Patterns of Online Communication during the Referendum Campaign

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

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

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

52 Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana (Italian Recreational and Cultural Association). ARCI is a broad association that networks numerous clubs and cultural centres in Italy. Linked in the past with the Communist Party and the Socialist Party, it has played a key role in several progressive campaigns.
flash mobs, digital actions, risks and opportunities of using Facebook are some of the addressed topics. After the event, the discussion continues with some difficulties on a mailing list, on a web forum, and finally on a Facebook group.

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

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

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

Even though these aspects of online communication are different, I analyse them starting from a common theoretical point of view, which connects them: the idea that websites and other web content can be usefully observed as ‘artefacts’ (Hine 2000) with which activists interact. Christine Hine (ibid.) usefully derives two ways of observing online communication from the concepts adopted in ethnographic research. The first approach that she proposes considers online communication as a culture, focusing
therefore on online exchanges, patterns of web communication, formation of
groups and online communities. The second perspective, which I tend to
privilege in this chapter, conceives of web content and web communication
as cultural artefacts, and focuses on how people include the web in their
activities, how they adopt new forms of web communication to accomplish
their tasks, and how these online artefacts relate with other, previously
existent routines.

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

In this chapter, I investigate the Italian referendum campaign on water
starting from these three theoretical proposals (to observe web communica-
tion as an element with which people relate, to focus on media practices,
and to observe how the offline characteristics of actors are reflected in
their online communication), relying on interviews and ethnographic data
collected both online and offline. More specifically, in the first section
I describe how activists modified their way of using and perceiving the
web during the campaign, responding to their new aims. In particular, I
derect these changes as an evolution from an instrumental view of digital
technologies (the web as a tool for action), to a view that considers the online
media as environments. In the second section I explore how the water
activists responded to the need for new skills, in particular, in the fields of communications, graphics, web development and ‘marketing’ during the campaign. I differentiate, in this part, the abilities that the activists met within the boundaries of the movement and the new contacts with professionals who volunteered during the campaign. The third section investigates the relationship between online communication and other media. In particular, I explore how activists used the web and social media as an alternative to television and newspapers, and how at the same time the activists’ communications came into contact with some aspects of this broader environment. Finally, the forth section explores how different actors created and interacted with the two main websites of the campaign. My main aims, in this last section, are, on the one hand, to show how the different ideas, projects and social interactions of the developers contributed to shape the sites, and, on the other hand, to show how the two sites promoted (and perceived, if a website can perceive) different models of digital and offline activism.

5.1 Online Communication during the Campaign: an evolving strategy

Digital communication and the activists’ goals

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

During the years that preceded the referendum, the Italian water movements had already adopted well-defined strategies of digital communication. The mobilization around the issue of water privatization in Italy emerged about eight years before the referendum campaign, mainly as a single-issue national ramification of the previous European Social Forum process. In the early 2000s, an initial core of activists and organizations connected with the Social Forum milieu started to come into contact with numerous local
struggles and territorial committees. Giving life to regional and national initiatives of participatory democracy, the initial groups gradually linked the local experiences with a solid backbone made of strong national organizations: trade unions, religious and environmental associations, consumer groups, and leftist and environmental political parties joined this network.

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

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

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

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

54 The administrator of the page Acqua Pubblica is Domenico Finiguerra, a very active environmentalist and mayor of a small town near Milan, Cassinetta di Lugagnano.
The evolution that I am describing started in April 2010, when FIMA organized the first phase of mobilization for the referendum campaign, a massive signature collection that reached about 1,500,000 citizens. In a progressive acceleration, the activists modified their communication strategies during the last six months of the campaign, entering a final and extremely intensive climax from May to 13 June 2013, the last day of the vote.55

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

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

55 Just to give an idea of the magnitude of this climax, the words referendum and quorum were the most prevalent on Italian Facebook statuses in 2011, according to the Facebook Memology that the platform publishes every year on its official blog (Bianchini 2011).
56 The legal term quorum – very well known in Italian society, politics and journalism – indicates the minimum number of electors required to declare a referendum vote as valid. The law fixes it to the absolute majority of voters (50% + 1), including Italians living abroad. The number 25,000,000 is an approximation that the activists adopted as a slogan.
openly discussed – among other media-related topics – the relationship between online technologies and offline territories, the effectiveness of Facebook communication, and the possibility of stimulating new groups of sympathizers through the web.

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

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

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

As it is easy to understand, these five elements (participation of new professionals, focus on communications, digital ‘specialization’ of some activists, decentralization, and peak of intensity) contributed to a radical transformation of the relationship of the activists with digital technologies. In the next section, I propose a synthetic description of what I consider as
the main dimension that characterized this evolution of the communication strategies: the activists started to conceive the online technologies less as a tool, and more as a communication environment, a sort of arena that they could influence. This evolution caused in my opinion a stable modification of the communication strategies for the actors involved in the campaign, also promoting the emergence of new roles within the movement milieu.

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

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

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

57 I adopt here the term ‘communication milieu’, rather than ‘environment’, because in this case I am not referring to the concept of media environment as developed, among others, by Mattoni (2012), but simply to a different way of perceiving the web as a space where people can act, instead of as a tool with which to act.
Furthermore, in this first phase the use of these online tools was mainly subordinate to initiatives regarding the offline reality: the mailing list was used to organize a demonstration and the website was a tool for publishing and distributing a report created during a national assembly. Another evident characteristic of this ‘way of being digital’ and of conceiving of online technologies is the fact that technologies are mainly adopted for inward-oriented communication and organization among activists, rather than for the purpose of contacting a broader public. Of course, there are evident exceptions to this instrumental, inward-oriented model. For instance, the administrator of the Facebook page Acqua Pubblica – briefly described in the previous section – was already adopting complex strategies in different online spheres to increase the number of readers and to connect with other, different web-based political communities. Furthermore, in some cases the activists described the website www.acquabene.com as a tool that was able to represent the water coalition and its internal organizations to interested people, moving in this way in the direction of outward-oriented communication, as it emerges in an interview to the FIMA webmaster:

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

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

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

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

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

Heterogeneous abilities

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

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

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

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

In Turin, a water activist with a particular interest in digital communications and with a previous experience of activism in the local Meetup gatherings of Beppe Grillo decided to contact three very young designers in
the same city. These designers were already famous on the web as authors of a beautiful animation that reached more than 1,000,000 viewers on YouTube (Negrin 2010). Knowing of their ability to build social media content and initiatives that had gone viral, the activist asked the designers to volunteer for the campaign. With complete freedom of action, they created an initiative in support of the referendum: a small ironic project of photo sharing, which people could easily reply to, personalize, and share on Facebook and YouTube (SmileLab 2011).

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

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

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

Digital knowledge and actions within the boundaries of the movement

In most cases, the FIMA actors reacted to the new communication needs that emerged during the water referendum campaign with tactics and resources that emerged within the boundaries of their movements or organizations. They searched for abilities or resources among the activists, they experimented with new forms of action, they adapted their activities to the new online environment, and they activated, applying the previous tactics, a strong learning processes within the movement milieu. These
internal ways of dealing with an evolving digital environment during the campaign assumed various forms, and involved several different actors. However, I could distinguish three key patterns of action in the campaign that I am investigating.

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

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

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58 See Chapter 4 for a network overview of the online resources that the Italian Forum of Water Movements developed and connected through time.
symbol in 2002. On the other hand, activists applied their knowledge and strategies to the new media environment that characterized the campaign. For instance, they posted press releases on Facebook, as they had previously on blogs and websites, but slowly (and not always) adapting this behaviour to the new environment. Finally, activists had another relevant resource that they could transfer from their previous experiences to this new digital space: they had connections and contacts with people and sympathizers that they had met during their previous initiatives. Therefore, even when activists were not particularly expert and skilled users of the online media, they could quite easily reach a large, committed online public.

Second, activists started to play with the social media environments and their features, experimenting with new practices related to the online space. As I discussed in the previous chapters, during the last months of the campaign the FIMA actors started to perceive the communications field (and digital communication, in particular) as the most important arena where they could support the vote. Dealing with online technologies, therefore, became a more widespread task than before. Numerous formal and informal groups started to elaborate independent online strategies, with the very simple aim of reaching as fast as possible the highest number of people, in particular, on Facebook. This experimentation was highly creative: groups and individuals played with the boundaries between online and offline spaces, coordinated their initiatives in order to become more visible to the traditional media, and attempted to reproduce – often in an amateurish but effective way – activities seen elsewhere and perceived as new, such as flash mobs, critical masses, or forms of crowdsourcing. Successful initiatives emerged (in my opinion) more due to the large number of people experimenting with strategies than as a result of good planning.\footnote{In Chapter 6, I describe in detail the patterns of communication and the initiatives that emerged during the campaign.}

In general, most of these activities did not require particular digital skills. In contrast, this experimentation was useful for developing and spreading new abilities and behaviours, which emerged from the action. Facebook proved to be a particularly useful platform for this experimentation, mainly due to the presence of an online ‘public’, to features that helped the circulation of images and videos, and to the possibility of creating closed groups where online strategies could be discussed.

Third, in my opinion the presence of high-skilled paid professionals in some social movement organizations played a crucial role, permitting the creation of stable groups of action (gathered and organized around the figure
of the remunerated professional), and giving life to complex experiments of digital or social media activism. These professionals – mainly characterized by technological and communications expertise – were able to work on a full-time basis, and made a decisive contribution to the development of online activities and strategies throughout the campaign. Active on different spheres, they dedicated, however, a particular attention to the already described processes of experimentation with social media, to the creation of websites, to establish stable relationships with people working within the traditional media. Easily recognized by journalists and able to adapt their routine to the media timelines, they could obtain larger levels of visibility and a higher impact than those of most activists.

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

External experts

During the 2011 campaign, a certain number of very expert communication professionals helped the FIMA central office, or created independent initiatives for some local water committees. For instance, thanks to the contribution of an external fundraiser FIMA proposed an experimental form of online donation. Since in Italy the official referendum committees can
receive compensation for their electoral expenses after the vote, those who visited the site www.referendumacqua.it were asked lend a certain amount of money to the Forum. After the referendum victory, the donors received an email that opened two possibilities: they could receive the money back, or ‘invest’ it in one of FIMA’s water-related activities.

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

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

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

60Unfortunately, I was only able to interview two of these experts, who, in both cases, described their desire to work once in a while outside of the market environment. A similar view, furthermore, indirectly emerges from how other activists described the role of these experts.
of fundraising strategies, therefore, quickly permeated some movement sectors, in particular, by passing through the contacts that they had with the paid activists whom I discussed in the previous section. In this way, these external experts established a mutual relationship, a connection, between the ideas circulating in traditional, market-oriented communications environments, and the alternative, social movement-directed strategies. To give one example, they successfully suggested simplifying the visual structure of websites, focusing them on simple messages and prioritizing the viewing of fundraising-related pages. A second effect of the market-related nature of these external supporters is the fact that they were obliged, in many cases, to keep their activities secret in order to maintain a neutral image with no political connotations.

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

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

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

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

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

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

61 See e.g. Freedom House (2011), but see Wu Ming (2011) for a different analysis.
62 According to the RAI, the choice of not permitting public support to the referendum issues during the 1 May concert simply applied the par condicio law, which regulates the presence of political content during electoral campaigns (see e.g. D’Emilio 2011).
Commissione di vigilanza RAI, approved the rules for the referendum electoral spaces only on 4 May, one month after the expected date, thereby reducing the length of the electoral campaign on the television channels (Libera TV 2011). Six days before, the activists of the nuclear and water referendum committees had protested over this delay in front of the RAI headquarters (Acqua Bene Comune 2011b).

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

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

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

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

Digital communication in coordination with other media

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

However, the Forum activated more interesting interactions with several national and local newspapers. Online groups of water activists organized so as to ‘capture’ the comments spaces on the websites of the main newspapers, whenever news items on the issue of water or the referendum were published (see Chapter 6). Furthermore, during the last months of the campaign, the activists created numerous online-dependent initiatives, tailored to appear in the local press: the widespread use of flash mobs, happenings, and critical mass bicycle rides enabled the referendum committees to increase their visibility in the local media. Finally, in the very last phase of the campaign the online version of the newspaper La Repubblica – in general perceived as a moderate opponent of the water committees – decided to act as a ‘networked political actor’ (Vaccari 2011) to support the referendum. The
An online newspaper started to host videos and information on some supporters’ initiatives, asking the widespread community of readers to contribute to the campaign by sending content to the newspaper. An interesting mapping, created from the readers’ ‘crowd’, emerged on repubblica.it in a form that seemed to reply the one that the FIMA secretariat hosted on its websites acquabeneacqua.org and referendumacqua.it. In part, this evolution allowed numerous semi-amateur videos made by the committees to appear on a highly viewed web hub. However, this media partially reshaped the meaning of the campaign, presenting it as an opportunity to win against the right-wing parties, and creating new symbols, less related to the issues at stake: in other words, *La Repubblica* participated in the campaign as a different, independent actor.

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

### 5.4 Processes of Website Creation

A different way of observing the web in its context is to focus on how activists actually create their online communication ‘products’, such as websites or social media pages. In many cases that I observed, numerous people collectively contributed to the development of a web project, for instance, writing content, influencing the graphical layout, suggesting a new form of interaction with the users. Nonetheless, the figure of the administrator and of the webmaster – or of a single, independent producer of content
– remains everywhere crucial: he (or she) tends to have an exclusive, one-to-one relationship with a site or a page, and this link is a very important element to investigate during a campaign.

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

The Forum webmaster and www.acquabenecomune.org

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

When he started to work on the referendum websites, he created a de facto completely new version of acquabenecomune.org, which appeared online as a subsection of the previous site, at the URL www.acquabenecomune.org/raccoltafirme. While he maintained in this new version a graphic layout almost identical to the previous one, he decided to help focus readers’ attention on the ongoing referendum campaign, mainly making some old sections of the site less easy to see and to reach. In the following months, N. slowly modified a number of other elements inherited from the previous developer. In particular, he introduced numerous innovations to the relatively plain layout of the site: primarily, he included a space dedicated to videos, a small application reproducing songs by artists supporting the campaign, and a new way of visualizing photos.
In order to manage the site, he used Joomla!, one of the most used open source content management systems, and he interacted on a daily basis with the Italian community of Joomla! users to share suggestions and solutions. During the campaign, N. was the only person with complete access to the entire website and its database; however, he gave limited access rights to the other members of the central office in Rome, who nonetheless often ask him to ‘put online’ what they were writing.

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

The creation of www.referendumacqua.it

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

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

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

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

Conclusions

In this chapter, I presented the complex environment and the social interactions that surrounded digital communication during the referendum campaign against water privatization. This investigation shows, in my opinion, two very interesting aspects of the campaign. The first regards how online communication evolved, with some exceptions, from a conception of digital technologies as tools with which to organize and mobilize, to the idea of digital environments where activists try to intervene with their messages. This change overlaps, moreover, with a focus on outward-oriented communication, which derives from the fact of having organized a large-scale campaign (see e.g. Baringhorst 2009). A second key aspect that I develop in this chapter is the fact that water activists established interesting relationships with
sympathetic professionals during the campaign. Some of them were very free to act, and highly influenced the strategies of numerous organizations. I am convinced that these relationships opened up interesting channels between working models that are typical of market-oriented environments and social movement actors, and I will study this topic in more detail in the future.

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

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

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