet clear (e.g. Wellman et al. 1996; Diani 2000), these technologies – and, in particular, those based on the web – are increasingly being seen as organizational structures on which the movement networks are embedded (Bennet 2004; Tarrow 2002, cited by Kavada 2003: 4). According to this perspective, the Chiapas Zapatista movement and the global justice movements have been seen as movements with an electronic spine (Kavada 2005: 91) swimming ‘like a fish in the Net’ (Castells 2001: 142, cited by Kavada 2003).

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

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

6 See also Rheingold (2000). For a critical perspective, see Diani (2000) and Della Porta and Diani (2006: 133).
7 See Rosen et al. 2011 for a review.
8 See González-Bailón et al. 2011 for an impressive study on Twitter.
Digital technologies as a new communication infrastructure for activism

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

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

The following quote well describes this tendency:

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

At the same time, scholars are increasingly focusing their attention on the variety of models of online communication that social movement actors develop – that is to say, on how they communicate online – more than on the ‘pure’ technological effects of online communication on activism.
Among other things, they interestingly focused on the different strategies of online communication (Bennett and Segerberg 2012a; Mattoni 2012; Howard and Hussain 2011), or on how organizations with different cultures tend to develop different websites (Kavada 2012; Ward 2012).

**Online communication as a product of society**

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

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

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

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

1.2 Overlapping Plans: research on online phenomena and its complexity

Recurrent research design models in the field of online activism

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

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

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

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

Another alternative to the research design focused on the impact of ICTs on social movement characteristics is to revert the terms of the relationship, concentrating attention on the role of activists and organizations as active players in the online media (see the third model in Figure 1.1). As in the previously presented design, the authors describe different types of social movement organizations and activists, but in this case they consider online communication almost as a dependent variable: in other words,
in this model of research design scholars observe that social movement actors differently shape online communication, according to their internal characteristics. Kavada (2012), for instance, provides a clear example of similar research designs. Focusing her attention on a set of organizations that promoted the G20 protests in London, and on their websites, she describes how organizations with divergent cultures (strategic, organizing, and decision-making) tend to produce different types of online content and websites.

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

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

**Core research design choices in this book**

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

As I have just said, a holistic, mainly descriptive and inductive research design (see the fourth model in Figure 1.1) that considers activism, online communication and the instrumental use of ICTS as interacting complex plans provides the broader, generic framework for the entire work. This model permitted me to investigate in detail divergent dimensions and concepts that I was not able to conceive and to define as relevant before entering into the field; therefore, my differentiation among causes, effects and environments mainly emerged from the analysis, instead of preceding it. Adopting this approach, my first aim is a descriptive one: as a result, I have been able to reconstruct the interactions of plans as different as the activists’ perceptions and strategies, the use of social media in different types of organizations, and the connection with the offline space. This approach and the dimension of the observed campaign obliged me to focus on a single and not generalizable case. However, these choices permitted me, for instance, to explore in detail two of the interesting research questions that Kelly Garrett proposes in her literature review on social movements.
and ICTS: firstly, under which circumstances and how activist use ICTS to ‘increase participation and commitment by facilitating the aggregation of small contributions or actions’; secondly, how they develop through the help of the ICTS ‘messy hybrid organizational forms, combining hierarchical and non-hierarchical structures as fit their needs’ (2006: 217). This research, in particular, Chapters 5 and 6, describes the complex processes that permitted the aggregation of small and dispersed actions of micro activism as well as the emergence of online and offline organizational forms whose characteristics depended to a large extent on the use of social media and on participation in a common online campaign.

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

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

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

Evolution of concepts and questions through time

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

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

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

Similarly, the definition of web communication in relational terms, as applied in Chapter 4 of this book and very useful to trace the structure of
the ‘traditional’ web, proved to be difficult to apply in a precise way to the very complex and ‘messy’ network of communication that characterizes social media. Even though I maintained the idea of the network, at least as a metaphor, throughout the entire book, I decided to explore the variegated and complex interactions of activists recurring to different concepts. In particular, I focused attention on four ideas. First, I observed in detail the bridges between online and offline activism. Second, I investigated how the different ways of conceiving social media communication affect activists’ initiative on these platforms. Third, I observed the very different features and content that appear on social media initiatives. Fourth, I describe how activists can use the same online platform differently – focusing an entire chapter on Facebook, in particular – instead of on the divergent characteristics of numerous online platforms (i.e., how Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, the web and offline actions are used in different ways).

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

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

\(^{12}\) The social media ‘era’ seems characterized by new, ever-present buzzwords, from ‘meme’ to ‘big data’, which I tended to adopt a little less than usual in this research.

\(^{13}\) Even if I focused on the recruitment process and on the characteristics of individual activists, campaigns can modify the characteristics of the organizations, too. Throughout the book, and, in particular, in Chapters 5 and 6, I provide examples of how campaigning – and the connected focus on communication – can modify the activists’ experiences and the nature of their network.
that joined the campaign at a second stage can take place. The idea of micro activism (see Garrett 2006; Marichal 2012b), made of small, effortless actions connected thanks to ICT-based solutions, explicitly emerged in my interviews and observation, and I tried therefore to describe and to trace how it integrates into traditional activism. Furthermore, describing the different patterns of use that very different categories of activists (external professionals, local sympathizers, early Facebook users…) elaborated, I tried to demonstrate the large variation that characterized the entire campaign. In my opinion, this internal difference makes it difficult to maintain a stable position in the vehement debate that opposes, on one side, those who conceive Facebook activists as empowered cyber militants and, on the other side, those who see social media activism as a surrogate for real forms of militancy.

Research questions: a final list

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

The network analysis of the web that sustained the campaign mainly served this descriptive purpose. It helped me to understand which actors were particularly relevant in supporting the online mobilization, with a focus on the long-lasting connections that characterize the traditional web. In particular, this analysis helped me to understand, at least in part, among other things, whether the web structure that sustained the campaign was centralized or horizontal, and which role and characteristics different ‘communication hubs’ played in the network. Furthermore, the network analysis combined with the use of a self-written software helped me trace the circulation of written content (slogans, keywords) online.
Other, less descriptive research questions emerged during the analysis. I derived two questions, already presented in the chapter, directly from the interesting review of Kelly Garrett. First of all, my research aims at investigating in detail how traditional activists and media professionals working and volunteering for the campaign were able ‘to increase participation and commitment by facilitating the aggregation of small contributions or actions’ (2006: 217). Websites, assemblies, and numerous Facebook initiatives were devoted to this goal: the book explains how this idea emerged, and describes the different kinds of activists (professionals, dispersed members of organizations, less engaged web users) who contributed to elaborate it. Interestingly, this mechanism, which might appear at first glance as a feature of social media able to influence activism, is first of all one of the possible communication strategies, present during the campaign in numerous variations, which only a restricted number of resource-rich activists (media professionals, designers) can initiate.

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

Another research direction – more than a proper question – regarded the evolution of the general communication strategy during the last phases of the campaign. This question was, therefore, mainly centred on the use of Facebook. In part, the organization of this large-scale campaign convinced most of the activists to privilege new, unexpected models of communication, following the pragmatic aim of increasing the visibility of the water issue. Interestingly, activists seemed to react to the need of reaching an enormous mass of citizens, slowly abandoning their first, mass media-like models of
communication, privileging dispersed online messages and less controlled forms of action.14

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

Conclusions

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

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

14 The idea of connective action elaborated by Bennett and Segerberg (2012b) seems very appropriate to describe the strategic change that characterized the communications of the Water Forum during the campaign.
referendum campaign against the privatization of water. In particular, after having discussed the numerous different possible ways of studying online activism, I decided to observe the campaign in a holistic and descriptive way. Furthermore, I integrated this approach with some questions about the effects of online communication on different kinds of organizations, and about how some organizations tend to exhibit their characteristics in their online communications. In every one of these questions, I often adopted online information as a source of data to reconstruct offline phenomena, too. After having clarified these choices regarding the research design, I elaborated my questions, which aim at describing the campaign, investigating the roles played by different activists, exploring the evolution of organizational forms, and understanding how the activists modified their strategic choices during the campaign. A final methodological question, which asks how to study in an efficient way an online-related campaign, will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.