Reinterpreting the Data

New theoretical perspectives and methodological proposals

In this book, I explored the 2011 referendum on water privatization as an example of well-developed, large-scale, diffused campaign that relied on online resources to develop. During this investigation, I had the opportunity to observe, in particular, how the water activists faced different communications needs through their campaign, how they adapted their actions to various digital communication spaces, and how they combined online actions with different forms of direct, offline initiatives directed to a vast groups of citizens and organizations. Furthermore, in this research I chose to follow the activists where they slowly decided to communicate: even if I reserved a certain level of attention to websites, blogs, and even traditional non-digital communication, this book mainly shows how the activists gradually colonized a new communications space, the Italian Facebook sphere. Through diffused, distinct experiments, the water activists used social media to encounter less engaged citizens, establishing a new kind of relationship between organizations, initiatives, and a sympathetic population. Finally, on Facebook, the water activists promoted a widespread circulation and remix of symbols, opening new models of communication that proved to be effective, in particular, because they combined local personalized actions within a common national framework.

This concluding chapter, divided into three sections, aims to discuss, from a different perspective, key findings of my research, evaluate the methodology that I applied, and present my proposals for further research.

The purpose of the first part of these conclusions is to summarize the results of my investigation, re-observing the data that I produced adopting three different theoretical lenses, which I have already introduced throughout the book. Firstly, I concentrate on the very high internal variation of communications strategies within the online campaign that I observed. More specifically, I discuss two different causes for this variation: the large number of actors involved, and a ‘strategy of differentiation’ that some key organizations decided to adopt. Secondly, I focus on how the activists’ online communication evolved during the campaign, paying particular attention to the tension between centralized and diffused communications strategies, to the introduction of Facebook, and to how the activists conceived of the digital environment. Thirdly, I discuss in detail how the activists played with the boundaries between the online and offline environments. In
particular, I represent a useful classification (already adopted in Chapter 6, Section 3) of four different models of interaction between digital resources and geographical space.

I dedicate the second part of this concluding chapter to making some comments on the methodology that I adopted in this research. I direct these comments, in particular, to researchers who may decide to study online campaigns and other similar complex digital-related phenomena in the future. More specifically, I present both the new possibilities and the difficulties that I encountered in my research due to the methodological choices that I introduced. Obviously, I focus on the two main methods that I adopted: the reconstruction of online networks among sites, and the digital ethnography of different online and offline spaces.

Finally, I dedicate a third section to proposing new lines of research that I would like to follow in future academic contributions. While most of these ideas propose that I will provide new interpretations of the data that I have already collected during this research, the final idea that I introduce suggests a different way for developing an effective research design in order to observe the phenomenon of online political campaigning.

7.1 Three Final Perspectives for Observing the Referendum Campaign

Internal variation of communication strategies during the water referendum campaign

In this research, I propose a detailed and fragmented description of very different communication activities, which activists and organizations elaborated during the same referendum campaign. I consider this recognition of the coexistence of numerous independent strategies within the same campaign as one of the main results of my work. As explained in Chapter 6, I mainly observed this variation on Facebook, a platform that groups very different features and that can permit, therefore, communication to be shaped in very different ways. In particular, activists adopted web resources to achieve different goals, perceived these resources in opposite ways, privileged the creation of horizontal online communities or, in contrast, the use of digital technologies to ‘inoculate’ a message within a large group of Internet users. Furthermore, they elaborated initiatives that were rooted offline, that were based on the web, or that were linking both of these spaces. Finally, they sometimes considered digital resources in an instrumental way
(for example, a social media group as a tool to connect dispersed activists) or as a fragmented environment in which to develop the campaign (for example, the activists’ coordinated messages posted on the comment space of the main online newspapers).

This variation mainly derived from the large number of organizations involved, from their very different characteristics, and – in particular, during the last phase of the campaign – from their freedom of action. Therefore, in my analysis I tried to link the characteristics of these online communication strategies with some aspects of the activists or of the organizations that were promoting these choices. Of course, in this research I never considered these characteristics as variables that I could systematically observe in their hypothetical correlations. However, I noted that local groups and relatively new organizations were largely promoting a horizontal use of digital resources: in particular, they perceived social media as places of interaction, and strongly linked online communication with their offline activities. In contrast, central actors representing core organizations tended to focus on the need to use web resources to spread a consistent, controlled and homogeneous message, and on the need to reach less interested people, too. Furthermore, professional and semi-professional actors more often adopted the idea of viral diffusion and of re-adaptation of messages in their work. Finally, as I will better explain in the next section, almost every actor started to conceive of the web as an environment of interaction during the last phase of the campaign, substituting a previous focus on digital resources as tools.

The large number of organizations involved clearly explains why online communications varied during the campaign. However, part of this multiplication of initiatives and communication styles depends on a strategic choice, which some very central organizations – including the central office of the Forum – started to conceive in the period that preceded the campaign. These organizations began to diversify their online (and offline) activities, in order to reach different sections of the public, to involve a higher number of sympathizers, thus providing them with practical tasks that were easy to personalize, and simply to experiment with numerous strategies at the same time, looking for the most efficacious ones.

Table 7.1 provides an interesting example of this planned variation. A single organization based in Rome planned, during a brainstorming session, the 38 activities listed in the last column shown in the table. Of

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72 I consider the possibility of adopting a comparative focus, investigating the communication strategies of different social media campaigns, as an interesting task for further research.
Table 7.1  Set of communication strategies elaborated by a single organization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Properties (where &amp; how)</th>
<th>Actions</th>
</tr>
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| Provide tools to become active | On the Net | – Templates for letters  
– Fake videos  
– Videos directed to elder people  
– Banners for blogs |
| | Individual actions | – Viral actions with stickers/posters  
– Postcards  
– Dinners for water  
– Stickers for bicycles  
– Water flags |
| | Offline | – Street actions in groups  
– Flash mobs  
– Happenings in swimsuit/naked |
| | Not specified | – Blog for first-time voters  
– Games for kids  
– Connect with other associations  
– Video games |
| Increase the visibility of the movement | Street/urban art | – Poems  
– Guerrilla marketing  
– Stencils  
– Diffuse performances on the web  
– Attract media attention  
– Connect territorial and national level |
| | VIP involvement | – A song for water  
– Artists for water  
– Small ads (with testimonials) |
| | Other ideas | – Musical bands  
– Connect with music clubs  
– Intervene on Yahoo answers  
– Communicate during sport events |
| Create interactive/dynamic communication | Self production of content | – Songs, dance contest |
| | Other idea | – Photos of supporters (I’ll vote Yes) |
| Launch coordinated actions | | – Respond to the ‘No’ committees  
– Comment on online newspapers  
– Video actions |
| Community building (fostering the sense of being part of a community of voters) | | – Symbolic objects  
– Ask young voters to talk with their grandparents  
– Demonstrations  
– Applications for Mac and games |
| Connect existing web resources | | – 45 websites/blogs |

The table re-elaborates a mind map emerged from a brainstorming activity. Militants applied most of these strategies, thanks to Facebook and to a page (www.referendumacqua.it/attivisti) on the main campaign site.
course, variation is an obvious result when a group applies the technique of brainstorming to plan its strategic choices. However, other interesting aspects emerge from this table, and from the meeting that it represents. The organizers of the session were looking for a very large set of possible communication tactics. Interestingly, the activists involved suggested to them initiatives that both conceived of digital resources in different ways, and that played with the link between online and offline actions differently. Furthermore, the organization that planned this brainstorming session applied most of these very different strategies in numerous online and offline places during the months that preceded the referendum. In some cases, therefore, divergent models for conceiving of the digital resources emerged and coexisted within the same organization.

To summarize, the water referendum campaign manifested a high level of internal variation for what concerns the initiatives based on the use of the web and social media. Scale of action, conception of the online sphere, interaction between online and offline plans constituted the main dimensions that characterized this variation. In general, large-scale organizations privileged less interactive, more homogeneous and easy-to-control perceptions of the online space, while the idea of Facebook as a place that hosts communities emerged in local or spontaneous groups. Finally, an idea of the digital spheres as spaces of interaction slowly substituted the previous idea of the online technologies as tools.

A relationship in evolution: activism and digital technologies

The creation of a wide communication campaign can modify in numerous ways the activities of the organizations that support it. In particular, in this book I show that the referendum mobilization in numerous cases required an evolution of the actors’ communication strategies, in particular, as concerns the digital environment. In particular, I identified three main aspects that characterize this evolution of the online initiatives.

First of all, two communications strategies were in a dialectical contrast during the year that preceded the vote: a centralized vision towards online communications, on the one hand, coexisted with an opposing, decentralized strategy. To a large extent, this phenomenon replied a similar tension among the actors of the Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l’Acqua (hereafter FIMA). On the one side, some organizations were encouraging an increased centralization and a certain level of institutionalization for the water coalition and, on the other side, some organizations strongly opposed the creation of centralized structures involving paid professionals,
asking for the Forum to remain a very horizontal network of connected territories instead (see Cernison 2016). While similar tensions are very common in coalitions and social movements, it is interesting to observe that during the referendum campaign they began to concern the sphere of digital communications, too. More specifically, the campaign that I observed evolved from at first having a centralized strategy (for example, through the creation of a single official Facebook account, or a strict control on the messages published online), to a very diffuse and uncontrolled communications scheme. However, it is important to note that in this case the word ‘diffuse’ does not necessarily mean ‘horizontal’ and ‘democratic’. Blogs with a large number of readers, authors of Facebook pages with thousands of ‘likes’, and organizations that could count on skilled and professional activists played a crucial role during the campaign. In other words, powerful communications actors quickly emerged within a multi-centric and diffused campaign.

A second aspect of this evolution concerns the different and widespread use of Facebook. While the organizations of the Forum were already using the platform on different scales before the start of the campaign, and the coalition had the support of some Facebook ‘stars’, this social network became the leading resource adopted in the campaign only during the final months preceding the vote. Numerous key activists who had influenced communication in a very pertinent way during the campaign were already looking at Facebook as a unique way of interacting with a broad, sympathetic audience, without recurring to the mainstream media. However, the campaign probably moved onto this platform due to numerous diffused, uncoordinated decisions. It is very difficult to summarize in a very brief way the effects the adoption of Facebook had on activism, organizations, and campaigning: Chapter 6, while presenting the complexity and variety in how the activists used the site, already provides some answers to this question. Nonetheless, I can suggest here three additional synthetic dimensions, which the activists often mentioned, adopted, and took into account. First, on Facebook the propaganda images and symbols widely circulated in an easy way, surpassing the traditional borders of the movements. However, this high level of circulation might simply result from the effectiveness of the campaign, or from the number of activists involved. Second, the water activists demonstrated the ability to adopt a single platform for different
functions, such as the creation of online communities or the diffusion of messages (e.g. petitions and invitations to events). In this case, I am persuaded that Facebook, as a medium, helped the activists to increase this ability, providing them with a single place in which to meet and communicate. Third, on Facebook the water activists were able to interact with a public that was wider than that of the activists' community. In my opinion, the social media environment obliged the water activists to enter into relations with different people, who were often sympathetic, but at the same time were less likely to have expertise or training in politics. These different users, furthermore, had the opportunity to organize in a semi-independent way during the campaign. As a result, the FIMA actors sometimes had to restate their line, for instance, contrasting incursions of militants of the Italian extreme right within marginal sectors of the campaign. Once more, the data that I have does not allow me to understand whether this opening process derived from the use of Facebook, or from the fact of creating a campaign: however, the two factors probably influenced each other, and social media use at least fostered the adoption of a very open style of campaigning.

A final aspect that widely characterized the evolution of online communication during the campaign regards the transition from a mainly instrumental view towards the digital resources, to a view that conceived of the web as a communications environment, made of neutral spaces of communication, but also of possible allies and opponents (see Chapter 5.1). In particular, this change resulted from the new needs that emerged during the campaign, above all the need to connect with a very broad number of less active sympathizers and, at a later stage, of citizens and voters who were not interested in politics. Following these needs, activists entered new online spaces: they ‘invaded’ the comments under online articles, looked for visibility on blogs dealing with non-political issues (including food blogs), appeared in highly visited online places such as Yahoo Answers and, of course, on Facebook. To explain this strategy towards the web, some activists ironically told me that they wanted to capture, in a very pragmatic way, a significant space on some famous platforms hosting porn videos, too. To conclude, it is important to mention another aspect that influenced – among numerous others – this evolution regarding the online communication strategies. The collaboration with external experts and the increased relevance of the paid professionals in my opinion contributed to the introduction of different views and the increasing complexity of numerous initiatives elaborated during the water campaign.
Connecting offline and online actions

The relationship between online communication and different offline geographical contexts, which the activists shaped differently during the referendum campaign, proved to be one of the most interesting and enlightening analytical dimensions that I encountered in my research. When I started to plan my investigation, I conceived of the two environments (online and offline) as well-defined, separate milieus, and my main purpose was to exclusively focus on the activities based on the web. In contrast, this research slowly moved in the opposite direction, investigating how the activists combined in their initiatives actions that were being developed on both the web and offline, often crossing the boundaries between the two. On the one hand, this evolution of my research design depended on the methodology and on the epistemological perspective that I adopted. Having derived to a great extent this perspective from the work of Christine Hine and from the (very different) approach of the Digital Methods Initiative of Amsterdam, a complex focus on the interplay between online and offline activities emerged. On the other hand, the activists whom I interviewed and observed clearly proposed complex (and divergent) descriptions of the interactions between the two environments, which were impossible to observe with a research design exclusively centred on a virtual and isolated web space.

In observing how the organizations combined digital and offline actions in their initiatives differently in the case of Facebook, in this book (Chapter 6.3) I introduce a classification that distinguishes four possible ways to ‘play’ with physical space while acting online. These categories characterize web communications in general, but the most complex ones were easier to find on the social media platforms. Since this classification might be a useful tool for further analyses on online campaigning (see Earl and Kimport 2011), I consider it useful to briefly summarize it in this concluding chapter.

The first category that I introduced (see Figure 7.1) groups events that the activists organized in a clearly delimited geographical place, which they made public through web communications on different platforms. In this case, the activists adopted the online resources as media tools, in order to attract more people to their initiatives or to spread information. The communication model that they applied, therefore, is not very different to the one adopted while distributing leaflets or writing a press release. Other minor elements can produce a slightly more complicated relationship between the digital and the offline observed milieus: for instance,
on Facebook the activists were able to represent their offline events in an easier way (for example, posting photos of a demonstration, charging videos, but also tagging people who were present and starting an online conversation on the initiative). Furthermore, digital resources often helped in the organization of these local events (for example, creating a ‘backstage’ that enabled the discussion and planning needed to develop a flash mob), and sometimes contributed to give life to stable conversations among the users, and even to the creation of formal associations that emerged after having participated in an isolated initiative.

A second category (Figure 7.2) includes the events that were developing primarily online. Of course, this category is internally very fragmented: it groups, for instance, the dissemination of photos and symbols, appeals to vote, and coordinated online actions of dispersed activists against the website of an opponent. In this case, the offline space can still play a role: as I explain in detail in Chapter 4, the online sphere often responds to cultural or geographical divisions and connections. However, since these phenomena mainly develop on digital platform, researchers can observe them with an exclusive focus on the internal ‘geography’ of the online space.
On the web, in these cases, different users connect among them, without considering in a direct way their territorial limits.

The third model that I propose includes the communities hosted online. The characteristics of the online communities are, however, very different from case to case, and researchers tend to dedicate entire academic contributions to these complex spaces of interaction (see e.g. Fuster y Morell 2010). In particular, online communities can relate to the offline places differently. In order to better represent them according to the offline/online dimension explored here, I divided them into two sub-categories, which I observed in my research. On the one hand, a local community of activists can integrate their continuous offline contacts by adopting online forms of communication (Figure 7.3 – A). In these cases, web communications can help to reinforce pre-existing ties, and the group appears to be always connected, in a continuous but informal assembly. The boundary between offline and online communications are therefore continuously crossed, and the activists’ discussions, content and range of actions are rooted in their local territory, even when they emerge online. On the other hand, an online community can appear with the aim of maintaining alive some channels of communication among activists who are geographically dispersed (Figure 7.3 – B). In this case, their communication is almost always happening online, even if periodic meetings and assemblies take place. As I had the opportunity to observe, the online community of this second kind that I could investigate in this work strongly considered the web and online resources as their territory and as their main field of action. In other words, they largely applied a perspective of the online milieu that conceived it as an environment of interaction and of struggle, instead of as a tool of external communication.
The last model that I introduced groups a series of complex initiatives, based on the idea of a local reinterpretation of a given format. They mainly emerged during the campaign because some external experts, professional activists or organizations often dealing with complex media strategies developed them (Figure 7.4) (for a detailed description, see Chapter 6, section 3). Generally speaking, in these initiatives the activists launched an idea on a particular web platform (in most cases, a social media platform), and asked a broad community of users and sympathizers to replicate it in a re-adapted, personalized and contextualized form. In most cases, the idea implied a first offline action (for instance, taking a photo of a water flag), followed by a further online action (in general, posting the photo or sharing some information online). Furthermore, the idea very often guaranteed a certain degree of personalization of the initiative (for example, the participants could decide a particular place or context to perform the action), a recurrent symbol, and a common online repository (a Facebook page, a website section, or only a very simple Twitter hashtag) to collect the results of the initiative. These initiatives, relatively new in the Italian context, proved to be particularly interesting to observe through the lens of online/offline interactions because they continuously cross the boundaries between these two milieus: they connect dispersed local contexts, but at the same time they root the action within numerous territorial milieus.

These four models are, evidently, simplifications of an interplay between online and offline spheres that will probably become more complex in the future. However, I am convinced that a refined version of this categorization could be a useful analytical tool to adopt in order to identify different strategies of online communications during online campaigns.
7.2 On Methods: strengths and weaknesses of a combined methodological approach

In this study dedicated to the referendum against the privatization of water I analysed this large-scale communications campaign by relying on a complex combined methodology. The reconstruction and analysis of networks of links among websites, the interviews with activists and the complex ethnography between online and offline spheres are the three main methods that I applied to investigate how the campaign developed.

I introduced this heterogeneous methodological approach as a necessary correction to my initial research plan, which was completely centred on the concept of the network. More specifically, when I first designed this research, my main purpose was to contribute to a growing discussion in the literature, which connected three fields of research: social movement studies, social network analysis, and web studies. Adopting the definition of movements as networks (Diani 1992) and bridging this concept with the idea that the web is a network made of sites and links, I aimed – as numerous other scholars have done over the last decade – to trace how social movement organizations connect online and appear on the web. Therefore, I was planning to adopt social network analysis, in a version adapted to the online environment, as the methodological core of my research, with the secondary goal of improving and testing new methods for investigating social networks online. Moreover, I was designing this research as a comparative study, with the aim of observing and investigating the online activities of different movements in various phases of mobilization.

I decided to extend my set of research methods, and to deeply review my research design and plan, for three reasons. First of all, because the water-related mobilization that I was starting to observe suddenly evolved, growing in scale and complexity: this intensification convinced me to limit the analysis to a single, internally fragmented and interesting case study. Second, I considered the continuous evolution of the campaign through time, in particular, as regards the communications strategies of the activists, as useful and illuminating elements to take into account in my research. Since social network analysis presents numerous difficulties in the description of longitudinal data, I decided, therefore, to look for a method better able to describe these time phases. Third, in 2011 social media, and, in particular, Facebook, quickly became the most important online places that hosted the activists’ campaign communications efforts, providing (with some difficulties) vast amounts of unexpected data for my research. Therefore, I
considered it too reductive to describe the referendum campaign by focusing only on the pattern of ties among traditional sites. I felt the need to find new and flexible methodological tools to explore the social media environments, in a context where it was difficult to precisely define in advance which groups, pages or events could become relevant for the analysis. Moving from these three premises, I started to convert the relatively simple and preliminary task of choosing a method into an independent research question, which I evaluated and which guided different stages of my research. I expressed this additional methodological question in the following way: How can a researcher successfully investigate the evolution of a large-scale, polycentric campaign that is happening in different physical places and online platforms?

In attempting to answer this research question, I achieved one of the most relevant results of this research: I explored, tested and developed methodological solutions that permit us to investigate how social movement actors communicate online during a campaign, keeping a focus that constantly moves from local activists to the campaign in its entirety. I achieved this result, at least in part, by combining methodological approaches – and in some cases, theoretical insights – that are usually held as distinct in the literature. On the one hand, I relied on the already mentioned ‘versions’ of social network analysis based on the web structure; on the other hand, I explored the qualitative/holistic digital ethnography tradition, in this case extended to non-digital environments, too, and integrated with a dense series of interviews with the activists.

As I have mentioned numerous times in this research, I did not combine these two approaches in order to triangulate them and compare their results. My aim was, instead, to describe the campaign at two different levels. Through the ethnographic qualitative approach, I explored the complex online and offline interactions among the activists, the perception of the activists, and other unexpected concepts (e.g. the relationship with space) that directly emerged from the analysis. The network approach completed the analysis by providing a wide, schematic image of the relationships between the numerous organizations involved in the campaign, which were difficult to trace using exclusively qualitative methods.

Both the network analysis and the digital ethnography revealed strengths and weak points. In the next two sections, I individually evaluate these components of my methodology, in order to provide some final suggestions to those researchers who are planning to extensively investigate similar online campaigns created by social movement organizations.
Network reconstruction and analysis of the referendum web domain

The fourth chapter of this book explores the communications sphere connected to the referendum campaign by adopting an online version of social network analysis: it investigates web domains using the Navicrawler software, mainly following a protocol elaborated by Jacomy and Ghitalla (2007). This approach, which I adapted to my research purposes, proved to be a very solid tool for investigating large web phenomena, mainly because it gives the researcher the ability to control every phase of the network reconstruction process, and of the analysis of its properties. While other programs and methods – such as the more famous IssueCrawler – provide users with faster ways to trace networks of sites in an automatic way, Navicrawler permits and requires continuous human control during the process of network tracing. Therefore, the researcher plays a more active role: he (or she) has the power to define the limits and the depth of the analysis, the websites that will become part of the network and the online resources that can be excluded from the examined structure. This last characteristic, in particular, is becoming increasingly helpful because it permits us to trace thematic networks even when highly linked and visible sites (such as Facebook, Google, Twitter and YouTube) have too great an influence on the web structure. Another useful characteristic of this method is its flexibility: after having traced the network, I was able to easily attach new attributes to the nodes, and to test numerous ways to analyse the collected data.

In comparison with other methods of online network tracing, the Navicrawler approach demonstrated some difficulties, too. First of all, it is relatively slow: although its speed is reasonable for investigating a relatively small ‘portion’ of the web, in my work I had to manually explore hundreds of websites, a process that required months of full-time work. Furthermore, at the moment of writing the software is made available in an old, unstable version, which works in combination with obsolete versions of the Firefox web browser. Therefore, it tends to crash during large-scale investigations. An upgraded version of the program and of the research protocol is, however, expected soon. In the meantime, the slow pace and the instability of Navicrawler can create, unfortunately, serious limits for research. In particular, the analysis through time of the evolution of a web network becomes almost impossible to achieve due to these software limitations. For research projects involving the time dimension, more automatized protocols and software like IssueCrawler are, therefore, a better choice.

A second limit of this research protocol concerns the analysis of the traced network. The most notable investigations that the core group of Navicrawler
Creators and researchers work with are particular kinds of online networks, representing, for instance, ethnic groups in the diaspora or political spheres with polarized positions. In these cases, it tends to be easy to distinguish subgroups in the traced network. In other words, some attributes of the sites (e.g. political ideas, issue treated) tend to vary according to their position in the network. In the case that I followed in this research, the online ‘water’ network of websites has relatively different characteristics, and it is not fragmented into subgroups or polarized positions in an apparent way. Its characteristics are, therefore, less easy to visualize. A web network remains interesting to observe in this case, too. In particular, I hope that my analysis of the different roles that the main hubs played in this web domain attracted the attention of the reader. However, researchers can obtain results which are easier to present and more able to attract the reader’s attention if they decide to map web phenomena where an internal fragmentation into groups, ‘tribes’ or polarized positions might be expected.

A third, obvious limit that the social network analysis protocols applied to the web are encountering is that they are techniques created for the traditional web: they aim at exploring relatively simple and stable connections, made of links or – in some recent and still experimental research – of likes and retweets. Online communication is increasingly variating, combining on the same platforms not only different content, but also different models of interaction. For researchers, these changes mean difficulties in the creation of databases, and in the possibility of adopting in advance well-defined techniques of investigation. This notwithstanding, among the numerous emerging kind of data adopted in this field, flows of text in posts and comments within representative Facebook groups, conversations in Twitter and data on citizens who sign online petitions are proving to be useful and widely adopted tools for research. However, the reconstruction of networks of traditional sites is a well-tested and almost established method. It gives the researchers solid results, which can be compared with those of other scholars adopting the same methodology.

Digital ethnography online and offline

Different types of activists shaped the campaign that I studied through day-to-day strategic choices and interactions, which were continuously ‘jumping’ from the online platforms to offline spaces, or from one kind of digital milieu to another one. The squares of small towns, national or local mailing lists, monuments, beaches, Facebook groups, and comments under articles in online newspapers were some of the intertwined places
where activists developed the campaign. As it is easy to understand, the characteristics of this complex and fragmented environment are very interesting to observe by relying on qualitative methods, and, in particular, by adopting an ethnographic approach.

In particular, the form of digital ethnography that I developed and tested in this ethnographic research approach proved to be useful for three reasons. First of all, it permitted me to analyse the referendum campaign without imposing previously designed concepts to the phenomena under study. In many cases, the observation helped me to produce unexpected analytical categories that were very different from my original ones. For instance, I understood through this research that my initial, technologically driven view of web communication was too focused on the horizontal and ‘democratic’ interactions that digital technologies seem to permit. In contrast, I observed that one-to-many communication patterns, together with a distinction between a public of readers and a small amount of key content producers characterizes in many cases the online campaigns, too. Second, the ethnographic approach permitted me to quickly re-orient the investigation towards platforms and web phenomena that were emerging as relevant in a previously unexpected way: small Facebook groups situated in peripheral contexts suddenly emerged as ‘the main place to be’ during the last phases of the campaign. Third, digital ethnography – with the crucial help of interviews – proved to be very useful for focusing the analysis on the interactions of the activists during the campaign, rather than on the content that they were writing online. I consider this focus on the interactions to be crucial for observing the link that connected online communications with traditional, street-based actions during the campaign.

Similarly, I distinguish three main limits to the digital ethnographic approach when applied to a large-scale campaign organized by a dispersed group of almost independent actors. The first limit regards the difficulty of tracing a representative image of the entire campaign. Due to the very large number of groups and actors involved, it was necessary to focus only on some groups and initiatives, and I was able to observe the activities of and to interview only a relatively limited number of key activists. In other words, my field of research was too wide for a proper ethnographic study: for this reason, too, I felt the need to include a different methodological approach, based on the reconstruction of web networks, in the analysis. The second limit of the ethnographic approach is that it proved able to depict the complexity on the referendum campaign well, but was less suited to reorganizing the data into new categories, in order to obtain a final simplified image of what happened during this complex communications
effort. A third limit of this method concerns the fact that a very large number of activities that contributed to shaping the campaign were happening in private places. Activists and less engaged sympathizers were sending messages or reading web content from their houses, or from their own digital devices. Unfortunately, my analysis seldom had the opportunity to interact with this peripheral and fragmented form of web communication (even though in some cases the activists arrived to host me in their houses).

To conclude, in order to mitigate against the effect of these three limitations while adopting an ethnographic approach to web communication, it is probably better to reduce the scale and to find case studies where the field of observation is easier to delimit. Actions that happen at the local level, campaigns organized by a single organization, initiatives that emerge on a single Internet platform are surely easier to observe. Furthermore, a focus on similar smaller cases can enable a researcher, or a team of researchers, to introduce a comparative perspective in their analysis, which surely is especially useful for observing how activists shape their strategies differently, according to the dimensions that emerge from the research.

7.3 Five Directions for Further Research

During my research, I did my best to cover as many aspects as I could of a communications campaign of such unexpected dimension, complexity and diffusion. To a large extent, however, my work required a continuous selection between, on the one hand, which aspects of the campaign I should consider relevant and, on the other hand, which research directions to exclude from the analysis. In particular, the availability of time, my methodological expertise, the internal congruence of topics within the book, and the accessibility of data were factors that played a crucial role in guiding these continuous choices. Nonetheless, after a final re-examination of the interviews and of the information that I collected, I can distinguish five themes that I should explore in detail in future contribution.

The first line for further research that I would like to cover in the future concerns the active role of commercial social media in shaping online campaigns. More specifically, I will shift my attention from a perspective that observes Facebook (and other social media platforms) as a ‘neutral’ platform, where people connect and shape different forms of communication and activism, to a perspective that considers Facebook as a platform created by a media corporation. This actor, of course, has its own aims, introduces its own strategies, and can influence online activism in intentional or unintentional ways.
In this book, I deliberately excluded this perspective on social media for two connected reasons. First of all, because the activists whom I interviewed very seldom described the commercial social media as non-neutral places: in the large majority of cases, they conceived of them simply as a new kind of online environment, where it was possible to interact with a broader population, to organize, and to spread messages. Even when I deliberately proposed to the activists questions regarding privacy, or their ability to maintain control over their online communication, they tended to pragmatically focus the discourse on the new possibilities that social media were offering them.

Second, I decided to exclude a perspective of commercial social media as actors because, as far as I was able to observe, they rarely played a visibly active role in the development of the campaign. In general, they provided the activists useful platforms for communication, which could appear in most cases as neutral environments. This notwithstanding, I consider it useful to work in the future by adopting the opposite perspective, mainly because the rare cases when Facebook played an active role in the campaign are particularly interesting to analyse. In one of these cases, in particular, the main Facebook page of the referendum committee – an enormously relevant communications tool for the campaign organizers – disappeared for almost one month, and the press agent of FIMA had to prove to the administrators of Facebook his right to communicate on behalf of the entire committee. In this case, Facebook administrators decided to act in a way that shows their ability to control and to set the rules of online communication on the platform.

A second interesting line of research that I would like to pursue in the future introduces a sort of ‘archaeological’ vision of online campaigns, and of the water referendum campaign, in particular. The research question that I propose to explore, starting from the data that I have already collected, concerns what remains of a complex online campaign after its end. In particular, online campaigns increasingly imply the creation of very creative communications products: interactive websites, symbols that circulate online and on the ground, online communities of activists and sympathizers are only some of the many possible initiatives that can emerge from these campaigns. Furthermore, the creation of similar online products usually requires professional or semi-professional skills, which a coalition of organizations can find within its boundaries, or by establishing new (ephemeral or long-lasting) connections.

Starting from these premises, I consider it particularly interesting to observe which ‘strategies’ the activists adopt towards the online resources and the communications skills established during the campaign. Intuitively, online communication seems to follow the fate of the coalition that created
the campaign. If a stable organization or movement emerges from the campaign, some core actor might invest resources in maintaining or adapting the online resources (Facebook pages, websites, and similar spaces) produced during the mobilization. Otherwise, these online resources disappear, or other actors can even try ‘recapture’ them. For instance, this is the case of the domain www.referendumacqua.it, which FIMA had to abandon after the end of the campaign: another actor bought the web domain, including some pro-privatization content on the site.

A third aspect that I plan to explore in the future concerns the circulation of symbols and images in different online platforms during a campaign. In Chapter 6, I briefly discussed the relevance of visual elements during a campaign, in particular, on Facebook, and I described different kinds of initiatives that aim at spreading visual elements online. In this book, however, I never observed these symbols as connected cultural elements that appear in online networks. In future contributions, I would like to apply to pictures and images the techniques that I already adopted in Chapter 4 to observe the online circulation of keywords. In this research, I have developed the expertise to create a database of images extracted from the online pages that supported the campaign: a similar database, combined with the adoption of social network analysis techniques, can provide very important information on the circulation of symbols on the web.

A fourth direction of analysis concerns the relationships that activists create with the wider online environment during a campaign. In this case, too, I have partly explored the phenomenon in this research, presenting my conclusions in Chapter 5. However, in Chapter 4 I deliberately limited my network investigation to social movement actors, without observing how activists and organizations established direct connections with mainstream media and other institutions. Jacomy and Ghitalla, while conceiving Navicrawler and the connected analysis of web domains, suggest useful relational techniques (in particular, what they call the ‘analysis of the frontiers’) to explore the links between campaign actors and their surrounding environment. Furthermore, I should dedicate even more attention in future contributions to the role of external media experts and designers in social movement campaigns. Atypical ‘movement’ actors who are deeply connected with the traditional media market, these professionals can constitute an interesting bridge between the practices of communication that characterize grassroots political communication on one side, and business environments on the other.

A final idea that emerges from this work regards a possible future contribution in the fields of online campaigning and digital activism. The
concepts and the dimensions that emerged during my research represent interesting aspects of online communications during a campaign. However, they might produce better results if adopted in comparative perspective to smaller and simpler cases. In the future, therefore, I will attempt to observe whether different ways of relating the online and offline spaces, different models of online actions, and different perceptions towards some particular tools and digital platforms tend to emerge in association with the characteristics of organizations and coalitions in several, relatively small campaigns. For the same reasons, my future contributions will probably focus on the variation of a limited number of characteristics of online communications, for instance, observing whether the relationship between activists and social media is different when a communication campaign is linked with a well-defined physical space, or when a campaign is less rooted in a specific offline territory.