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From Cyber-Autonomism to Cyber-Populism: An Ideological History of Digital Activism

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Abstract: The analysis of digital activism has so far been dominated by a techno-determinist approach which views the content of various forms of activism supported by digital communication, as directly reflecting the properties of the technologies utilised by activists and the historical evolution of such technologies. This line of interpretation has been manifested in the popularity acquired by notions as "Twitter protest" or "revolution 2.0" in the news media and in academic discourse in reference to recent protests. Moving beyond this reductionist trend, this article proposes an ideological approach to the study of digital activism and its historical transformation, which may better account for the combination of political, cultural and social factors involved in shaping it. I identity two main waves of digital activism, which correspond not only to two phases of technological development of the Internet (the so-called web 1.0 and web 2.0), but also to two different protest waves, the anti-globalisation movement, and the movement of the squares that began in 2011, each with its own dominant ideology. I argue that reflecting the seismic shift in perceptions and attitudes produced by the 2008 financial crash, and the connected shifts in social movement ideology, digital activism has moved from the margins to the centre of the political arena, from a countercultural posture to a counterhegemonic ambition. I describe this turn as a transition from cyber-autonomism to cyber-populism as the two defining techno-political orientations of the first and second wave of digital activism. Reflecting the influence of neo-anarchism and autonomism in the anti-globalisation movement cyber-autonomism viewed the Internet as an autonomous space where to construct a countercultural politics outside the mainstream. To the contrary, informed by the populist turn taken by 2011 and post-2011 movements cyber-populism approaches the Internet as a "popular space", a generic space which is populated by ordinary citizens, and mostly dedicated to non-political activities, such as gossip, celebrity culture, or interpersonal communication, but which can nevertheless be politicised, and turned towards the purpose of popular mobilisation against the neoliberal elites responsible for economic and social disarray. This shift which substantially modifies the way in which activists conceives of and utilise digital media goes a long way towards explaining the differences in digital activism practices, and their contrasting views of the Internet as a tool and site of struggle.

Keywords: Digital activism, ideology, social media, populism, autonomism, Internet, counterculture, popular culture, techno-politics, techno-determinism

1. Introduction

Digital activism, a term widely used to describe different forms of activism that utilise digital technology, has undergone a rapid transformation since its emergence at the dawn of the web. From the vantage-point of the mid 2010s it is possible to tentatively identify two main waves of digital activism. The first corresponds to the early popularization of the Internet and the rise of the web in the mid '90s which was accompanied by the development by a first wave of digital activism. This wave encompassed a number of projects and initiatives waged by tech and alternative

media activists of the anti-globalisation movement, including the alternative news site Indymedia, as well as a number of alternative mailing lists and early hacker (or hacktivist) groups and labs. The second wave coincides with the rise of the so-called web 2.0 Internet of social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, which has been accompanied by the rise of world-famous hacker collectives as Anonymous and Lulzsec, as well as the "social media activism" of 15-M, Occupy and the other movements of the squares, whose organisers have used social networking sites as platforms of mass mobilisation. To what extent are these two phases of digital activism simply a reflection of the evolution of digital technology, and of the shift from web 1.0 to web 2.0, as they are often portrayed? Is the difference between them to be understood merely as deriving from the changing material affordances of digital technology at a time of rapid technological innovation? Or is there something more to the equation?

The debate about the transformation of digital activism has so far tended to follow a typical techno-deterministic tendency which reads technology as the ultimate cause of social transformation. This conception is belied by the popularity acquired by terms as "revolution 2.0" (Ghonim 2012), "wiki-revolution" (Ferron and Massa 2011) or "Twitter revolution" (Morozov 2009), widely used in news media and scholarly accounts to refer to recent protest movements making use of digital technology. The underlying rationale of these expressions is that the adoption of a certain kind of platform, say Facebook or Twitter, automatically defines the form of activism channelled through it. This approach stems from a simplistic view of technology's effects, deeply informed by the media theory of McLuhan and his famous moniker "the medium is the message" (1967; 2011), according to which the use of a given technological device results in a series of inevitable consequences. The school of media ecology, deeply informed by McLuhan's work has important things to say about the way in which technology structures action, for example the way in which different communication technologies (say telephone, TV or the Internet), carry with them different communication architectures (one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many), and different dispositions from the users of technology (Postman 1985; Lundby 2009). However, it tends to neglect a number of non-technological factors – socio-economic, political and cultural ones – that intervene in defining activism's content. To go beyond such simplified view of technology as an un-mediated force reshaping organisational structures and protest practices after its own image, the analysis of digital activism needs to recuperate an understanding of ideology, understood as a worldview and value system which shapes collective action, and of how ideology interacts with technology in shaping activist practices.

Adopting this approach, in this article I develop a periodisation of digital activism which centres around two different waves, each with its own ideological characteristics and with its accompanying "techno-political" orientations, to use the term introduced by Rodotà to describe the nexus between politics and technology and since widely adopted by activists and researchers. To this end I draw from my previous theorising on digital activism (Gerbaudo 2012; 2016) in the movement of the squares of 2011 and other post-2011 movements.

My argument can be schematically summarised as follows. Anti-globalisation activists adopted a techno-political approach that I describe as cyber-autonomist. This approach was deeply informed by the 70s and 80s counter-culture, DIY culture, and the tradition of alternative media, from pirate radios to fanzines. These different inspirations shared an emphasis on the struggle for the liberation of individuals and local communities from the interference of large-scale institution. Drawing on these antecedents, cyber-autonomism approached the Internet as a space of autonomy.

The movement of the squares has instead adopted what I describe as a cyber-populist attitude which sees the Internet as a space of mass mobilisation in which atomized individuals can be fused together in an inclusive and syncretic subjectivity. This approach reflects the populist turn that has marked the movement of the squares, as seen in its adoption of a discourse of the people, or of the 99% against the elites (Gerbaudo 2017).

These two techno-political orientations evidently reflect the process of technological evolution from the more elitist web 1.0 to the massified web 2.0 of social network sites. But their understanding cannot be reduced to this technological transformation. It also needs to encompass a plurality of other factors, and account for the seismic shift in attitudes and perceptions caused by the financial crisis of 2008 and connected ideological developments. Paralleling the turn of social movements from anarcho-autonomism to populism as the dominant contestational ideology, digital activism has transitioned from a view of the Internet as a space of resistance and counter-cultural contestation, to its understanding as a space of counter-hegemonic mobilisation.

The article begins with a theoretical discussion of different factors involved in the transformation of digital activism, and in particular the relationship between technology, politics and culture. I highlight the need to give more attention to political, cultural and ideological factors in the understanding of digital activism beyond the techno-determinism that currently dominates the literature. I continue by demonstrating how ideological shifts have shaped the transformation of digital activism, by exploring the transition from cyber-autonomism to cyber-populism, and how it manifests itself in a number of concrete examples. I conclude with some reflections on the implications for future research about digital activism, emphasising the need to bring ideology back into the analysis of protest movements of the digital era.

2. Techno-politics Beyond Techno-Determinism

Digital activism is a form of activism that by definition brings into question the relationship between politics and technology, or to use a term that has become en vogue among activists and researchers in recent years, the nature and dynamics of "techno-politics". Techno-politics is a term that has been coined by Italian politician and scholar Stefano Rodotà (1997) to express the nexus between politics and technology, and has since been popularised by activist scholars as Javier Toret (2013) in Spain to define the new field of analysis raised by the development of digital activism. Referring to the two constitutive concepts in the notion of techno-politics - technology and politics - one can argue that up to this point the scholarship on digital activism has excessively focused on the first element while neglecting the second. Scholars have tended to read political transformation as resulting from technological transformation, thus overlooking that also the converse is the case, namely that changes in political and ideological orientations modify the way technology is conceived of and used.

The techno-deterministic nature of much contemporary scholarship on digital activism is seen in the way in which the nature of digital activism is understood as deriving directly from specific properties of technology. This is clearly seen in the debate about the effects of media affordances on digital activism. An example, is the book by Earl and Kimport (2011) and the way it approaches digital media as a set of apparatuses that lower costs to participation and thus facilitate new forms of interaction that were previously impossible. In line with much literature coming from a

political science perspective, this account proposes an instrumental and economic understanding of media effects, as seen in the language of "benefits" and "costs" which it utilises to explain the use of digital technology. This approach explains the practical advantages of digital technology to activists but it neglects the symbolic and cultural dimension of digital activism starting from the actual content that is channelled through this technology. A similar critique can be made to the work of Lance W. Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, and their theory of what they describe as "connective action" (2012) in opposition to the notion of collective action. Bennett and Segerberg claim that social media with their allowing for increased connectivity, overcome the collective logic of earlier social movements, and their need for leadership and collective identity (2012). Thanks to digital technology movements can thus become more personalised and less controlled from organisational centres. What is overlooked in this context, is that this libertarian application of digital technology is far from being an inevitable result. The affordances of digital technology can be turned towards very different political ends and coupled with very different organisational formats. It is sufficient to think for example about the fact that radically different political phenomena as the Occupy Wall Street movement and Donald Trump campaign in the 2016 presidential elections have both proficiently used social media, yet in radically different ways, and on the back of radically different organisational structures.

A techno-deterministic element is arguably also present in the work of Manuel Castells on digital activism. To be fair, Castells' account is far more nuanced than purely structuralist accounts originating mostly from the field of political science. This is because Castells works in the sociological tradition and his approach also accounts for a number of cultural factors that are involved in shaping the Internet and digital activism. Differently from other authors he does not see technology as an almighty monolith but also as a social and cultural product. In this light, Castells has interestingly argued that an important factor to understand digital culture is the influence of the libertarian spirit of the 1960s and 1970s protest movements and the way it has inspired the de-centralised end-to-end architecture of the Internet (2004). Nevertheless, Castells' theory of the network society, and his view of digital technology as ushering in a shift away from the pyramidal structure of Fordist society, and towards network-like structures proper to the information society still contains some techno-deterministic elements. This is due to the view of technology as ushering what he describes as a "morphological" transformation that affects the entirety of society, and that has consequences on all social fields and organisations that adopt digital technology. This view no doubt contains an element of truth, but it seems to neglect the flexibility that such process of organisational influence usually manifests. Furthermore, it is wrong in assuming that digital technology tends to bring about an erosion of hierarchy. As I have demonstrated in my previous work, digital activism is not an horizontal and leaderless space, but is accompanied by the rise of new forms of leadership (2012; 2016).

A similar tendency is also seen in Castells' work on social media. Castells has argued that the diffusion of social media as Facebook and Twitter has transformed internet communication and introduce a new media logic which he describes as "mass self-communication" (2009), one which combines the logic of self-communication of face-to-face, telephone and other one-to-one media, with the mass and one-to-many of mass media. According to Castells this communication logic deeply informed the 2011 movements of the Indignados, Occupy and the Arab Spring, and it strongly contributed to their mass outreach (2012). This view certainly provides with a powerful rationale to understand the way in which the second wave of

digital activism has managed to go beyond the minoritarian politics of the first wave. According to it, social media have provided the necessary technical conditions for new forms of digital activism to arise. However, Castells tends to neglect how in this shift also ideological and political factors have concurred. As I will demonstrate in the course of the article, without a change in ideology the new opportunities of mass mobilisation offered by social media would have not been reaped by protest movements.

The work of Jeffrey Juris, an anthropologist and a former student of Manuel Castells has followed a similar line of reasoning, reading the transformation of activism as resulting from technological transformation. In his influential book *Networking Futures* (2008) Juris argued that the anti-globalisation movement was informed by the imaginary of the network which constituted a key inspiration in a number of digital activism projects that emerged around this time, including the alternative news site Indymedia, and alternative mailing lists used by activists to organised specific activities and campaigns. In his work about the movement of the squares of 2011, Juris has argued that this wave has a different logic to the anti-globalisation one. He discusses a shift from the logic of networking of anti-globalisation activists, to what he describes as a "logic of aggregation", and argues that this transformation derives from the evolution from the web 1.0 to the web 2.0 and that the logic of aggregation reflects the new mass outreach affordances of social media platforms. This logic has been supported by the "virality", that is by the capacity for rapid diffusion afforded by corporate social networking sites as Facebook and Twitter, and has then been translated physically in the occupied squares of 2011 teeming with large crowds (2012). Juris' inspiring analysis provides some interesting insights about the technological underpinnings of the transformation of protest tactics. Yet, it overlooks how this change in the way of doing protest is also informed by significant changes in protest culture and ideology.

2.1. Bringing Protest Culture Back into the Equation

While these accounts are right in identifying the influence played by technology on contemporary politics, they often tend to adopt a reductive understanding of this relationship of causation. A certain type of technological arrangement is seen as automatically leading to a certain logic of action, with little attention paid to the process of political or cultural mediation that intervene in different concrete examples of digital activism. Indeed, digital activism is not just a technical phenomenon, it is a phenomenon. It is an activity that revolves around communicating certain messages, ideas, images, and therefore it possesses not only a technological but also a cultural dimension. The cultural, as well as more generally the political, nature of digital activism needs to be taken into account if we are to understand why digital activism has developed in certain way and why it has changed through time. To overcome the techno-deterministic bias of contemporary debates it is necessary to pay attention to the complex imbrication between politics, culture and technology, with specific reference to a) the relative autonomy of politics from technology; b) the symbolic and not only material character of technological processes; c) the role of technology as a mediator of social relationships and ways of life that cannot be reduced to technology alone.

First, a key problem in techno-deterministic accounts is the way in which technology is seen as the independent variable always bound to determine the logic of action of social movements and consequently steer in a certain direction. This approach neglects what we could described as the "relative autonomy of political and cultural processes from technology" that is the way in which culture and politics are

influenced by but not reducible to technology. Technology does not single-handedly define activism, rather activism is always informed by the cultural contents it channels, by the ideas, images, views that it puts forward. A number of recent works illustrate this point.

Wolfson in his book *CyberLeft* looking at the anti-globalisation movement and its use digital media, highlights how digital media practices are accompanied by a certain ethos and "cultural logic", which approaches the Internet not just as a tool but also a space of solidarity in which different struggles can unite (2014, 17). Similarly Barassi and Treré have argued that besides the evolution of technology it is important to take into account the lived experience of the activists who utilize that technology, and the way they deconstruct assumptions about the nature and purpose of technology (2012). Coleman has argued that hacking is not just a technical practice but also a social one which carries specific ethics and aesthetics, aspects which are influenced by, but cannot be reduced to technology (2013). This is seen in the way in which hacker groups construct their own language and symbology, epitomised by the mask of Anonymous, taken from the cult movie *V for Vendetta*. Thus, it is necessary to pay attention not only to the technical devices used by activists, but also by the cultural contents they channel through such technologies.

Second, it is important to account for the fact that technology is not just a material apparatus, a technical or instrumental structure possessing certain properties, but also a symbolic object to which a number of meanings and cultural uses are attached. This is an aspect that has been widely documented in the literature on the domestication of media and technology (Berker, Hartmann and Punie 2005) and in the cultural study of science and technology (Menser and Aronowitz 1996; Van Loon 2002). Scholars have shown that technologies can be associated with very different meanings depending on the different social and cultural contexts in which they are deployed and the values and beliefs of the groups that utilise them. As Kavada has demonstrated, not only does digital activism reflect the properties of the Internet as a set of technical devices, but also of the internet cultures that have emerged within it, such as hacker culture (2013). The Internet is not just a technology but also a cultural space, the two being difficult to separate from one another. This aspect calls for the need to explore the role played by various internet cultures and subcultures in influencing digital activism.

Third, we should avoid looking at technology instrumentally, as a self-standing tool but appreciate the way in which technology mediates social relationships, since this is ultimately the most important way in which technology has an effect on social phenomena. This view is ultimately the one which lied at the core of Marx and Engels account of industrial technology. For them what mattered was not just the way in which it allowed for new forms of production, but also the fact that it materialised a relationship of oppression, in their case the one of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat (2002 [1848]). Techno-deterministic analysis tends to bracket this aspect, overlooking the fact that technology is a mediator of a certain social relationship be it of oppression, leadership or cooperation. Furthermore, it overlooks the way in which technology is embedded in broader social (and not just communication) ecologies and the social relationships that are established within them.

Lim has for example demonstrated how the effectiveness of social media in circulating information relevant to the protest movements that eventually led to the Tahrir protests in 2011, was the presence of thick offline social networks. These were exemplified by the way in which cab drivers in Cairo facilitated the circulation of information via word-of-mouth, repeating to others what they had heard from passengers about "what Facebook was saying" on any given day (2012). The effects

of technology thus depend not just on its affordances but also on the social relationships and ways of life with which it is entangled. This aspect highlights the need to appreciate the embeddedness of technology in different cultural communities, and the way in which technological use depends on the customs, values and norms adopted by these communities.

These different critiques call for a more nuanced account of the relationship between technology and politics, which may render not just how technology influences politics, but also how in turn politics influences technology. In my contention, the way to achieve this objective is to resurrect the notion of ideology, hereby understood in the neutral sense as a system of values and beliefs adopted by political and social actors and allowing them to act as a collective. Ideology is a term that provides a way to explore the complex imbrication of cultural, political and social factors which alongside technology influence the way in which digital activism is performed.

A number of scholars have already begun to explore how different technological practices carry their own ideologies. For example, Turner has argued that the development of cyberculture was informed by the ideology of techno-utopianism and techno-libertarianism, which was in turn informed by the 70s and 80s counterculture, with their emphasis on individual self-realisation and their suspicion for large-scale institutions (2010). Barbrook and Cameron argued that the rise of the digital economy in the 1990s manifested an inchoate ideology they described as the Californian ideology: a techno-libertarian worldview bringing together hippies and yuppies (1995). An ideological element is also clearly visible in social media. Social media are in fact not just a set of applications with given material affordances. Alike other media, they also carry their own media ideologies (Gershon 2010), or in this case what we could described as "the ideology of social media" manifested for example in the language, of sharing, crowd-sourcing, friendship and collaboration they have introduced (see for example Fuchs 2013, 98; Lovink 2011; Van Dijck 2014, 172). Building on this literature about the nexus between technology and ideology in the continuation of this article I develop a periodisation of digital activism in two waves with distinct ideological characteristics, and connected "techno-political orientations", that is different ideologically informed ways of conceiving of the relationship between politics and technology.

3. 1990s-2010s: Digital Activism from Counterculture to Counterhegemony

Looking at the transformation of digital activism through the lens of ideology, allows to appreciate the way in which political and cultural factors combine with technological ones in shaping the content of various forms of activism channelled via social media. Being a form of activism that is deeply entangled with technology, digital activism reflects the nature and transformation of the ecosystem of digital communication (Treré 2012). However, this technological influence is "filtered" through a number of political and cultural factors, and more specifically "techno-political orientations" that determine how a certain technology is conceived of and utilised. This conception of technology that I describe through the term techno-political orientation is highly ideological in character since it involves a value-laden view of the Internet and of its role in society and politics, and ideological are its consequences, in the way in which it guides collective action.

Following this line of thinking we need to explore how processes of evolution of digital activism that are usually understood as stemming simply from the evolution of technology do in fact also reflect a change in the ideology of protest movements and

in their techno-political stance. This is most clearly seen in the view of an activism 1.0 followed by activism 2.0, as paralleling the transition from web 1.0 to web 2.0 and reflecting the change in technology and affordances. It is obvious that there is some truth to this parallel. However, as I will endeavour to demonstrate the causes of this transformation are more complex and cannot be reduced to technological factors alone. In fact, these two waves of digital activism do not only coincide with two waves of technological evolution, but also to two phases of social movement mobilisation each with its own defining characteristics.

These two protest phases are the anti-globalisation movement around the turn of the millennium and the movement of the squares of 2011. These two protest movements have shared many similarities, to the point that some activists have seen the second wave to be a continuation of the first. At the same time these waves have also displayed different ideological orientations, which reflect the change in the social and political situation since the onset of the economic crisis of 2008, and thus make these two movements interesting case studies for the purpose of comparative analysis. While the anti-globalisation movement's dominant ideology was anarcho-autonomism (or autonomism for short) as a combination of anarchism and autonomism, the movement of the squares has been characterised by the influence of left-wing populism (Gerbaudo, forthcoming). As I will endeavour to show this ideological shift in social movements maps onto the changing techno-political orientations of social movements: the cyber-autonomism of the first wave, and the cyber-populism of the second wave of digital activism.

3.1.   An Ideological Periodisation of Digital Activism

The transformation of digital activism in the last decades can be viewed schematically as a move from the margins to the centre, of the political arena, from a countercultural politics of resistance to a counterhegemonic politics of popular mobilisation. According to this interpretation, while an early form of digital activism conceived of the Internet as a separate countercultural space, the second wave of digital activism has approached the Internet as part of a political mainstream to be occupied by protestors (Gerbaudo 2015). Thus, the first views position the Internet as a sort of sanctuary space, in which activists can find solace from the oppressive character of society. Conversely the second view considers the Internet as a centre-piece of contemporary society, one which manifests its contradiction, but also one where activists can hope to develop a process of mass mobilisation, capable of attracting not only highly politicised people, but a significant section of the general population.

My understanding of the evolution of digital activism and of the presence of two distinct waves comes close to the view of Karatzogianni, a media scholar who has been working on digital activism since the early 2000s. Karatzogianni proposes the existence of 4 waves of digital activism (2015). The first one from 1994 to 2001 coincides with the early phase of the anti-globalisation movement, from the Zapatista uprising in Mexico in 1994, to the protests in Genoa 2001, which were violently crushed by police. The second phase from 2001 to 2007 comprises the second phase of the anti-globalisation movement, and its rise to prominence worldview. The third phase which she describes as the "spread of digital activism", refers to the migration of digital activism to BRICS and other countries beyond Europe and the US where digital activism had first developed. The fourth phase finally is when digital activism invades mainstream politics, with the rise of phenomena as Wikileaks, the Arab Spring uprisings, and the Snowden affair, making digital activism, no longer a marginal phenomenon but one that is at the very centre of political conflicts.

Rather than encompassing four phases, as proposed by Karatzogianni, my analysis is more simplified and focuses on two main waves. Furthermore, it explains the transformation as resulting from changes in ideology, which in turn reflect changes in the social and political situation and connected shifts in opinions and attitudes. Focusing on ideology does not mean to deny the role played by technological factors, and in particular the shift from web 1.0 of static websites to web 2.0 of social network sites. Rather it suggests that technological impact cannot be understood merely from an instrumental perspective, but needs to encompass an understanding of the cultural change that is facilitated and influenced by technology, yet not reducible to technology alone. We shall now see how this approach can be applied to the two different phases that have been identified for the present analysis: the anti-globalisation movement and the movement of the squares.

The anti-globalisation movement developed around the turn of the millennium and was manifested in a series of large-scale protests against global economic institutions such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation and the Group of Eight (G8) meetings. It was a multi-faceted movement that encompassed very different ideological streams including trade unions, Trotskyist groups, environmentalists, third world development NGOs, and religious organisations. However, at its core this movement and especially its younger section was deeply informed by the ideology of autonomism or anarcho-autonomism, an hybrid ideology drawing inspiration from post-68 anarchist and Marxist autonomist movement, and marked by a strong anti-authoritarian and anti-statist spirit. This ideology centred on the project of a politics of autonomy, away from the state and the market and attempting to construct a self-governed space of "the common". The movement of the squares has instead turned towards leftwing populism, or more specifically to a peculiar brand of populism which I describe as citizenism, that is a populism of the citizen, rather than a populism of the people. This ideology centres on a bottom-up recuperation and reclamation of democracy and political institutions by ordinary citizens, starting on their gathering in public spaces and on social media. It yearns for the construction of a radical democracy that may allow a more authentic participation than the one offered by corrupt liberal-democratic institutions.

As we shall see, this opposition between anarcho-autonomism and populism maps onto the opposition between cyber-autonomism and cyber-populism, as the dominant techno-political orientations of the first and second wave of digital activism. The way in which activists have conceived of and utilised the Internet reflects their general worldview, their attitude towards the state, towards politics and towards the general population and its prevalent opinions and attitudes.

3.2. Anti-Globalisation and Cyber-Autonomism

Let's begin from the anti-globalisation movement and its digital activism. Anti-globalisation activists pursued what could be described as a "cyber-autonomist" strategy that saw the Internet as a space to construct islands of resistance outside of the control of state and capital. As the name suggests this communication logic revolved around the idea of creating autonomous spaces of communication on the Internet, away from a society controlled by capital and the state. As I have proposed in my previous work about this issue (2014) activists were convinced that setting up an autonomous communicative infrastructure was a fundamental condition for any genuine alternative communication (2014). Building on the tradition of alternative media in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, in the context of the underground press, fanzine cultures and pirate radios, tech activists hoped to use the Internet to break the monopoly of corporate news media responsible for channelling neoliberal

propaganda and shutting down all alternative points of view. This vision lay at the foundation of an array of alternative media initiatives pursued between the late 90s and early 2000s (Pickard 2006; Juris 2008).

The most visible manifestation of this strategy was Indymedia, the first global alternative news initiative with tens of editorial nodes all over the world. At the height of counter-summit protests, Indymedia became the unofficial yet semi-official voice of the anti-globalisation movement and it also constituted a fundamental organisational infrastructure for protestors, with editorial nodes often doubling up as political collectives directly involved in organising protest campaigns. Besides Indymedia, alternative service providers (ISPs) such as Riseup, Aktivix, Inventati and Autistici catered for the internal communication needs of the movement. These groups provided secure personal email accounts as well as listservs allowing conversations on a number of topics of interest, ranging from protest organisation to squatting and permaculture. The imaginary underlying all these activities was one of "Islands in the Net", as expressed in the name of one of the most important activist ISPs in Italy. Activists thought of the Internet as something akin to the Temporary Autonomous Zones (T.A.Z.) described by Hakim Bey, a space comprising temporary islands in a rebel archipelago outside of the control of State and capital. The Internet was thereby conceived as an autonomous space, one in which the movement could find a more hospitable place to develop its action than the one otherwise offered by a consumerist society which was heavily dominated by neoliberal hegemony. This is why the techno-political attitude of this phase was also strongly countercultural. It saw the Internet as a space where to cultivate an alternative culture, clearly different from the majority culture of the time, considered to be irremediably corrupt. The movement of the squares projects what can be considered to a great extent as a reversal of this position.

3.3.   The Movement of the Squares and Cyber-Populism

Digital activism in the movement of the squares has instead been characterised by a techno-political orientation I have elsewhere (2014) described as "cyber-populism". By this term I define a techno-political orientation that regards the mass web of commercial internet services controlled by monopolistic corporations such as Facebook, Google and Twitter, as a space that despite its inherent capitalist biases needs to be appropriated by activists, and whose mass outreach capabilities need to be harnessed and used for their own ends. Rather than creating an alternative Internet – a free, self-managed and non-commercial space of communication – contemporary tech activists have been more concerned with harnessing the outreach capabilities of corporate social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter and the digital-popular culture that has emerged on these platforms.

The examples of this cyber-populist trend abound in the wave of 2011 protests, from the Facebook page Kullena Khaled Said in Egypt, to call hundreds of thousands to take to the streets, to the work of activists in Spain, Greece, the US, Turkey and Brazil, who have used social media as a means for mass mobilisation. Instead of trying to create alternative spaces, digital activists within these movements attempted to occupy the digital mainstream, appropriating social media as people's platforms.

This strategy bears the mark of the majoritarian and popular ambition of the Occupy wave, and the fact that these new movements do not content themselves with constructing minoritarian spaces of resistance. By using corporate social networking platforms, activists invade spaces they know do not belong to them and over which they have little control, but they do so in the persuasion that it is necessary to take them in order to construct forms of popular mobilisation matching

the technical conditions of our era. Instead of aiming to create temporary autonomous zones on the Internet as their predecessors in the anti-globalisation movement, the new generation of digital activists harboured the desire to break out of their life-style ghettoes and reconnect with the 99% of the population they purported to fight for. One could thus describe this position as more 'opportunistic' in that it tries to exploit the political opportunities that unfold within a space which is otherwise morally questionable because of its subservience to a market logic. However, this is also the element that has allowed these movements to be so successful and to achieve a magnitude of mobilisation that evidently surpasses the one achieved by anti-globalisation activists.

4. Conclusion

In order to understand the transformation of digital activism it is necessary to pay attention not just to changes in the materiality of technology, but also to cultural, social and political factors that come to shape its understanding and use. This is why it is imperative to recuperate the notion of ideology, understood as the system of beliefs and values that informs the activist worldview in any given historical period.

As I have demonstrated in this article the difference between the first wave of digital activism around the turn of the millennium, and the second wave in the late 2000s and 2010s, has been shaped not just by the transformation of digital technology and the shift from web 1.0 to the web 2.0 of social network sites but also by changes in the ideology of connected social movements, and in particular by the shift from anarcho-autonomism of the anti-globalisation movement to the populism of the movement of the squares. This ideological turn has translated, in the context of digital activism, into a shift from cyber-autonomism to cyber-populism, two techno-political orientations which carry different assumptions about the role of digital technology as both a means and site of struggle. While cyber-autonomism conceives of digital technology as an autonomous space separate from the state and capital, cyber-populism conceives it as a space of popular gathering and mobilisation.

This ideological interpretation of digital activism does not entail ignoring the role played by technology in shaping collective action. Digital activism certainly reflects the nature of technological affordances. For example, the process of massification of the web that has paralleled the diffusion of social media goes a long a way towards explaining the shift from a minoritarian to a majoritarian logic of mobilisation in digital activism. However, technological transformation is not the only determining factor. Its effect on the content of activism is filtered through ideological narratives and worldviews which contribute in shaping the way activists conceive of the Internet as a political battlefield, an aspect that can be captured through the notion of "techno-political orientations" which has been utilised in this article.

What is required going forward is thus research that can better account for the complex ways in which ideology shapes activist practices and their content. This perspective would allow us to overcome some of the shallowness of much contemporary analysis of digital activism and better render the way in which this form of activism reflects the themes, attitudes, and motivations of connected social movements, besides technological factors.

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