

Performing Citizenship Online: Identity, Subactivism and Participation

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Abstract

This paper calls for the adoption of a culturalist approach to the study of online participation. Notions of such as “civic cultures”, “public connection”, and “subactivism” represent effective theoretical and analytical tools that help grasp the meaning of online grassroots practices which emerge at the crossroads of politics and culture and are rooted in the realm of everyday life. Therefore, online participation is understood as the outcome of broader social changes and changes in the media environment, usually assumed under the labels “web 2.0” and “convergence culture”, co-determining each other. Drawing on empirical evidence from three interrelated research projects focused primarily on young people, the paper shows how participatory uses are unevenly distributed among social network users and acquire different meanings depending on the civic cultures and the “convergent media ecology” inhabited by the individuals.

Keywords: civic cultures, convergence culture, subactivism, web 2.0, social network sites.

Introduction

Since the middle of the Nineties, when the internet was increasingly integrated in peoples' lives at least in Western Societies, its role in reshaping democracy has acquired a permanent place in the academic and public debate. Commentators have addressed their attention to the potentially democratising features of the internet and online technologies (i.e., interactivity in stark contrast with the one-way flow of communication typical of broadcast media), though different political theories and divergent notions of participation have led to distinct framing of its effects.

In the pre-web 2.0 era, the issue of online participation was articulated almost exclusively within institutionalised politics and was grounded in a “minimalist model of democratic participation” (Carpentier, 2011), one which limits citizens' political role to participation in the election process, whereby the decision-making process is centralised and delegated to elected representatives. Even if we assume that citizens' involvement within institutionalised politics includes more than taking part in the election process, nonetheless in a minimalist approach participation remains limited to any activity directed toward, or effective at, influencing government or formal political institutions (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). Consequently, the branch of research on participation and the internet adhering to this minimalist understanding of the political role of citizenry was aimed at evaluating whether internet use in general, or specific online activities (such as information gathering) generate offline political participation and is

capable of influencing vote. In other words, the dominant frame in early research drew on a model of digital democracy which sees online media as unidirectional, top-down means for increasing individuals' civic and political engagement.

However, the heuristic value of an approach exclusively focused on "macro-participation" (Carpentier, 2011) in the study of online democracy has been questioned by changes in both citizens' participation and the contemporary media ecology.

Transformations of citizenship in the last decades have become a recurrent theme on the research and policy agendas. Proponents of the so-called "disaffected citizens perspective" (Loader, 2007) argue that contemporary democracies are affected by a steady decline in traditional forms of political and civic engagement, such as voting, party and trade unions membership, trust in political institutions, engagement in voluntary and civic associations (Dalton, 2008; Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; Putnam, 2000). Critics of the decline thesis, instead, contextualise disengagement from traditional politics within larger societal changes, such as globalisation, individualisation (Beck, 2000), and the network society, which promotes networked individualism as the dominant pattern of sociality (Castells, 1996, 2001). As a consequence, new forms of civic and political engagement are emerging outside the place of conventional politics, which are characterised by loose and informal network associations, and are more closely related to lifestyle concerns, identity issues and consumption (Bennett, 1998; Giddens, 1991; Micheletti, 2003; Norris, 1999, 2007). In this emerging scenario, personal identity, it is argued, replaces traditional collective identities as a support for political affiliation (Bennett, 1998), and participation is filtered through the lens of personal interests. According to this second approach, citizens are not necessarily less interested in political issues: rather, they are reluctant to take part in more traditional forms of politics because politics itself has disconnected from citizens. Commentators adhering to the "cultural displacement" perspective (Loader, 2007), therefore, maintain that the disengagement thesis is the very product of a restrictive concept of participation: focusing exclusively on conventional forms of political engagement entails the risk of neglecting emerging practices - such as individualised collective action (Micheletti, 2003) - that innovate citizens' participation repertoire.

This perspective gives rise to a different approach on the issue of the internet and democratic engagement: the so called "maximalist model of participation" conceptualises everyday life as a possible site of democratic engagement (Carpentier, 2011), and rejects isolating the practice of citizenship from everyday activities such as consumption, popular culture, and entertainment (Burgess et al., 2006). Accordingly, potential political meaning is attributed also to informal conversations, on- and offline, which occur in public spaces but more often in the private realm of everyday life. These interactions are recognised as vital for

civic agency: it is in the context of everyday life activities and interactions that people develop their political identities and engage in citizenship practices (Gamson, 1992).

A further challenge to a traditional and normative minimalist model of participation is also posed by recent developments of the web usually labelled as web 2.0, and now preferably known as social media, which are the domain of digital storytelling, cultural remix and informal conversations. The emergence of a "convergence" or participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) is said to be significantly altering the boundaries between production and consumption, thus implying a new position of the audience vis-à-vis media content: rather than mere recipients of broadcast mass communication as audiences, networked publics (Ito, 2008) are engaged in making and sharing their own media culture (Gauntlett, 2011). Participation, remediation and bricolage (Deuze, 2006) have always been important components of engagement with the media (Hartley, 1999), and yet they have become distinctive features of digital culture, thus apparently becoming mainstream practices¹. In addition, it is argued that online creativity is transforming citizens' relationship not only with cultural industries and their products as well as with politics, education, and the market: grassroots practices such as UGC and DIY represent patterns of media and civic engagement (Bennett, 2008). Bottom up creativity is understood as an active, though not always conscious, resistance to the so-called "sit back and be told culture" constitutive of the mass media, thus acquiring a highly political meaning (Gauntlett, 2011). Studies of creative participation online point also to its significant social dimension, insofar as online DIY cultures involve connecting with other people and society (*ibidem*). Indeed, new forms of online sociality are emerging in social media platforms beyond those of networked individualism and personal communities in the shape of ego-centred networks (Castells, 2001): not only individuals but also groups of people are able to network and create "a shared but distributed network identity" following a different sociality pattern that Baym defines as "networked collectivism" (Baym, 2010: 91).

Evidence of growing bottom-up political uses of the web (Smith et al., 2009; Purcell et al., 2010) taking place in social media have encouraged views of the internet as a remedy for (young) citizens' disaffection. However, studies of the role of online media in promoting political engagement among young people are divided in their conclusions claiming that the internet is effective at mobilising disengaged youth (Montgomery et al., 2004; Lusoli et al., 2006), or that online initiatives are able to intersect only those already interested in politics (Livingstone et al., 2007).

This paper aims to investigate novel modes of online participation, their meanings, and their relationship with offline participation with a particular focus on young citizens. In order to fully understand emerging

¹ I use the expression « apparently » because creative and participatory uses of the internet are popular but not universal: the majority of internet users, also among the so-called digital natives, do not engage in bottom-up creative practices. For data on younger users see for example the EU Kids Online data (Livingstone et al., 2011).

forms of civic and political engagement online, it calls for the adoption of a "culturalist" approach on issues of citizenship, media, and democracy (Dahlgren, 2009; Hartley & Green, 2006), as well as a more inclusive notion of citizenship which recognises the relevance of everyday life activities and conceptualises the political as a dimension of the social (Carpentier, 2011). In addition, since the popular rhetoric on web 2.0 and its potential for political and civic participation tends to equate participation with interactivity, or better said, "with the interaction component of audience activity", which "refers to the processes of signification and interpretation triggered by the media" (Carpentier, 2011: 66), the paper will mainly focus on the "participatory component of audience activity" which is articulated in participation *through* or participation *in* the media (Carpentier, 2011: 67).

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

As outlined above, the paper adopts a broader notion of participation and citizenship as embedded in the structures of everyday life, culture, and media use. More specifically, it draws on the notions of "civic cultures" (Dahlgren, 2009), "actualizing citizenship" (Bennett, 2008) and "public connection" (Couldry et al., 2007) as theoretical and analytical tools which help grasp the political significance of online citizenship practices.

Drawing on the "republicanism imaginary", Dahlgren (2009) understands citizenship as a mode of agency and an achievement which is promoted or inhibited by a set of socio-cultural conditions, among which identity has a prominent role. His work resonates with the cultural studies' notion of cultural citizenship understood as the "processes of bonding and community building, and reflection on that bonding" (Hermes, 2006: 303), which is the product of the construction of identity and difference through the engagement in popular culture and media practices. Dahlgren goes further on to exploring not only cultural citizenship but also the 'culture' of citizenship: doing citizenship (Dahlgren, 2006) is a social and cultural practice that originates when individuals recognise themselves as citizens, develop a sense of belonging in a collective "we-ness", share knowledge, norms and values, and engage in practices which are embedded in particular places. Civic cultures, then, can be defined as "cultural patterns in which identities of citizenship, and the foundations for civic agency, are embedded" (Dahlgren, 2009: 103). Moreover, they can be empirically analysed as being comprised of six dimensions: they constitute shared systems of (1) meanings and knowledge, (2) values, (3) trust, (4) spaces, and practices (5) through which citizens define (6) collective identities that support or hinder their political engagement. In particular, an understanding of novel modes of online participation entails exploring the relationship between online participation – and therefore

between spaces and practices – and shared identities in which varied notions of citizenship – and the associated values, knowledge and trust – are embedded.

The centrality of identity in contemporary citizenship practices, and especially within young people's (digital) cultures, is also recognised by Bennett, who discusses two contrasting citizenship patterns producing different civic identities and forms of engagement in civic life online: those adhering to the "dutiful citizen model" (Bennett, 2008: 14) perceive citizenship as a routine activity that has to do with institutionalised political participation (e.g., voting). In contrast, the "actualizing citizen model" widens the field of citizenship, understood as a voluntary practice and a form of empowerment involving a novel, personalised and lifestyle-related participation repertoire - which includes non-conventional practices such as demonstrations and rallies, petitions, single-issue campaigns, flash mobs, political consumerism, and other forms of creative participation (Micheletti & McFarland, 2010). These de-institutionalised forms of civic and political engagement are contextualised in the "small world" of everyday life where civic identities are produced, negotiated, performed, and increasingly practised on the internet.

The cultural turn that contextualises citizenship and its foundations within the private spaces of everyday life underscores the role of mundane practices of media consumption in shaping public engagement: in contemporary societies, "public connection", that is the orientation towards matters of public concern, is increasingly "mediated" (Couldry et al., 2007). The domain of everyday life is also the place where media content is interpreted, made sense of, and circulated in order to inform the civic talk where citizen identities are shaped. This paper is based on the assumption that, compared to broadcast media, digital media do not only provide knowledge, values and symbolic resources that individuals creatively employ when defining identities in "we-they" terms; they also provide social spaces where practices of citizenship can be enacted, and shared civic identities can be embedded.

The theoretical framework just outlined functioned as "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer, 1954) which oriented the researcher's gaze and guided the analysis of the empirical evidence collected. Political uses of social media among young people have been investigated in the context everyday life and youth cultures characterized by the growing relevance of peer networks and cross-media diets in the definition of personal and collective identities. Along with the complexity of changing perceptions of citizenship and participation, these features of contemporary youth lifestyles and digital cultures call for the adoption of qualitative methods: they stimulate interviewees' reflexivity on their own practices – especially mundane activities – thus enabling researchers to listen to their own voices (Couldry & Markham, 2007). Furthermore, a qualitative methodology better responds to the "double hermeneutics" (Giddens, 1987) and the "reflexive turn" in social sciences, which understand sociology as an "account of accounts" (Melucci, 1998: 23), an interpretation aimed at making sense of the ways in which individuals make sense of their social world.

The empirical material discussed here draws on three different but interrelated research projects on youth participation and online citizenship practices conducted by the author between Autumn 2009 and Spring 2011:

- a) the first project is a qualitative case study of the Popolo Viola movement. The case began in September 2009, when a group of Italian bloggers and citizens launched a large demonstration calling for Berlusconi's resignation online – on blogs, Facebook and social news platforms (Ok Notizie). The "No-Berlusconi Day", which took place on December 5th 2009, mobilised around one million people in Italian cities and worldwide. This demonstration gave rise to a citizens' movement called the Popolo Viola (Purple People) that had been active in the following two years, organising demonstrations and advocacy initiatives oriented towards protecting the Italian Constitution and reporting the scandals and corruption of the Berlusconi government. The analysis consisted of an examination of the texts, communicative platforms and actors involved, as well as of the media coverage of the demonstration. In order to contextualise the origins of the movement and understand its developments, interviews with one national leader (a woman aged 54), and two local activists (two men aged 39 and 32) of Popolo Viola were carried out.
- b) The second project focused on online participation among Italian youth and involved 8 focus groups with young people aged 14-19 (secondary school students) and 20-25 (graduate and post-graduate students) which took place before the elections for regional governors in Lombardia and Piemonte² in March 2010. Since the closer focus groups come to natural peer groups (Gamson, 1992: 192), the easier it is to observe people producing, negotiating, and sharing meanings and collective identities, a variant of focus groups, namely "peer groups conversation" (Gamson, 1992: 17) was employed. Peer groups conversations lasted from one and a half to two hours and took place in natural settings which were chosen by the participants in order to minimise the asymmetry between the different roles of moderator and participants and put the interaction "on a more equal footing" (*ibidem*). Settings varied from places where the group's collective practices are usually embedded (a school, a youth centre, a university department, a political party's local office) to public places where they are used to gathering (two cafés). In order to untangle the factors that shape online participation, participants were selected through a theoretical sampling. The two sampling criteria were participants' political socialisation and engagement in civic or political groups and activities on the one hand; and the embeddedness of the internet in their everyday life contexts on the other. Behind this choice lies the assumption that online participation is grounded in offline civic cultures, peer cultures, and their media practices; young

² Two regions in Northern Italy.

people tend to climb a “ladder of online opportunities” (Livingstone and Helsper, 2007) so that more creative and interactive uses are associated with longer experience and more thorough embeddedness of the internet in daily lives in terms of frequency of use and number of activities performed. The sampling strategy, therefore, led to the selection of eight groups differentiated in terms of age, political socialisation, engagement in participation practices, and digital inclusion: some groups are characterized by a strong socialisation to political engagement both at home and in the peer networks (group 4, 7, 8), and share practices of political or civic engagement (3, 4, 7, 8); others are mixed, combining individuals who have a strong commitment to citizenship and political engagement and individuals who are not actively engaged in modes of participation (group 5 and 6); or comprised of mostly disengaged individuals (1 and 2). As it regards digital inclusion, most participants have extensively incorporated the internet in their everyday practices (3, 4, 5, 6, 7); some pursue almost exclusively communication and leisure activities online (1, 2); and a group comprises both frequent and low users. The following table summarises the composition of the groups

Tab. 1 Composition of Peer Groups

group number	group shared activity	n. participants	Age group	gender	Model of citizenry
1	Vocational high school (Itis) classmates	5	18-19	5 boys	Dutiful citizen: though expressing elements of actualizing citizenship (mistrust of party politics and the media) they reduce political participation to voting
2	Youth centre (CAG) regulars	5	15-17	3 boys, 2 girls	Dutiful citizen: though expressing elements of actualizing citizenship (mistrust of party politics and the media) they reduce political participation to voting
3	Members of the Students' Union (UDS) ³	4	18-19	3 boys, 1 girl	actualizing citizen: voting is less important than active participation in a variety of non-conventional participation practices. The everyday and the social is the domain of the political

³ UDS is a Students' Union born in the early '90s and connected with one of the major Italian trade unions.

4	Members of a students' collective	3	16-18	3 boys	actualizing citizen: voting is less important than active participation in a variety of non-conventional participation practices. The everyday and the social is the domain of the political
5	University students	7	22-25	6 girls, 1 boy	Hybrid: combining mistrust in the media and politicians, and engagement in activism and consumerism with keeping informed on political issues also through mass media, and voting
6	University students	6	23-25	6 girls	Hybrid: combining mistrust in the media and politicians, and engagement in activism and consumerism with keeping informed on political issues also through mass media, and voting
7	University students	3	22-23	3 boys	Hybrid: combining mistrust in the media and politicians, and engagement in activism and consumerism with keeping informed on political issues also through mass media, and voting
8	Members of <i>Giovani Comunisti</i> ⁴ + civic association (<i>Libera</i> ⁵) activist	4	20-24	3 girls, 1 boy	actualizing citizen: voting is less important than active participation in a variety of non-conventional participation practices. The everyday and the social is the domain of the political and vote is just the consequence of their daily engagement

- c) The third source of empirical material comes from the study of 2011 elections for the mayor of Milan. The study consisted of an analysis of the online campaign of the two candidates (Letizia Moratti, the incumbent and from the PDL – Popolo della Libertà, Berlusconi's party, and Giuliano Pisapia, who won the centre-left coalition primaries without having been the preferred candidate of the main centre-left party, the PD - Democratic Party). Since this article is mainly concerned with bottom-up political uses of web 2.0, the contrasting communication strategies adopted by the two candidates will not be discussed in depth, but can be briefly summarised as a conservative and traditional top-down communication by Letizia Moratti, and a more participatory

⁴ *Giovani Comunisti* (Young Communists) is the youth section of *Rifondazione Comunista* (Communist Party).

⁵ *Libera* is a civil society organisation promoting legality and fighting against mafia and other illegal organisations.

communication by her rival. Due also to structural conditions shaping his communication strategy⁶, Pisapia's campaign relied more significantly on grassroots participation and citizens' engagement in both campaigning activities and in the defining of policy issues. Therefore, the author conducted a participant observation of the "Officina per la città"⁷ and the central electoral Committee. A set of formal interviews with five young activists aged 19 to 28 (3 boys and two girls) and involved in the coordination of local committees with the central committee, as well as informal interviews with activists in local committees were carried out. Table 2 summarises the characteristics of the interviewees in terms of the model of citizenry adhered to. Finally, grassroots online communication practices, which took place during the campaign, were also analysed⁸.

Table 2 - Interviewees

Interview number	Age	gender	Model of citizenry
1	25	girl	Combines traits of both dutiful and actualizing citizenry. She has had a strong political socialisation in the family context; has been an activist of the Communist Party in Argentina; once back in Italy she took part in the student movement and has been active in civil society organisation involved in poor suburbs.
2	29	boy	A leader of the student movement at University, and himself grown up in a very politically active family, he joined SEL (Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà – Left, Ecologism and Freedom) a minor left party, who supported Giuliano Pisapia at primary elections. Though still believing in the necessity of party politics, he displays also traits of actualizing citizenry.
3	25	boy	Active in the student movement, he is similar to interviewees 1 and 2 in combining traits of both citizenship patterns.
4	21	girl	actualizing and dutiful citizen at the same time, her background and approach to political life is quite the opposite of interviewees 1, 2 and 3: she has expressed disaffection from politics until recently; hasn't been socialised to politics at home, at school and in her peer group but joined the campaign for the desire to have a role in the change
5	19	boy	Closer to the dutiful citizen model, believes in active citizenship. Has little prior political experience, joined the central committee and was a candidate for the local district council. ⁹

The present article draws mainly on interviews and focus groups and focuses especially on younger citizens; however, insights on Popolo Viola and bottom-up political uses during the 2011 administrative campaign are also given and discussed. Transcripts of focus groups and interviews have been analysed

⁶ His lower visibility, since Pisapia was not the incumbent; fewer economic resources (Pisapia spent only one million euros in the campaign, while Letizia Moratti invested over ten million euros); as well as the already mentioned candidacy for the centre-left primaries as the candidate of a minor radical left party; all these features help explain the lower level of professionalisation of his campaign, compared to the PDL candidate.

⁷ The project involved a set of thematic working groups which gathered experts, associations and citizens and provided the candidate with goals and contents for his programme (<http://officina.pisapiaxmilano.com/>).

⁸ The author conducted qualitative content analysis of the tweets in order to define common patterns and meanings.

⁹ Larger cities in Italy have a city council, and local districts councils (Milano has 9 local districts).

thematically in order to group responses and address the following issues: 1) the meaning of online participation and its relation with offline participation in young people's everyday lives; 2) drawing on the civic cultures model, this relationship will be analytically articulated as the relationship between civic identities – and the associated values, knowledge and trust - and on- and offline participation – in terms of practices and spaces; finally 3) the investigation of online engagement in relation to offline participation provides the opportunity to understand how focus group participants and interviewees position themselves vis-à-vis two contrasting theses – the reinforcement or the mobilisation thesis - on the effects of online citizenship practices.

Civic Cultures in between on and offline

The empirical data here presented show that political uses of the internet and more particularly social media are unevenly taken-up by online users and overshadowed by communication, entertainment, and “hanging out” practices (Ito et al., 2009).

The role of the internet regarding mediated public connection and contemporary non-conventional citizenship practices is shaped by the symbolic, social, and material resources that define civic identities: interest in political issues and offline civic and political engagement is a strong pre-condition of uses of the internet and social media as resources for political information, and as means for political discussion and participation. Under this respect, empirical findings provide support for the so-called “reinforcement thesis”: among the participants in these studies, only those adhering to an “actualizing citizen” model (Bennett, 2008) or a hybrid citizenship pattern (see Table 1 and 2), who were interested in politics and active in civic associations or political groups (groups 3, 4, 7, 8), were online political users. This finding indicates that the internet mirrors existing gaps in political participation already documented in the literature on offline participation (Livingstone et al., 2007; Mesch & Coleman, 2007).

However, since opportunities for civic engagement online are not taken up equally (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007), also digital literacy¹⁰ and digital inclusion are at play here: as it emerges from our participants' accounts, however, online participation is also thoroughly rooted in digital literacies, self-confidence as internet users, variety of activities pursued online, frequency of use and time spent online (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). As the following excerpts well exemplify, the “participation gap” (Jenkins 2006) has to do with the place of both politics and the internet in young people's lives and within their own peer groups. Indeed, interviewees who perceive themselves as low users tend to restrict their online activities to communication practices on social network platforms, and entertainment activities such as downloading

¹⁰ Though the notion of literacy is controversial (see Livingstone, 2009), a growing consensus has converged on the definition of literacy as the ability “to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms” (Aufderheide, 1993: xx).

and gaming (groups 1 and 2). Moreover, these very participants express disaffection for politics and low, if none, engagement in political issues, which reinforces their habitual online practices

(m, 18, group 1): it is easier and quicker to watch the news on tv, it is time-saving. Instead, the newspaper, I don't... I don't read it very often actually

(m, 19, group 1): yes, and moreover I am not very much into political news, I prefer other kinds of news [...] and on the internet I only visit the Gazzetta and Tutto Sport [two sport newspapers] websites, and that's it

Interviewer: so you also look for news online?

(m, 18, group 1): not that much really...

(m, 18, group 1): well my mailbox is on Tiscali [ISP] so I watch the news there but...

Interviewer: and you were saying that you also look for news on the internet?

(m, 17, group 2): neah, we do other things online!

Interviewer: so what do you do online?

(m, 17, group 2): listen to music on YouTube

(m, 17, group 2): yes, or downloading music, legally of course [laughing] and then you play games, or chat with friends on MSN

(m, 17, group 2): yes, Facebook

More frequent users, instead, use the internet for a variety of activities, including news consumption, blog writing, sharing and producing content, and contributing to discussions in various forums etc. (groups 3 to 8). More specifically, when digital literacy combines with offline pre-existing civic identities, more participatory uses of the internet emerge (groups 3, 4 and 8): young people, then, participate *through* the media, using mailing lists as tools for internal communication and coordination between members of associations and social movements, and for keeping up with the latest news; and they participate *in* the media, being engaged in the production of websites, blogs, and Facebook profiles to inform, engage and mobilise internet users.

(f, 23, group 8): the way we participate has changed because we have the means of participating in a time-saving manner. Our association for example, we don't meet weekly. We share information via email, we keep updated with the latest news in the mailing list and then we meet when we have something important to discuss, that requires face-to-face proximity. So it is much easier, I can get involved into different working groups because I can follow three discussion in the same night simply sitting in front of your computer.

(m, 18, group 3: now we have created the Pomodoro¹¹ web page, and left a section free for citizens' contributions, every citizen can email us his article and we publish it

(m, 19, group 3): yes, the good thing with the internet is that every individual citizen, every individual student has access to news media [...] every individual has a very powerful medium to inform other people

These practices, which Castells (2007) named "mass self-communication", are the domain of young activists: in political activists' civic cultures, therefore, identity – which has been shaped offline through shared practices embedded in specific places and systems of meanings, values and norms - informs and shapes online practices.

Among online activities, social network sites have become pervasive in the everyday lives of youth and their popularity is constantly growing among the young worldwide (Lenhart et al., 2010; Livingstone et al., 2011). Italian Facebook users at the end of November 2011 were more than 20 million, 36% of whom were under 24; those under 29 represented nearly half (49%) the Italian population on the social network site¹². Being mainstream places for relational maintenance (Baym, 2010), social network sites also incorporate and integrate different media and communication practices, thus representing for many young people the main access to the web, a sort of "walled garden" or a web portal revisited.

However, although beyond relational uses different media and online activities are converging on Facebook, "the dominant and normative (...) usage pattern is to connect with friends" (boyd, 2009: 89) or with the so-called "latent ties" (Haythornthwaite, 2005), namely friends of friends. Not surprisingly, then, there are consistent divides in the take-up of social network sites as a resource for civic identities and a place for political participation.

A first participatory use of the social networking platform concerns its evolution into a news media where users keep up with the latest news, comment and disseminate it. In this perspective, it can thus be considered as a further support of mediated public connection (Couldry et al., 2007). Not only does Facebook remediate other online sources of information – online newspapers and blogs - but it also remediates the practice of consuming news, turning it into a shared social experience. As prior research highlighted, the distinctive feature of getting informed from social media is a kind of collaborative filtering (Purcell *et al.* 2010): users make sense of and interpret media content through mediated social interaction within their social circles. Findings show that practices of participatory news consumption are far more common among young adults. Among teenagers, instead, only those already engaged in political and civic participation (groups 3 and 4) report using Facebook in this way:

¹¹The UDS invented a Facebook page called 'I bet this tomato will get more fans than Silvio Berlusconi' which attracted over 600.000 fans in a couple of weeks. After that unexpected success they also created a webpage (www.ilpomodoro.weebly.com). Both the website and the Facebook page have later become managed by the national UDS.

¹² Source: Facebook Advertising data analysed by Vincenzo Cosenza (<http://vincos.it/osservatorio-facebook/>).

(m, 18, group 3): besides jokes that we share, I feel a sort of a duty to form people's opinion. So sometimes I post some articles, I send news to those disconnected and disengaged with news (...) in case they want to read it. So at times I post some interesting news, I am involved in some counter-information activity. Besides that yes, some jokes, some laughs

(f, 18, group 3): there are two groups on Facebook that post articles of counter-information, and so also we like to share content of that kind

(f, 24, group 8): I find it very useful, because I am connected to so many people that share my own interests, and so I can browse what they post. It is an excellent tool, because you know that you can find interesting news there

(f, 23 group 8): it is even easier than with blogs

(f, 24, group 8): yes, you have to look for blogs

(f, 23 group 8): some bloggers use to post their articles on their profiles too, so I've noted that since I have been on Facebook – around one year and a half ago – I read less blogs, I have around 20 profiles that I check more often, some of whom are journalists, and so I look at their profiles

(f, 24 group 8): it is a filter

(f, 23, group 8): that's right, a filter by people you trust, because you know you share their opinions, or that you are interested in their point of view even if you don't share it (...) and I'm quite active, I also comment at times

(f, 25, Pisapia's supporter) in my opinion Facebook or other social media, or mailing lists help disseminate news which otherwise would be quite hidden...

Interviewer: so you happen to read news posted by your Facebook contacts?

(f, 25, Pisapia's supporter): yes, especially news which are marginal on mainstream media... or more critical views ...

A further source of political content is represented by groups and pages focused on civic and political issues, or those more related with party politics. Peer group conversations suggest that engagement with political content on Facebook acquires different meanings to different civic cultures and is variously incorporated in the process of defining collective identities. The more disaffected teenagers (groups 1 and 2) dismiss political content on Facebook as inappropriate and boring. On the opposite side, instead, young people who belong to offline civic cultures constructed around an ideal of cultural and active citizenship perceive social network sites as further resources for the continuous construction of pre-existing offline collective identities. In addition to this hermeneutic dimension of engagement with online content, young activists involved in associations, students' collectives and/or parties (groups 3, 4 and 8) participate through Facebook in a

more active way, as a further place for engaging the youngest and promoting their offline activities: they create and update pages, create events and petitions and so forth.

When it comes to the potential mobilising effect of social media, however, interviewees and focus groups participants converge on a normative view of online participation independently from their positioning on the continuum between dutiful and actualizing citizenship: all participants express concern and disillusion regarding the potential of social network sites for re-engaging disconnected youth. Consistently with prior studies (Livingstone et al., 2007), online political users interviewed by the author recognise that social media, and the internet more in general, provide an opportunity to pursue pre-existing civic interests, thence reinforcing the divides which characterise contemporary youth offline participation. The following excerpt is from an interview with a 25 year-old girl who was involved in supporting Pisapia's campaign and coordinating electoral committees. Here she describes the continuity between off- and online in terms of political engagement and inequalities:

(f, 25, Pisapia's supporter) on Facebook you have the same effect that I call "Milan is a big village"... Thinking of my generation, those born in '85, '86, '84, let's say '80-'87, and those who have attended high school rather than technical schools, so they belong to specific cultural backgrounds, if not socio-economic backgrounds... I mean there are different cities within one city (...) and the same happens on Facebook. My connections are made of people who are interested in politics and use to post comments on political issues, they don't share the horoscope or "like" a group of nail polish fans! It may be only 5 out of 550 among my connections, so the problem is that different worlds don't merge nor communicate. News spread faster and in a more efficient way, but it is a small, closed world.

The normative understanding of online participation adhered to by the interviewees, who are indeed active political users of the internet and social media, is declined in two further popular social representations. First, young people involved in these studies also point to what is perceived as one of the main limits of online communities in terms of civic and political engagement as well as of "public connection" itself: the fear that, rather than being exposed to cultural and political difference, online users access information only from familiar and like-minded sources and become locked into "cyberghettoes" (Sunstein, 2007). The increasing pluralisation and fragmentation of the online public sphere, it is argued, generate polarisation and cyberbalkanization (Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson, 1997; Kim, 2011). The risk of online issue ghettoes is crucial and well-documented in the literature on digital democracy. What is of major interest here, however, is the strong relationship between on and offline participation, or at the opposite end the disaffection. The analysis of ordinary online communication practices, thence, suggests that identity has a prominent role among the other dimensions of civic cultures, and that it shapes practices and spaces of participation.

Moreover, this normative representation of online participation leads interviewees to question its relevance in mobilising offline citizenry. On the one hand, indeed, the Popolo Viola provides an example of how participation on social network sites could serve as a basis for offline mobilisation, and as a means for intersecting people who were not necessarily active in any form of civic or political engagement but had a latent subjective positioning in the sphere of actualizing citizenship. Most of the people who joined the movement and engaged in the activities of its local nodes were dispersed individuals who did not recognise themselves in any particular collective identity and felt disconnected from party politics. Interviews with Popolo Viola's local activists, such as the excerpt below, suggest that Facebook helped activate what can be defined as latent civic cultures, which are comprised of fragmented and isolated individuals who lacked resources for mobilisation in their everyday life contexts but were provided with a place to build a sense of belonging to a network, a perceived common identity symbolised by the purple colour, shared meanings, values, and practices. These civic cultures may lack a formal and long-term structure, but are effective at mobilising people, as the recurrent demonstrations, rallies and mobs called by the Violas show. In this latter case, therefore, practices and spaces sustain the formation of a shared civic identity by providing a route to civic and political participation both on- and offline.

(m, 39, Popolo Viola's activist): I came to know the Popolo Viola thanks to Facebook, because I've seen many events and initiatives on my wall, shared by pre-existing connections. So when I saw it for the umpteenth time, I went on its official page and had a look. This happened after the No B Day, since the Popolo Viola was born just after the No B Day... and then I joined some of their meetings, I participated to some demonstrations and I joined their Facebook pages, both the national and the local one, until I became an "activist" I would say

However, online political users question the meaning and value of online engagement and claim that offline participation is preferable. As the empirical evidence collected through interviews and peer group conversations shows, a common concern among online political users is represented by a persistent gap between on- and offline mobilisation. From the viewpoint of activists, "clicktivism", such as joining a Facebook group or "like" a page, may represent a dangerous replacement of citizenship practices, insofar as it requires low effort and investment (it is "juts a matter of a click" says one 18 year-old boy), but provides the feeling that one has done something in support of a cause:

(m, 19, group 3): promoting our activities on Facebook is a way to socialise and engage. It is not simply a matter of preferring the virtual agora instead of physical places, it is a new kind of engagement, of being locally active in new, innovative ways. Both the virtual and the physical are important, and both have to be used. It is meaningless to underestimate one of the two

(m, 18, group 3): there's no point in using them separately even because if I make something online then I get 2 billion clicks, and when I do it offline I do not involve the same amount of people. Because on Facebook it is just a matter of a click but once you have clicked you don't automatically go and join the meeting

(f, 18, group 3): that's right, a lot of people joined the flash mob call online, and then we ended up in forty people

(f, 54, Popolo Viola): I organised buses to Rome for the No B Day for around 250 people (...) I found out that, out of these 250, only 20 came from Facebook. Half were internet users, and the rest were informed by word-of-mouth or by the press when it entered the agenda of the mainstream media. So I could say that Facebook had a limited effect in mobilising people. It is a sort of enclosure. It helped because Repubblica launched the page, and so many people "liked" the page. But Facebook is an act of delegacy. One is satisfied for clicking and that's it

What is the meaning, then, of online practices of "soft" participation? Are they significant in terms of collective identities, adhesion to common values and knowledge, and therefore, do they have a civic if not political relevance? The next two paragraphs are an attempt to answer this question.

Online cultures and "subactivism"

One distinctive feature of "convergence culture" (Jenkins, 2006) is that individuals connect and engage in the creative sharing and manipulation of their media cultures. Both media products and user generated content are increasingly central to identity construction and communication practices in everyday life: the layering of social interaction and identity display, consumption and production of media and cultural products is constitutive of the way (young) people inhabit Facebook (boyd, 2009). Of the varied material incorporated in people's profiles, political content is certainly one, though its largest part may better be labelled as "pre-political"¹³: Facebook and other social network sites abound with online social discourses and content which deals with political issues and actors, but draws on popular culture's narratives and resources, and thus represent a popularization of politics. For example, in the spring of 2010, a local UDS group launched a Facebook page called "I bet this tomato will get more fans than Silvio Berlusconi" which attracted over 600.000 fans, mainly secondary school students, in a few short weeks. Moreover, online users produce and join a variety of single-issue groups related to lifestyle concerns.

¹³ The concept of pre-political is used here to refer to online mobilisations and discussions that acquire a political meaning but are born around products of popular culture, and online social discourses around political actors which draw on popular culture's narratives and resources, and thus represent a popularization of politics.

Engagement with pre-political content can be incorporated in the process of defining collective identities thus reinforcing the sense of community. However, most focus group participants and interviewees do not include these online activities as part of their practices as members of civic cultures.

The youngest and the more disengaged (groups 1 and 2) tend to dismiss pre-political content as a matter of entertainment, a sort of political fandom with no direct connection with their offline behaviour: this is in line with their narrow and “minimalist” perception of political participation, which suits with the so-called dutiful citizen model (Bennett, 2008). More common is the expressive function attributed by young actualizing citizens to single-issue groups, used as identity markers to perform political identity online (groups 5 and 6). Joining groups and causes is functional to the construction of one’s profile: these connections and activities are used to express the user’s lifestyle concerns rather than to support the construction of collective identities, shared cultural systems and shared practices. Though the dominant identity pattern in Facebook is that “through connection” with others (Livingstone, 2008, 2009), belonging to lifestyle-related groups populated by like-minded individuals, or signing petitions and joining single-issue campaigns is interpreted by interviewees mainly as a private experience and a matter of representing personal identity. Even when individuals belong to civic cultures, engagement in single-issue groups does not automatically turn into participation, as the following discussion from focus group addresses well:

(f, 23, group 6) on Facebook I tend to disclose my personal opinions only regarding specific issues, that is environmental issues and animal rights, that is what I care most, so I joined groups as 'against whales hunting' or 'against eating meat', but I don't like joining groups directly connected with parties

(f, 25, group 6) I guess she joined these groups to get in touch with like-minded people

(f, 23, group 6) I agree with what she says, it is a private issue, sometimes I feel depressed when I see so many people in winter wearing a fur coat, disgusting I think, and so going on a group and seeing that you are not alone, that other people share your opinions... is comforting. But I think it is not with Facebook groups that you raise other people's awareness, it is more personal

A second form of pre-political content that is increasingly popular includes online mobilisations and discussions that acquire a political meaning, but which are born around products of popular and media culture. As prior research on youth petitioning has pointed out (Earl & Schussman, 2008), most popular petitions involve contention over cultural products. As Earl and Schussman claim, these practices are the outcome of two converging phenomena: the emergence of a new kind of audience, those networked publics who are used to personalise, produce, and share cultural content, thus innovating the relation between consumption and production; and the development of “movement societies, where scripts and practices from social movements have become part of everyday thinking” (2008: 76). They go further, and argue that petitions and contestation over cultural products and celebrities represent the contemporary

form of civic participation, a form of engagement which "is not formal - facilitated through well-established community organizations, activist groups, or political parties - and it may not even be conscientiously understood as engagement, but instead as a seemingly natural aspect of using or watching or gaming" (*ibi*: 74). Examples of this contestation over cultural products are found in the empirical material here discussed. A student involved in one of the peer group conversations (group 5) told his experience as fan of a radio show, the "Zoo di 105", popular for being repeatedly shut down by the broadcaster due to the use of offensive and foul language by the speakers. Every time the programme is blocked, however, online petitions involve an impressive number of fans of the show, so that the broadcaster finally rehabilitates the speakers, and the show is aired once again. What emerges from the following excerpt is a sense of efficacy gained by participation in petitioning over cultural products, that is missing in the interaction with the world of politics. Contention over consumption and cultural consumption in particular, is perceived as having a direct impact on people's everyday lives.

(m, 22, group 5) It is certainly easier to obtain your favourite show is aired by the broadcaster than the ban of fur coats (...) in that case you are pressing a broadcaster who faced a loss for interrupting the show, and so is eager to broadcast it again because of revenues. Instead something like that pertains only to a specific group of people, and disturbs the fashion industry which is very powerful, so you come to have major opponents (...) death penalty for example, yes, people die but... it is not here. How many executions take place in the US that don't get here? So that you perceive it as a far more distant issue. It's sad, I know, but people see it as so far beyond their own experience that they..

What belonging to lifestyle groups as a marker of one's identity, and petitioning over cultural products have in common is being grounded in the emerging participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006; Gauntlett, 2011), and representing an integral part of people's everyday lives. For this reason, they can be assimilated to what Bakardjieva has termed "subactivism", that is "small-scale, often individual decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference (or both)" (2009: 96). Though it is rooted in the private sphere, subactivism promotes personal empowerment as well as collective identities. Moreover, since the boundary between private and public sphere is shifting and continuously negotiated, at least as communication and participatory practices on social media are concerned, subactivism may at times acquire a public political relevance. Practices of subactivism are more popular among young people who don't exhibit a strong pre-existing civic identity: once it promotes the building of a bonding and the sense of belonging to a shared identity, therefore, subactivism can lead to more formal manifestations of civic and political engagement.

When subactivism turns into institutionalised political participation

The last campaign for the Mayor of Milano, in spring 2011, represented an interesting case of how the intersection between novel grassroots practices of online engagement and traditional media may bridge the gap between subactivism and “minimalist” participation.

On the 10th of May, the rival candidates participated in a face-to-face confrontation on Sky: at the very end of the debate, when Pisapia had no more opportunity to reply, Letizia Moratti accused him of being involved in a car theft in the Seventies. It did not matter that he was totally exonerated by the court, the act of the incumbent candidate can be interpreted as a final attempt to reduce her disadvantage through the use of traditional top-down communication strategies. Instead of discrediting the rival, however, this negative campaign triggered a spontaneous grassroots reaction on social network sites, which had its origins on Twitter and then moved to the more mainstream and “mass medium” Facebook. Over 38.341¹⁴ Twitter users engaged in an activity that, drawing on the wide literature on internet activism, can be defined as “culture jamming” (Chadwick, 2007): they replied to the invitation by @Lipesquisquit who called Twitter users to “help Moratti build fake charges against Pisapia such as: Pisapia used to hide spinach to Popeye to let Brutus win”. The pattern of the over 9.000 #MorattiQuotes tweeted between May 12th and 13th is recurrent and easy: Pisapia is found guilty of some iniquitous acts that mobilise common sense knowledge and manipulate media culture (Pisapia is the black smoke in Lost; Pisapia is the father of Luke Skywalker), popular culture (Pisapia has stolen Christmas; Pisapia suggested Herods the massacre of the Innocents and took part in it), current affairs and politics (Osama Bin Laden is not dead, he is disguised as Pisapia; Pisapia was the first to bring Ruby to Arcore when Berlusconi was not home)¹⁵.

#MorattiQuotes provide further evidence of the mainstreaming effect of web 2.0 and convergence culture: former elite and non-mainstream practices such as fandom, culture jamming and other online practices constitutive of the social movements’ communication repertoire are now turned into mainstream practices and distinctive features of digital culture. To refer to Deuze’s work (2006), it is a clear example of bricolage through which individuals engage in the reflexive manipulation and assembly of reality. During the political campaign herein considered, these bricoleurs’ practices sustained the collective definition of a set of meanings, values, and knowledge, and reinforced the sense of belonging to a civic culture expressed, also, through the identification with a political candidate.

Moreover, this case represents a further indicator of the process of politicisation of popular culture and the concomitant popularisation of politics (Street, 2000): practices that are cultural in nature, as the #MorattiQuotes, not only acquire a public visibility, but also a political significance. The continuous flow of #MorattiQuotes was the ironic response of citizens against the aggressive negative campaign conducted by

¹⁴ According to statistics made with TweetReach

¹⁵ For a deeper analysis of this campaign see Mascheroni and Murru (2011).

Moratti, Berlusconi, and the PDL and gave voice to the civic cultures that gathered around the candidacy of Giuliano Pisapia.

This case study can be interpreted as an example of a "cultural public sphere" (Hartley and Green, 2006), which is rooted in the domain of everyday life and the private sphere, but occasionally bursts into public visibility when they enter the media agenda. So, the notions of subactivism and cultural public sphere are both useful, because they remind us of the political dimension of cultural life.

Conclusions

This paper has argued that the shift from a "minimalist" to a "maximalist model of democratic participation" (Carpentier, 2011) and the cultural turn in the literature on the relationship between media and political engagement are productive for the study of online participation. Notions such as "civic cultures" (Dahlgren, 2009), "public connection" (Couldry et al., 2007) and "subactivism" (Bakardjieva, 2009) have proved effective theoretical and analytical tools that help grasp the political nature of online practices which are rooted in the realm of everyday life but can turn into political participation. Conversely, a narrow definition of participation leads to understand civic and political uses of social media as falling outside the boundaries of "authentic" participation. Indeed, though the claim that "«Friending» a candidate is not the same as working in a campaign" (Schlozman et al. 2010, 501) is unquestionable, the paper argues that mundane and cultural citizenship practices on social media have a political relevance. Consequently, it is aimed at investigating the meaning of political and civic uses of the internet and social media, and their relationship with offline participation, from the viewpoint of (young) citizens.

As the three case studies here presented suggest, the internet and social network sites provide pre-existing offline civic cultures with further space to embed collective identities and citizenship practices; the virtual co-presence in between a face-to-face meeting and the next, reinforces trust between members, while supporting the sharing of information, knowledge and values at a distance. As discussed earlier in the paper, all the dimensions of civic cultures, that is the organisational (space and practices), cognitive (knowledge and values) and symbolic (identity and trust) dimensions are reproduced, negotiated and reinforced online.

In showing that online political users are mainly young activists engaged in various forms of civic and political activities offline, and who combine actualizing citizenry with a few dimensions of the dutiful citizen, the findings discussed in this paper are supportive of the reinforcement thesis: they suggest, indeed, that online participation is not effective at mobilising disaffected individuals, and that civic identities, in which the cognitive and symbolic dimensions are embedded, shape the organisational dimension of civic cultures.

The case of the Popolo Viola, however, supports in part the mobilisation thesis: individuals who have no clear pre-existing civic identity find on the movement's social media a space, a repertoire of practices and a cultural system which enables the process of identification in a collective (actualizing) citizenry model.

Civic cultures are born out of the interactions among citizens who recognise themselves as part of a "we" and build a collective identity. In this perspective, online practices and spaces may shape a particular civic identity, which is then materialized in a set of knowledge, values, trust, and offline spaces and practices. However, since social network sites have become an integral part of our communication repertoire, it is likely that individuals who lack offline social and cultural resources that promote participation, may find and join civic cultures online.

Findings also confirm that the mainstream usage pattern of social network sites is relational, and aimed at maintaining and extending relationships. Indeed, political uses of social network sites are minor, and overshadowed by social networking and entertainment. Most pre-political and political groups on Facebook are perceived and practised as an expressive performance of individual identity. They have to do with personal empowerment and with the representation of identity "through connection" with like-minded individuals or "through display" of one's tastes and lifestyle choices (Livingstone, 2008); they are still significant, indeed, in that they represent a further means of political socialisation at least as we conceive them as a resistance against a top-down, one-way hegemonic culture (Gauntlett, 2011).

Many commentators have argued for the political relevance of non-conventional, informal, convivial, and cultural online practices: "The most vibrant political activities in network culture are not actually located in collective political actions such as deliberation and mobilization, but rather are located between private and private, between private and public, and between publics. They emerge in the overlapping domains of politics and culture" (Lim & Kann, 2008, 92-93). The notions of "civic cultures" and "subactivism", then, contribute to shape a more inclusive research agenda which addresses not only non-conventional citizenship practices, such as petitioning, single-issue campaigns and lifestyle politics, but also online creativity as a form of citizenship (Gauntlett, 2011; Hartley, 1999). Networked collectivism, it is argued, may have a significant role in shaping new modes of citizenship, thus challenging the assumption that non-conventional participation represents an outcome and a further drive towards individualisation. Future research examining the potentials of online creativity and participatory uses of cultural products is therefore needed.

Broadening out conceptions of participation so as to include everyday life, culture, and the private sphere – in a word, to include subactivism - however, does not mean neglecting the limits of the internet as a tool for democratic engagement. The empirical evidence presented here suggests that the two main factors shaping practices of online citizenship are offline civic cultures, on the one hand, and digital inclusion on

the other. Participants' inequalities in the take-up of online participatory practices are embedded in their socio-cultural backgrounds – included their digital literacies and media ecologies – and in the specific subcultures and civic identities to which they belong. Digital inclusion is a barrier that may be actually hindering the ideals of the internet as a more accessible space for the practise of citizenship. Divides in online political participation along the lines of education, age, and above all, pre-existing political engagement are supported by empirical evidence (Smith et al., 2009) thus suggesting that digital citizenship and media literacy are crucial aspects of contemporary societies that may shape the role of the internet in democratic engagement.

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