



Italy's "Five Stars" movement and the role of a leader: Or, how charismatic power can resurface through the web

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Abstract

By focusing on the case of the Italian political movement "Five Stars", founded in 2009 by former comedian Beppe Grillo, this article will analyze the resurfacing of a particular kind of power – charismatic authority – through a platform such as Web 2.0 that was expected to promote more rational consensus strategies. Although the political action of the Five Stars movement pretends to be inspired by a participative culture, it is in fact directly ruled by the founder via his blog, with a little space allowed for discussions. In this sense, the rise of Grillo as a political leader seems to both retrieve and renew an old form of authority grounded in a very traditional legitimacy – the charismatic and undisputed leadership of the boss – while at the same time being able to spread through the network. This article will offer an overview of events and also provide a theoretical interpretation.

Keywords

Italian politics, political communication, power, power-law, Web 2.0

Introduction

Insofar as networks are decentralized and almost freely accessible, they are intended to be more democratic than the older media: to a great extent, this is the current idea of the web as a political tool. In actuality many experiences in which the web has been exploited,

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and even stressed to its limits, for radically democratic purposes easily come to mind – the Seattle movement, the German Pirate Party, Occupy the World, to name just a few. Even though blogs and social media are expected to play a role in the widening of democratic debate, my discussion will focus on the Italian movement “Five Stars”, founded by Beppe Grillo in 2009, which has revealed a very different pattern. Although the party has acted exclusively via the web, with no traditional structure and very rare physical meetings (indeed, Grillo has always refused to define it as a “party”), there is no democracy inside the movement. Decision-making, far from being decentralized, is totally embedded in the figure of its leader. Nonetheless, since its birth the movement has been exploiting the democratic rhetoric of the web as a topical argument as well as a critique to traditional hierarchies, and has been growing in popularity and consensus. My concern therefore is not only for the political consequences directly brought about by the movement, but also for the extent to which digital environments, in a broader sense, are exposed to the rise of populist leaderships.

The rise of the movement, 2007–2013

Already a well-known comedian when he decided to enter the political arena and founded his own movement, Beppe Grillo was a famous protagonist in 1980s Italian mainstream entertainment. In 1986, during a popular prime-time TV show, he accused the Italian Socialist Party of being responsible for the widespread corruption of political and economic affairs. As a consequence, the Italian public TV company RAI, controlled by the most influential parties, immediately decided to ban him. This episode marked a turning point in his career, consecrating him as a subversive and anti-establishment figure, a reputation he would largely exploit in his subsequent political adventure.

The first step in Grillo’s political rise was the birth of his blog. Launched in 2005 and mainly dedicated to environmental topics and corruption issues, it was destined to be an unpredictable success. If we look at the *Observer*’s list of the 50 most powerful blogs in the world, *beppegrillo.it* ranks number 9, while the author himself ranks number 7 in the Forbes list of the most influential web celebrities. According to the *Guardian*, he is even supposed to be one of the most influential bloggers worldwide, while Technorati ranks his blog among the 10 most popular in the world. The collected data are even more impressive when we consider that the blog is dedicated to Italian local issues, and its main language is almost unknown outside Italy.

As for the political project, Five Stars’ program has been established by the leader himself – rather than through public consultation via social media, as in properly networked movements – and is organized into seven main fields: relationship between state and citizens; energy; information; economy; transport; health; and education. However, this program is far from being clear and, in this sense, is similar to that of many European populist parties. What bloggers need – Mathieu O’Neil (2009: 117) points out – are basically enemies, for “without them, they would have nothing to write about”. Indeed, since the birth of the movement, Grillo has been looking for exactly that, mostly focusing on the exploitation of complaints about corruption and politician privileges. Occasionally he has included other issues related to immigration regulation, resistance to global financial powers, opposition to European currency, contrast to petty crime, development of

local autonomies, and so forth. One can say that there is nothing new in this situation, inasmuch as economic crisis often gives rise to demagogic reactions. New elements however emerge if we consider the technological conditions upon which the movement has developed and this paradoxical overlapping of new digital environments and old ideological temptations.

As for Grillo's political action, three events are worth mentioning: the so-called "V-Day" in 2007; the local elections in 2012; and the national political elections in 2013. The V-Day was the first political demonstration organized by Grillo in the Italian squares: the "V" formed with fingers representing an Italian curse word, and also referring to Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* and its call for popular revenge against government abuses of power. In 2007, Grillo collected more than 300,000 signatures for a law that would prevent corrupt politicians from being eligible for election; a notable result, considering that under Italian legislation popular initiative laws only require 50,000 signatures. Nevertheless, the Italian Parliament oddly refused to take the proposal into account, in so doing deepening the rift between the people and the "Palace" (to say it in the words of Pier Paolo Pasolini), which gave new strength to the most pivotal subject in Grillo's propaganda.

As a consequence, Five Stars' popularity continued to grow, leading it to notable success at local government elections. The most relevant result was achieved in 2012 in Parma, a wealthy city in the north of Italy, where the previous City Council had been tainted by many corruption allegations and scandals. Here, the majority of people eventually voted for Five Stars' candidate Gabriele Pizzarotti, who was elected as mayor. At that time, 38-year-old Pizzarotti was very young with in Italian terms, totally unknown in public opinion and with no political experience. This was to become the Grillo, and Five Stars, method: candidates are actually requested to *not* have any political experience, and are recruited from the so-called "civil society". People willing to enter politics simply have to submit their curriculum vitae to Grillo's blog and let the leader evaluate them and make the final decision – apparently following his personal preferences, with no transparency whatsoever.

The final chapter of the story was written on the occasion of the 2013 general elections. Five Stars actually obtained more than 7.2 million votes in the Senate (23.79%), and more than 8.7 million votes in the Chamber of Deputies (25.11%), becoming the party with the second highest number of votes, or even the party with the most votes if we do not count those of Italians abroad. These results are more impressive when we consider that Five Stars conducted a low-cost electoral campaign, arguably mobilizing people through word-of-mouth communication, without using any state funding, and, if anything, taking advantage of the excessive cost of politics as a main argument against the other parties.

Even though Grillo's blog is the actual house organ of the party, I am not pretending that it can exhaust the reasons for his political success. On the contrary, many other factors should be considered – not only Five Stars' specific proposal, but the fact of its leader's popularity due to not being part of the old political class. Perhaps the widely believed inefficacy of Parliament played a role, eventually generating the need to find an alternative to traditional parties. As far as I am concerned, though, I will only address the role of Grillo's blog with respect to both Italian society and cyberspace, in order to raise

some broader questions about the influence of digital platforms and the unpredictability of their links with the evolution of the public sphere.

In only a few years Five Stars has moved from the limited ambition of a blog to becoming a real protagonist in Italian history, so that its success is now posing some undeniable problems. To what extent can we think of Grillo as a party leader, considering that he has not been elected by anyone? How can a party contribute to democratic debate, without any *internal* democracy? As for Grillo, is his role supposed to expire, and if so when? Will it be reconsidered and submitted to any form of evaluation, or should we consider him as a leader *for life*?

In the end, his television experience accounted for his popularity as a comedian, but the web gave rise to his credibility as a politician. Therefore the question here is: how could this leadership – apparently typical of televised propaganda – take place in the new digital environment? In order to answer this question, we should take into account two different factors: structural and local. The first basically refers to the technical advantages of the web and its tendency towards concentration (which is likely to assume a charismatic nature in the case of blogs), while the second has to do with recent Italian history, and its political events and cultural peculiarities.

Literature review: From the power of the web to the power in the web

It is not easy to fully understand the political implications of the web, because internet-driven communication is causing very different aftermaths: hugely democratic uses of the new devices, as in the case of Occupy Wall Street or Indignados; advanced applications of viral marketing principles, as in the famous 2008 Obama campaign; and even populist waves in other countries such as Venezuela or the Philippines. In order to understand why Italian politics has been affected by the latter tendency, we have to take into account both structural and local levels.

As for the structural level, one of the limits of web theory could be to consider that *exclusion* is the only form of discrimination, the clearest example of this being the digital divide of connected and non-connected people. In this way, little attention has been paid to several forms of discrimination and inequality taking place *inside* the network, despite the relatively early discovery of the “power-law” as the main rule in web development.

Empirical evidence actually shows that there are several good reasons to question the widely accepted idea of the web as a fully “decentralized” structure. The rise of meritocratic leadership inside the open source environments, or the dictatorship of a few active users in Wikipedia’s and many other communities reveals a very different pattern, which must be considered as a “centralization” movement. Ultimately this tendency probably has to do with the power-law structure of the web, first discovered by the Faloutsos brothers and clearly illustrated by Albert-László Barabási. According to Barabási (2002: 70),

unevenness characterizes networks [...]. Power laws mathematically formulate the fact that in most real networks the majority of nodes have only *a few* links and that these numerous tiny nodes coexist with a few big hubs, nodes with an anomalously high number of links.

The same tendency therefore affects different levels of the digital environment, from the network's basic technical pattern of linking to the consistent imbalance between the centrality of different sites, which is usually referred to as the "topology" of the web. An important question we might ask is: to what extent is this centralization also affecting the relationship between users? As for the political use of the web, Sandra González-Bailón (2013: 2–4) argues, we might "debunk claims that equate online networks to horizontal structures": rather, the way the web can "help people self-organize" has to do with the embedding of traditional practices, namely opinion leadership and two-step flow of communication. In other words, the affordability of the web for political engagement is a measure of its ability to exploit pre-existing phenomena such as ideological polarization, opinion-giving strategies, and spreading cascades: a property that Grillo would be able to stress to its limit.

At a basic level, generally speaking, the structural imbalance of the web has been repeatedly demonstrated through the statistical distribution of incoming and outgoing links, intended as the vital resource for any website, with both following the power-law rule. Faloutsos et al. (1999) studied a sample of more than 11,000 nodes, and concluded that the power-law fits the data "very well, resulting in correlation coefficients of 96% or higher". Albert-László Barabási and his team obtained a confirmation of the previous result by detecting the power-law organization of the in-links of the 325,000 pages on the University of Notre Dame's domain (Barabási and Albert, 1999). Andrei Broder studied a more significant sample of 203 million pages, and found a clear separation between a few highly connected sites – the *core* – and the vast majority of nodes, which become progressively less connected or literally disconnected from the system (Broder et al., 2004). Zoltan Dezső analyzed the topology of the Hungarian news portal Horigo, clearly divided into a "stable skeleton" and a large number of "documents only temporally linked" to the structure, in so doing confirming the validity of the same rule, also referred to as "Pareto's principle" (Dezső et al., 2006). Adamic and Huberman (1999) found a similar power-law pattern by studying a 700,000-node sample and taking into account the distribution of subpages between the different sites, which was supposed to be a direct indication of their strength, and showing a clear opposition between a strict minority of rich nodes and a vast majority of one- or few-page sites. According to Pennock et al. (2002), the power-law plays a fundamental role in the political economy of the web, even though some types of websites can diverge from the main rule, "with the magnitude of deviation varying from category to category".

Not only is the power-law the basic rule in web development – for which internet traffic and the in-link distribution cluster around a small number of hubs – but a similar concentration tendency is likely to affect the relationship between end users as well (Barabási and Albert, 1999: 512). In studying the relationships that people develop via email, Ebel et al. (2002: 4) found the presence of a few powerful subjects, characterized by a very intense frequency of exchanges, regulating the communication flow at large. Additionally, Lada Adamic discovered that the exchanges in peer-to-peer networks and file-sharing sites, such as Gnutella and Freenet, are ruled by the disproportion between a majority of weak nodes and a few influential, highly connected users. Here the power-law reflects not only a statistical imbalance but also "the presence of central individuals

who interact with many others on a daily basis” and “play a key role in relaying information” (Adamic et al., 2001: 1).

A number of surveys focusing on Twitter – one of the supposed protagonists of democratic uprisings in both North Africa and the Western world – have demonstrated its actual dependence upon the same power-law tendency. According to the survey conducted by Wu and others on a sample of more than 250 million tweets, 0.05% of users account for over 50% of all messages (Wu et al., 2011: 5). As for the practice of information retweeting, which can be considered as a likely indicator of the importance of different users, the studies measured a similar distribution, clearly regulated by power-law (Bakshy et al., 2011: 4; Cha et al., 2010: 4). Although these findings may not be surprising, it is unexpected to observe a similar tendency in the well-known case of the Arab Spring. Studying a dataset made of 600,000 tweets with hashtag “#25 jan”, used during the 2011 Egyptian revolution, Wilson and Dunn (2011: 18) found a “clear manifestation of a power law rule”, for which “a small minority of a large group” was responsible for a highly “intensive contribution”, thereby showing that a kind of leadership – technical, if not political – is likely to emerge within the new movements.

In examining Wikipedia – probably the most successful case of cooperation in web history – things seem to work no differently. For instance, out of 29,000 users examined in a survey, only 143 were administrators, and no more than seven of them had true decision-making autonomy (Ciffolilli, 2003). According to another survey, Wikipedia authors fall under the authority of a handful of arbitrators who, while accounting for a very small minority of the community, are nonetheless able to put the others “out of the game” (Bryant et al., 2005: 9). Christian Fuchs referred to this structure as a “pyramid”, where common users stay at the bottom, while above them, in ascending order, are “registered users, ambassadors, mediators, administrators, arbitrators, developers and bureaucrats”. Only the last four are vested with an actual authority (Fuchs, 2008: 319).

A clear concentration in decision-making processes has been observed within open source communities as well. Despite the radically democratic ideology of the open source world, Mockus et al. (2000) found that 0.03% of Apache community members are responsible for 90% of interventions. In a 2002 survey, they found out that almost 50% of technical problems within the Mozilla community are resolved by an incredibly small minority (Mockus et al. 2002). Lakhani and Von Hippel (2003) discovered very similar data, demonstrating that only 2% of participants in the broader Apache discussion forum provided more than 50% of the answers to technical questions. Ghosh and Prakash (2000) showed that 10% of participants in a free software community account for 72% of the produced informatics code. Incidentally, the same inferences can be found in similar studies conducted on the Debian system (Krafft, 2005), the Linux development team (Webber, 2004), and open source environments at large (Duguid, 2006), all showing the system’s clear dependence upon the imbalance pattern of power-law distribution. Perhaps this imbalance is not entirely consistent with the ideology of open source movements, but is likely to depend on a meritocratic criterion, basically relying on the self-evident competence of the most skilled users. Contrarily, it is hard to explain the concentration process in other web environments, such as the blogosphere system to which the case of Grillo ultimately belongs.

Even in the blog system, Mathieu O’Neil argues (2005: 4), we can easily find a sort of “A list”, a small group of hyper-connected sites favored by power-law. This tendency has been demonstrated by, among others, Clay Shirky (2003) through a survey of 433 blogs: if we look at the in-links that regulate the relationship between those blogs, the first 12 sites collect 20% of links, and the first 50 – which are no more than 12% of the total amount – collect 50% of links. A similar tendency has been illustrated by Jason Kottke (2003) through a study of Technorati’s 100 most popular blogs, and by Cameron Marlow (2004), who analyzed a more significant dataset of 27,000 blogs. Farrell and Drezner, working on a sample of 4500 blogs dedicated to political issues, figured out that power-law organized them in a clearly non-democratic order (Farrell and Drezner, 2008: 21), thus turning the blogosphere into a *pyramid* whose base is exceedingly distant from the apex. As a result, the most important blogs usually select the topics of discussion for all the others, which are then forced to link to the most influential ones (Farrell and Drezner, 2008: 22). Cameron Marlow (2006: 1–5) identified a similar statistical trend in the frequency with which authors update their sites, while Gruhl *et al.* (2004) showed that the number of *posts* produced a decrease in the same power-law distribution, revealing the gap between a vast majority of peripheral blogs and a very small number of successful nodes.

Furthermore, this imbalance in blogs does not simply rely on technical reasons, but also reveals a vast difference in credibility between common bloggers and a few influential individuals: that is, the emergence of a charismatic authority (O’Neil, 2009: 116). The distribution of links within the blogosphere, namely the distinction between “blog-roll” and “permalinks”, can provide a clear explanation. Unlike blogroll links, which express the endorsement of another blog, “permalinks” or “dynamic links” simply point to a specific topic likely to be included in any subpage. As shown in Marlow’s surveys, it is no accident that the distribution of the latter is more balanced than that of the former, arguably due to the fact that the links pointing to the home page of a blog are attracted by the charismatic authority of the most influential authors and therefore reveal a higher degree of concentration (Marlow, 2004: 6–8, 2006: 7). Content-driven discussions are more democratic, whereas the reduction of complexity requires the intervention of stronger personalities. Therefore, given that the blogosphere seems to follow a *concentration* rule, is it surprising to witness the rise of a traditional leadership within?

Italian cascades

On the one hand, we have concentration processes likely to create technical premises for cultural concentration; on the other, we have to consider the condition of Italian cyberspace and the cultural profile of its users. In this sense, what makes the Italian case typical is its vulnerability to what we could call “opinion cascades”. A cascade can in fact be intended as the sudden manifestation of the silent majority – or at least of a highly numerous minority – normally acting at the deepest and hidden levels of public opinion.

According to Lohmann (1994: 50), a cascade is likely to take place when the information about the nature of a political regime, usually “dispersed among the members of the society”, eventually becomes universally known. This process usually takes place through a sort of “signaling game” that involves a sender and a receiver, where the sender

provides “information pertinent to the receiver’s decisions”. The result is the transformation of the citizen’s private relationship with the system into a real public experience (Lohmann, 1994: 49). Grillo’s rhetoric of disclosure, and his call for popular direct action, seem to follow a similar vein.

Lustick and Miodownik (2004: 5) suggest that spatiality is a key factor in the spread of political cascades:

By spatiality we mean variation in the size of the zone of knowledge available to individuals, i.e. in the amount of access that individuals in a population have to information about a specific subset of that population rather than to parametric information about the population as a whole. The specification of the subset of the population with which an individual has more contact than with others can be a function of geography, that is, strictly speaking, spatial relations, but it can also be social.

A cascade can rise from a variation in the spatial configuration, being intended as both the material living space as well as the informational environment accessible by the people. An extended survey actually found that the spread of information through the blogosphere takes the shape of a cascade, with a few influential nodes following a power-law distribution (Gruhl et al., 2004; Leskovec et al., 2007). In all these cases, Duncan Watts argues (2003: 204), even networked people can stop thinking autonomously and eventually act as a “coherent mass”. With its fleeting success, Grillo’s blog both summarizes a broader technical tendency and exhibits a specific political circumstance: while backstage information about political affairs started to circulate through the blogosphere, a new *space* opened up and suddenly became ruled by the most influential player.

If we look back at recent Italian history, we can detect at least three different cascades: the first localized between 1992 and 1993 at the very end of the historical period known as the “First Republic”; the second spread between 1994 and 1998 at the beginning of the “Second Republic”, largely overlapping the popular consensus on Silvio Berlusconi; and the last beginning around 2009 when the effects of a global economic crisis started to affect Italian internal affairs and everyday life as well. Even though this recent opinion cascade does share some arguments proposed by Indignados and Occupy – such as the social responsibility of banks, critique of financial powers, rating agencies regulation, etc. – it also shows a continuity with respect to the previous national cascades and their hostility towards corruption, public bureaucracy and the privileges of politicians, as perceived by the citizenship.

According to Cass Sunstein (2007: 84–85), cascades are a typical problem of the web. Insofar as people select some given environments and only connect to like-minded others, as in Facebook, they renounce any “unexpected encounter”, so as to be exposed to information sources and opinions they have chosen in advance. Consequently, at least under given circumstances, dissent is no longer acceptable and a conformist cascade will be more likely to take place. However, in Italy, cyber-cascades actually complement the opinion cascades that have been circulating within different realms, from interpersonal communication to mass media. All these cascades have in fact been inspired, from 1992 on, by the very same issue: the diffused hostility towards the “caste” of politicians, considered to be privileged, unjustly enriched and unpunished, and ultimately corrupt (Rizzo

and Stella, 2007). It is therefore no surprise that Beppe Grillo – who had been ostracized by the parties in 1986 – eventually provided an illusory personification of popular revenge.

All three cascades have generated a similar process: a huge bandwagon effect destined to affect electoral results. The first gave strength to the movement against public funding to parties and proportional electoral law – both suddenly identified with the power of traditional parties *as such* – eventually abolished by referendum in 1993, in accordance with an unprecedented popular support (ranging from 82% to 90% and from 28 to 31 million votes). In 1994, businessman and media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi took advantage of the second cascade, exploiting the widespread diffidence towards political professionals, through a last-minute campaign mainly based on the myth of the self-made man: only a few months after the foundation of his party, he obtained more than eight million votes at the general election, and then, at the apex of his success, more than 10 million votes at the European Parliament election. In this sense, Grillo's success actually reproduces a cyclical phenomenon in the evolution of Italian public opinion, destined to favor the non-institutional candidates (or rather, the candidates able to present themselves in such a way).

What all those movements have in common is a clear inclination towards *populism*: a concept that has a slightly positive meaning in a country affected by a deepening divide between a privileged “caste” of politicians and high-level functionaries and the rest of the population (Rizzo and Stella, 2007). While left-wing parties have always failed to embrace this rhetoric, so as to be eventually perceived as the very symbol of the establishment, populism has become a powerful electoral argument for both local and right-wing movements, resulting in perfect suitability for both the one-way televised propaganda and social media-engaged practices (Lanni, 2011). As Paolo Flores D'Arcais (2011) famously pointed out, from 1993 onwards any party, in order to get consensus, might be able to “harness the wave of anti-politics” and occupy its strategic square: and what was true for Berlusconi in the late TV era, seems to be true for Grillo and the blog era as well.

As for the properties of contemporary digital cascade, an explanation can be found in the so-called “echo chamber” effect: blogs tend to produce a fragmentation and even a polarization of political opinion, simply preventing their readers from encountering alternative ideas. As a result, reality is fragmented into a variety of diverging interpretations. In the same way, the general audience of TV is broken down into polarized communities of beliefs, each reinforcing its “tribal” identity and radicalizing its ideology (Manjoo, 2008; Sunstein, 2007).

Because bloggers select their contents in advance and usually link to like-minded bloggers, the final result will be a “one-sided coverage of politics” (Baum and Groeling, 2008: 359), to the point that readers will no longer deal with ideas and opinions they have not chosen in advance.

In any case, there is no scientific evidence about whether blogs produce, or simply reproduce, this polarization tendency: such an “insularity” seems not to increase across time, and thus arguably depends on the wider social tendency towards “homophily” rather than on the specific effect of the web (González-Bailón, 2013; Hargittai et al., 2008). Surely, whichever it is, blogs contribute to shaping a very different reality with

respect to TV, which allowed the merging of public spheres and provided the audience with a shared representation of the world (Meyrowitz, 1985). On the contrary, a blogger can exercise an undisputed leadership over his or her selected audience: an authority that is also “a form of violence” and implies the “power of exclusion and stigmatization”, as well as the ability to decide “what is most interesting” (O’Neil, 2005: 8).

As for Grillo, from a merely sociological standpoint, it is not improper to analyze his role in the most traditional categories of power. Max Weber’s classical definition of “charismatic authority” actually gives a full understanding of our problem for at least three reasons. First, this kind of power ultimately relies on the spontaneous acknowledgment by the “dominated”: its legitimacy does not require any ratification because it is simply *unquestioned*. Second, laws are not needed; or better yet, rules are directly embedded in the leader’s body and voice, so as to make any formal codification totally useless. Third, all intermediated agencies are no longer required, and all bureau powers are consequently weakened and absorbed by a kind of personal management of public affairs. Weber’s concept of power can therefore be extended to the blogosphere. How can we explain this oddity?

I have stated that Five Stars’ strategies are imposed by the leader: even admissions to the party are actually based on Grillo’s will, as are the rules regulating the duration of political activities, the economic treatment of parliamentarians, and so forth. Not accidentally, Grillo recently started to challenge the principle established by the 67th article of the Italian Constitution, according to which congressmen are independent from any political mandate imposed by their party – a rule that could actually prevent the leader from directing the action of Five Star representatives, as he has basically been doing in the last year. In terms of communication, the structure of the blog can provide a clear exhibition of the same phenomenon: the role of followers is limited by definition, and Grillo himself manages the power to ban other individuals from the debate, as has often been reported. This transformation of power *within* digital environments is a difficult problem to stabilize. According to Manuel Castells’ (2009) general theory, contemporary forms of power can be organized into four categories: networking (“the power of the actors and organizations included in the networks” over the excluded groups); network (a form of power acting “by imposition” of rules and standards); networked (the authority of some “social actors over other social actors” *within* the net); and network-making (the ability to program and “switch” different networks). The first and the last are to some extent the basic forms of authority exercised “by exclusion”, or through a very traditional form of control, while “network” and “networked” power act by *inclusion*. And this seems to be the case of Grillo with respect to Italian public opinion.

Even though Castells is well aware that power relationships *do* take place in networked structures and that this configuration varies according to any specific network, this is probably the least convincing part of his work, as well as a major problem in current media studies. The problem here is whether or not the sociology of media has to acknowledge the evidence of concentration as it clearly emerges from statistical findings of the physics of the web: namely, the extent to which inequality is to be considered as neither a borderline case nor an accidental aftermath, but rather as a *structural condition* in the political economy of the web. However, this assumption would in any case mean that democratic uses of the web are not allowed. If anything, it would suggest that they

are more difficult to realize and that they need to be studied with respect to their political inspirations rather than to favorable technical possibilities. Proof of the former could be the fact that many participative networks, as previously shown, finally reveal the following of a hidden hierarchy; while the latter shows that the real democratic uses of the web are usually restricted to selected and well-motivated social circles (and often limited to brief experiences). In any case, technological and social networks are not *one*, nor do they follow the same rules. On the contrary, it is necessary to clearly differentiate between their properties so as not to provide a “one-dimensional” theory (Fuchs, 2009: 95–96; Van Dijk, 1999).

Therefore, in order to differentiate between these aspects, we have to admit that the technical rules of the web do not tell us *anything* about the groups acting in the network society. Power-law does not explain why a *specific* blog can attract so many followers. On the contrary, the morphology of the web possibly explains why such an undisputed authority can – and is *likely* to – take place despite the infinite voices available on the internet. It explains how and why a leadership ultimately emerges through horizontal relationships, but not *precisely* why Grillo took it on. In the end, that is a subject for social and political studies.

Discussion: Do digital artifacts have politics?

The more we dig into the depths of the network society, the more we discover a concentration bias, leading us to a paradoxical conclusion and even more complicated questions. Is the concentration simply the *technical* rule of web development, or is it also affecting the level of users’ experience? And does this tendency have anything to do with such a concentration of authority, like Grillo within the Five Stars movement?

The extent to which technical configurations result in political consequences is a highly discussed topic, ranging from Karl Marx’s well-known distinction between the effects of hand and steam mills, to White’s analysis of the relationship between the diffusion of the stirrup and social change in the Middle Ages; from Harold Innis’ and Marshall McLuhan’s technological determinism, to the discussion between Langdon Winner and Bernward Joerges of the politics of artifacts, and the overall contribution of the sociology of science. It could be said that if such a theoretical problem is too big to be resolved, it is probably because it is posed too generally.

My main point is not that such a relationship between technological and social configurations is supposed to exist as a general rule, but rather that, in this case, a clear affinity *does* exist between the two. A systematic analysis would be required to show whether, and to what extent, this affinity depends upon the structure of the web as such or is more accidental. In other words – is Grillo’s political success a direct consequence of the diffusion of the web in Italy or, given the same premise, could things have gone differently?

To provide an answer, we have to look not only at the ecology of the web, but also at contemporary Italian history and at the conditions of society at large. If we consider the hypothesis that the web can be responsible for variable social effects in different countries, and that the “networked power” is likely to diversely affect different systems, we have to pay attention at least to the most evident aspects of Italian culture. Of first and

foremost importance is the national literacy rate. According to the last *Report on the Social Situation in Italy* by Censis (2012), non-readers account for approximately 50% of the population, possibly explaining the emergence of a traditional leadership through the strengthening of a cascade that started on the web and exploited the everyday *offline* word-of-mouth experience.

This new embedding of leaderships, pointed out by Mathieu O'Neil, could easily be linked to the overall personalization of politics brought about by broadcast media. However, the point I am most concerned with here is an interesting continuity between the opinion-giving processes shaped by vertical media and those taking place in horizontal media. And the case of Five Stars is far more interesting, in this sense, considering that its leader is the only Italian politician who has regularly been refusing to appear on TV and get interviewed by newspapers, while delegating its strategic communication to his blog and its ability to generate an information cascade. The personal nature of a leadership, in this sense, can be intended as a bridge between the blogosphere and society as a whole.

Even in situations of distributed content production and comment moderation... the structure of a weblog is intensely personal... because it is the logic of individual charisma that permeates any blog. [...] Ultimately in weblogs, administrative power is happily autocratic. The expertise of the crowd does not translate into the corresponding capacity to act (O'Neil, 2009: 116).

If we look for continuity rather than discontinuity between traditional and contemporary politics, we can be led to believe that something typical is acting in both Italian society and the Italian blogosphere, which deters the transition from the vertical to the horizontal paradigm (by which the whole theory of the network society is actually inspired). As for the state of society, Paul Ginsborg's analysis of "familism" comes to mind, which focuses on its specific Italian version, grounded in cohesive family units, ruled by "vertical relationships" (Ginsborg, 1994: 68–69) and likely to inhibit any sort of "horizontal solidarity" (Ginsborg, 1998: 644). On the contrary, Ginsborg (1998: 640) argues, civil society – the missing link between family and state – does exactly require a form of peer solidarity, so as to transform individuals into citizens and shape a "horizontal" culture able to prevent any strong leadership from rising up and degenerating (Ginsborg, 2004: 177).

Therefore, when it comes to the Italian blogosphere, we can question if a similar process is taking place, by which a potentially horizontal system has finally turned vertical. According to Balmas et al. (2012), the personalization of politics can bring two almost opposite consequences: "decentralized" personalization or "centralized". In the first case, power previously exercised through party committees splits into several autonomous individualities, as in "networked" contemporary movements (Castells, 2012), while in the second it becomes embedded in a central leader. In the Italian case, where the diffusion of the web has been associated with the long-term effects of *familism* rather than with the transition towards "networked individualism" (Rainie and Wellman, 2012), this second process is arguably taking place, and a vertical authority is strengthening even within the new digital platforms.

A closer look at the Italian blogosphere can possibly provide confirmation. Vincenzo Cosenza's (2012) analysis of 1900 blogs actually shows a clear representation of the

system, in its turn ruled by power-law. The most interesting aspect shown by social network analysis, is the distinction between “two different metrics”: the in-degree index, which measures the number of in-links, and the “betweenness centrality”, which expresses the ability of a node to shorten the distance between any two blogs – in other words, to act as a “bridge”. Even though the two indices often overlap, they ultimately belong to different properties: to the extent that a blog (such as Wittgenstein or Manteblog, in the Italian case) can be very central for its “in betweenness” index and have a relatively low in-degree value, while others such as Grillo’s reveal the very opposite profile. The centrality of Grillo’s blog has not directly to do with networking attitudes (such as linking and bridging), but rather it relies on the unique ability to collect strategic in-links without in turn using hyperlinks in order to widen the discussion space. It is not by accident that the blog has no blogroll, but only gives space to a news aggregator owned by the same company that has built *beppegrillo.it* (while the blog *does*, despite Grillo’s rhetoric of transparency, host banners and third-party elements, even though the distribution of advertising revenues is far from clear).

A useful contribution to network theory is due to Jon Kleinberg and his distinction between two types of central nodes: the “hubs” and the so-called “authorities”. While the hubs play a fundamental bridging function, the authorities constitute the “authoritative sources” with respect to any given cluster of sites or any given subset of arguments. According to Kleinberg (1999: 611),

hubs and authorities exhibit what could be called a mutually reinforcing relationship: a good hub is a page that points to many good authorities; a good authority is a page that is pointed to by many good hubs.

In other words, the web is affected by two different forms of power, at least from a very technical standpoint: the hubs, due to the concentration of links and their likelihood to fill the distances between the edges, and the more centralized authorities, which are credited with the highest level of liability and trustfulness. We can suggest the hypothesis that, in the political economy of the web, some authorities – such as Grillo’s blog – do not emerge through the uneven statistical distribution of hyperlinks, but rather by obtaining an amount of decisive in-links from some selected hubs, which regulate the traffic while at the same time channeling it towards specific edges. As far as we consider that the percentage of blog readers is usually not too high amongst the population, but it *is* high amongst bloggers and journalists, we can wonder if a two-step process has been active, by which the power-law first defined a technical hierarchy, and the hubs then selected *beppegrillo.it* as the most influential source. Such a two-level structure could also explain the spread of information cascades, originated by Grillo himself and propagated through all the opinion leaders and the “satellites” ultimately depending on his blog. A process by which, in any case, cyberspace has moved from the original horizontal structure to becoming a *centralized* one.

Finally, a few words must be dedicated to the political sense of this concentration tendency. Jodi Dean (2012: 19–32) is probably right when she suggests that critiques to centralization paradoxically take over the neoliberal ideology, according to which decentralized is always better than centralized. Either way, my goal is not to uphold this idea,

but rather to show a particular way in which a contradictory political discourse is taking place – one that uses decentralization as a rhetorical way of building up a very traditional authority. What I would like to point out here is not that decentralization is better – which is not necessarily true – but that centralization of web resources, unlike different systems, is acting at a level deep enough to make users not necessarily aware of it. We are witnessing a kind of schizophrenic moment, in which many social groups are likely to use web platforms to mobilize against political institutions, while at the same time not questioning the *ownership* and governance of the platforms themselves (Grillo’s blog in Italy, as well as Facebook at a global level for example). And this is, in the final analysis, a serious matter of power.

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