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A Double-Faced Medium?
The challenges and opportunities of the Internet for social movements

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Abstract

While most of the literature focusing on the Internet and politics tends to assess the positive contribution of Computer-Mediated Communication to political processes, this paper stresses both positive and negative consequences of the Internet for social movements, with special attention paid to the Italian Global Justice Movement. The Internet is presented as a double-faced Janus creating opportunities but also posing new challenges to resource poor actors.

This paper is built on data that was gathered with quantitative and qualitative instruments employed during different researches: a survey of participants in the demonstration on the Bolkestein directive (Rome, October 2005) and a series of qualitative interviews with those in leadership positions of different organizational sectors of the Italian Global Justice Movement. While quantitative data allows for the checking of some relations among variables concerning the political use of the Internet, qualitative data provides more detailed information on Internet use in the everyday life of the organizations. An attempt to compare systematically the Internet's limits and opportunities for social movements will be presented in the final paragraph.

A double-faced medium?
The challenges and opportunities of the Internet for social movements[1]

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Introduction: The democratic potential of the Internet

This paper draws on the recent debate on the democratic potential of the Internet. Such debate has often been dominated by the confrontation between skeptical and optimistic views, especially over the potential contribution of new technologies to improving political participation and democracy. The Internet has been considered by some to be a medium that favors those already interested and engaged in politics (Norris 2001). Other scholars claim that it can reduce political inequalities (Meyers 2001). Indeed, the Internet multiplies the channels for political information and participation at the individual level, provides new opportunities for communication, mobilization and interaction at the organizational level, and creates new pluralistic public spheres where citizens can discuss issues of general interest directed towards to the public good at the macro level (della Porta and Mosca 2005a). The effects of the Internet have been discussed over many important fields, including its impact on participation and pluralism.

As for *participation*, unlike television and other high-cost types of communication, the Internet has been presented as a technology that allows broad participation and also reduces hierarchies, favoring horizontal forms of communication and organization. More optimistic scholars such as Ayers (1999) stressed the capacity of the Internet to give more voice and power to the powerless. The "equalizing" effect of the Internet has, however, been denied and challenged by more skeptical scholars such as Margolis and Resnick (2000) who have claimed that this new medium favors organizations already rich in resources and people already engaged in politics. Most recent literature on this topic seems to provide support for skeptic arguments.

As for *pluralism*, the Internet has certainly increased the quantity of information available and facilitated access to it. However, also on these issues, some skepticism has emerged on the quality of information available online (in particular in relation to the difficulties involved in assessing its reliability) as well as on the capacity of Internet communication to overcome social and/or ideological barriers (Sunstein 2001; Rucht 2005). Furthermore, the online presence of resource-poor organizations is overshadowed by what has been called "googlearchy", that is the tendency of search engines to over-represent mainstream political actors online (Hindman et al. 2003).

A discussion of the democratic potential of the Internet should also take into account the traditional critique concerning the democratic deficit of this medium: the digital divide. In fact, when reflecting on the Internet's democratic potential, it should be noted that even in rich and technologically developed countries a significant part of the population is still excluded from access to this medium. As Norris (2001) noticed, digital differences emerge in access between different territorial levels (not only between rich or poor macro-regions, but also between nations with similar standards of wealth located in the same macro-region), between different social classes in the same nation (penalizing groups of citizens who lack economic and cultural resources), and between social sectors with different degrees of interest in politics (favoring groups of citizens already active and interested in politics). A large number of studies demonstrates that people without access to the Internet have peculiar socio-demographic characteristics. In fact Internet access reflects a gender divide, a generation divide, a wealth divide and an education divide, as the Internet is more likely to be used by young, male, affluent, and educated people.

Recent studies have focused on the use of new technologies by civil society organizations and individuals, with particular attention paid to the Internet. Electronic networks have been considered the backbone of new transnational social movements[2] which gained media visibility from "the battle of Seattle" on (Bennett 2003). Being bi-directional, interactive and cost-less, they allow for the construction of new public spheres where social movements can organize mobilizations, discuss and negotiate their claims, strengthen their identities, sensitize public opinion and directly express acts of dissent (della Porta and Mosca 2005a).

Internet research has been characterized by methodological pluralism (Garrett 2006), especially when focused on the organizational level. In fact, studies on the individual level have been undertaken mostly through online surveys that are generally based on self-selected samples, raising problems of reliability (Best and Krueger 2004). At the same time, the attention paid to offline surveys on Internet use has been limited

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[2] Social movements are defined as "informal networks, based on shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilize about conflictual issues, through the frequent use of various forms of protest" (della Porta and Diani 1999: 16).

to very basic questions concerning frequency and places of connection but generally ignoring the political dimension of Internet use.

As for the organizational level, the online presence of different political organizations has been investigated through the content analysis of websites (for NGOs see Vedres, Bruszt and Stark 2005; for parliaments and political parties see Trechsel, Kies, Mendez and Schmitter 2003; for social movement organizations see della Porta and Mosca 2005b); mailing-list analysis (Cristante 2003; Kavada 2006); link analysis (Koopmans and Zimmermann 2005) and with the case-study approach (Pickerill 2003). Such research has provided important insights into how these organizations use the Internet for acting politically by other means.

In what follows, I will address the political use of the Internet by the Italian Global Justice Movement (GJM) giving attention to both the organizations and the individuals involved in the movement. First of all, I will define the meaning of the concept "political use of the Internet" and its operazionalization. Then, I will consider how the Internet is used politically by participants in social movements taking into account those factors that can explain different styles of Internet use. My hypothesis is that offline experiences (organizational and participatory ones) define the political profile of individuals that is then consistently expressed online.

In this paper I will present data that was gathered with quantitative and qualitative instruments employed during different researches: a survey of participants in the demonstration on the Bolkestein directive (Rome, October 2005) and a series of interviews with those in leadership positions of different organizational sectors of the Italian GJM.[3] While quantitative data allows for the checking of some relations among variables concerning the political use of the Internet, qualitative data will provide more detailed information on Internet use in the everyday life of the organizations.

Concerning the survey, as it is almost impossible to build a casual sample of participants in a protest event, I worked with a "non-probabilistic sample" (Corbetta 1999: 343-52).[4] The sampling strategy was based on previous surveys on participants in Italian social movement events like the Genoa G8 counter-summit and the Florence European Social Forum (Andretta et al. 2002; della Porta et al. 2006). The survey was implemented using a "strategy of small samples", focusing on the main organizational sectors of the Italian movement, mapping their presence in the demonstration (as indicated in the program and declared by the organizers) and selecting interviewees at random during the meetings organized by different movement sectors before the demonstration started and after it finished. A sampling method of selecting interviewees on the basis of their belonging to different organizational sectors was then employed (for more details see della Porta et al. 2006). Data was collected through a self-administered paper-based questionnaire distributed just before (when different groups assemble to organize their presence within the demonstration) and just after the demonstration (when people rested and listened to spokespersons of the movement) and during a conference on "common goods" discussing the consequences of the Bolkestein directive on public services preceding the demonstration. In order to take into account the different geographical provenances of participants, the questionnaire was also

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[3] Both researches took place within the Demos project, focusing on conceptions and practices of democracy in the European Global Justice Movements (http://demos.eui.eu).
[4] A probabilistic sample could not be built since for civil society events it is impossible to know exactly the characteristics of the population participating (indeed, lists of participants do not even exist).

distributed on different trains coming to Rome (the place were the demonstration was held) both from the South (Sicily) and from the North (Lombardy) of Italy.

The non-probabilistic nature of the sample does not allow strong inferences to be made. Thus, I present only descriptive statistics and non-parametric correlations in order to give an idea of the strength of the relations between variables.[5] It is worth underlining that the findings provide information on the participants in a specific protest event but cannot be considered generalizations for the social movement population.

As for the qualitative part of this paper, I interviewed those in leadership positions/ spokespersons of different groups belonging to different Italian social movement families[6] engaged in mobilization on the issues of globalization, democracy, and social justice: from political parties to unions, from large associations to small informal groupings. During the interviews I asked those in leadership positions of different Social Movement Organizations (SMOs) to indicate both the strengths and weaknesses of Internet communication.

While the first part of the paper focuses on quantitative findings concerning the individual level, the second presents qualitative results regarding the organizational level (but still collected at the individual level). An attempt to compare systematically the Internet's limits and opportunities for social movements will be presented in the final paragraph of this paper.

The political use of the Internet by participants in social movement protest events

In this section the focus will be on the political use of the Internet by individuals taking part in social movement protest events. In what follows, I will present some results of a survey of the participants in a demonstration against the Bolkestein directive that was held in Rome on October 15th 2005.[7] Almost 500 questionnaires were gathered.[8] The questionnaire, focusing mainly on conceptions and practices of democracy within the GJM, also contained some batteries concerning sources of political information and Internet use.

In what follows I present some data concerning information gathering by interviewees, putting in relation the use of the Internet with other sources of information in order to assess its relevance in a multi-media environment. I will then illustrate results concerning the political use of the Internet by the interviewees.

First of all, it is worth considering that the sample includes people engaged in social movements which are characterized by an intense use of the Internet to organize and carry out political actions (della Porta and Mosca 2005a; for similar findings see also Van Laer 2006). The issues around which they mobilize are scarcely considered by the traditional mass media, and are under-represented in parliamentary arenas.

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[5] All results of non-parametric correlations presented in this article have been previously checked with results obtained through cross-tabulations and other descriptive techniques. The significance levels of coefficients presented throughout the paper are reported as follows: ** means significance at the 0.01 level; * means significance at 0.05 level.

[6] The concept of the social movement family has been proposed by della Porta and Rucht (1995) to indicate sets of movements of similar type (i.e. new social movements, left libertarian movements etc.) sharing a number of values and a similar political culture.

[7] The survey was directed by Donatella della Porta, and coordinated by Massimiliano Andretta and Lorenzo Mosca. I wish to thank Maria Fabbri, Anna Ferro, Egle Mocciaro, Linda Parenti and Gianni Piazza for their help in administering questionnaires.

[8] We distributed 700 questionnaires and got back 500. Return rate was approximately 70%.

Consequently, the Internet is heavily used: 42% of our respondents declared they used it daily, 30% more than once a week, 11% once a week and 8% once a month. Overall, less than one tenth of the interviewees never accessed the Internet.[9] This result is particularly significant if we consider that at the time of the survey the percentage of the Italian population accessing the Internet was estimated to be about 40% (Bentivegna 2006).

As figure 1 shows, the Internet is a medium that is entering activists' everyday life. In fact, considering the most important means of communication used daily to gather political information, we found that only newspapers were actually more used than the Internet (46% against 42%). This medium was more used on a daily basis by interviewees than other "mainstream" media of communication like the TV and the radio (around 35%). It is also worth noticing that interviewees use unmediated forms of communication as a primary source of political information: almost two thirds of interviewees declared in fact that they collected political information by talking politics with friends and colleagues daily. Even if they used different means of information, face-to-face relationships were considered much more important in the formation of their political opinions.

This data clearly shows that the Internet supplements other channels of information and serves to allow communication when face-to-face meetings are not possible but it is not substituting unmediated human communication (similar results can also be found in Di Maggio et al. 2001). In a movement that is considered heavily dependent on mediated forms of communication, we found that face-to-face interactions are still at the core of communicative processes. A similar result was found when analyzing in depth the forms of communication employed during the first European Social Forum in Florence (Mosca, Rucht, Teune and Lopez Martin 2007).

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[9] Among those who declared they did not access the Internet, 59% were women, 84% were undergraduates, 47% were more than 28 years old.

Figure 1 - Frequency of use of different media to gather political information
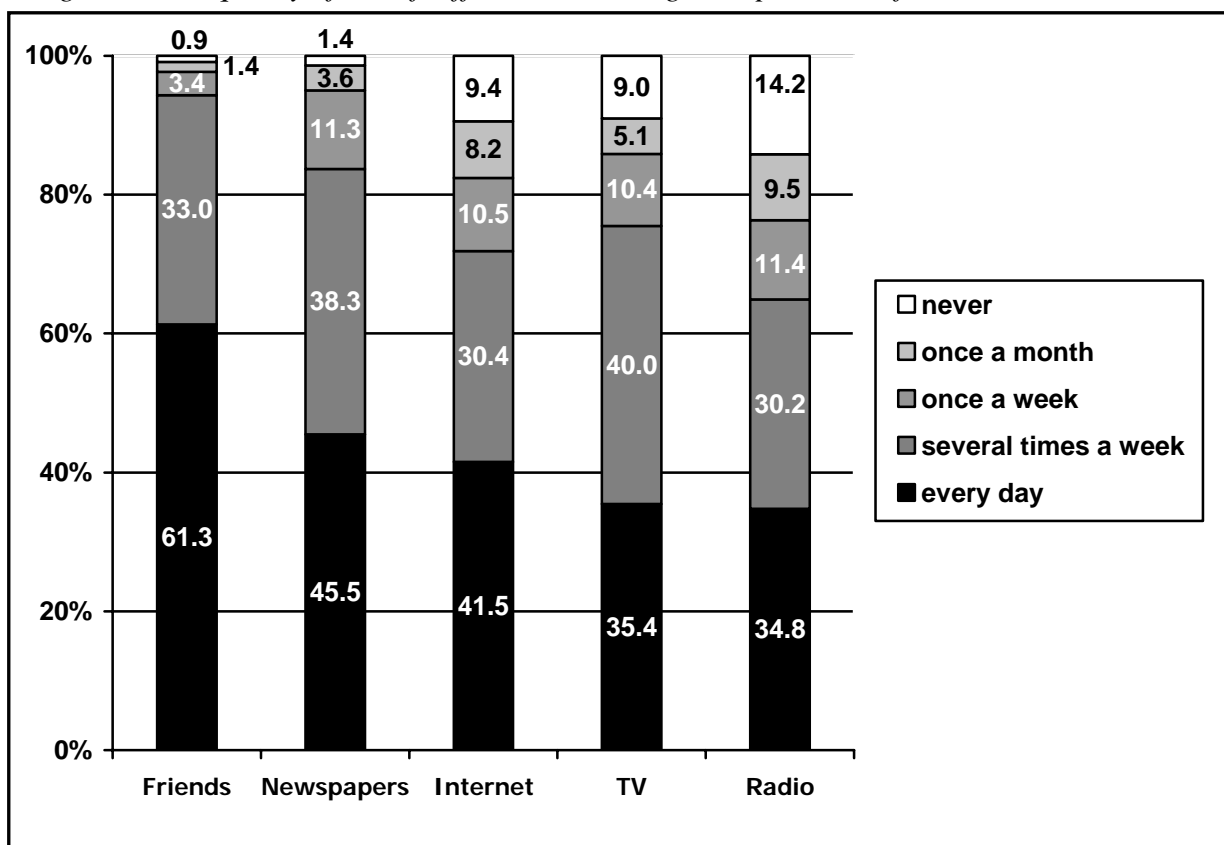
However, the Internet is not just a medium providing alternative information. It can also be seen as a resource that supports political participation in several ways: by providing a new platform for debate and engagement, or by complementing offline participation through, for instance, facilitating organization and communication between people already involved in social and political networks.

The political use of the Internet has to be understood as using the Internet to gather political information, to discuss political issues and to perform acts of dissent. In order to assess if and how the Internet is used politically by participants in social movement protest events, interviewees were asked about how they use the Internet when online. The questionnaire contained indicators concerning different styles of Internet political use: to collect and produce political information; to exchange political opinions and to communicate with one's own group; and to perform online forms of action (e-petitions, net-strikes[10] etc.).

As can be seen in the table below, 86% declared that they use the Internet to gather alternative political information. Around half of the sample had used the Internet not only to collect information but also to publish reports of protest events. This data is very interesting in that it underlines that interviewees are not just passive receivers of information but they also act as active producers posting online reports of protest events that they have directly experienced. One of the more innovative features of the Internet,

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[10] Net-striking consists of a large number of people connecting simultaneously to the same domain at a prearranged time, in order to "jam" a site considered a symbolic target, in order to make it impossible for other users to reach it (Jordan 2002).

that is enabling users to take an active role in publishing their opinions online, seems then to be fulfilled by a significant number of interviewees.

Table 1 – Political use of the Internet by social movement participants

Frequency of Internet use	Political Use of the Internet											
	Visiting alternative information websites		Publishing reports of protest events		Expressing political opinions online		Communicating with his/her political group		Supporting online campaigns		Net-strike and other radical online actions	
Never	14.0		49.5		43.5		32.8		26.5		73.9	
Sometimes	29.4		23.1		31.7		21.6		29.5		19.0	
Often	29.2	86.0	14.6	50.5	12.6	56.5	24.4	67.2	24.0	73.5	4.1	26.1
Very often	27.4		12.8		12.3		21.1		20.0		3.0	
Total (N)	100.0 (432)		100.0 (398)		100.0 (398)		100.0 (393)		100.0 (401)		100.0 (394)	

Data also shows that the Internet is not only used to (passively and actively) inform but also to engage in interactive communication, exchanging political opinions in forums/mailing lists/chats (56%) or to communicate with one's own political group (about two thirds of the sample). Results are quite different if we consider the last dimension of the political use of the Internet, that is to practice online forms of action. While the Internet is broadly used to support online campaigns and petitions (almost three-quarters of interviewees do that), only one quarter of respondents participated in online radical forms of action (such as the net-strike). At this stage it is difficult to go behind the quantitative result explaining why "radical" online forms of action are scarcely practiced by participants in protest events. However, other studies (della Porta and Mosca 2005b) led us to hypothesize that this seems to be related to two different factors: firstly, the fact that information on the existence and the functioning of acts of electronic disturbance is not widespread among participants and, secondly, the fact that such online actions are perceived as ineffective and often disregarded by the targets to whom they are directed. More explanation of this will be provided in the second part of the paper.

Summarizing, the data shown demonstrates that the Internet is used politically at different rates: mostly for retrieving political information, campaigning and petitioning online, and to discuss in ongoing assemblies with one's own political groups online. To a lesser extent, the Internet is used to actively produce information and to express political opinions online via forums, mailing-lists, blogs etc. Engaging in acts of electronic disturbance (i.e. net-strikes and mail-bombings) is instead still restricted to a reduced quota of participants in protest events.

In order to provide some tentative explanations of the political use of the Internet, I created synthetic indexes aggregating various indicators. This applies to the indexes of offline participatory experiences, offline organizational experiences, and political use of the Internet.[11] Even if correlation coefficients don't tell us anything about the direction

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[11] The indicators aggregated in the index of offline participatory experiences were dummy variables concerning the following forms of action: signing a petition/referendum, participating in a demonstration, participating in an alternative form of demonstration (May Day parade, critical mass, etc.), participating in an official strike, participating in a wild cat strike, participating in a sit-in, boycotting, occupying public buildings (i.e. schools, universities etc.), carrying out cultural performances, subvertising/adbusting. The indicators aggregated in the index of offline organizational experiences were dummy variables concerning the following organizations: political party, trade union, socialist/social-democratic organization, communist organization (3rd International), Trotzkyist organization (4th

of a relation between variables, I hypothesize that offline (organizational and participatory) experiences could explain the political use of the Internet to gather information, to talk politics online and to perform acts of dissent on the Net (figure 2).[12]

It is worth noticing that offline experiences, especially participatory ones, and the political use of the Internet are strongly correlated. The index of political use of the Internet is in fact associated both with organizational experiences (0.270**) and, especially, with participatory experiences (0.438**).[13]

Figure 2 – Relationship between offline experiences and political use of the Internet
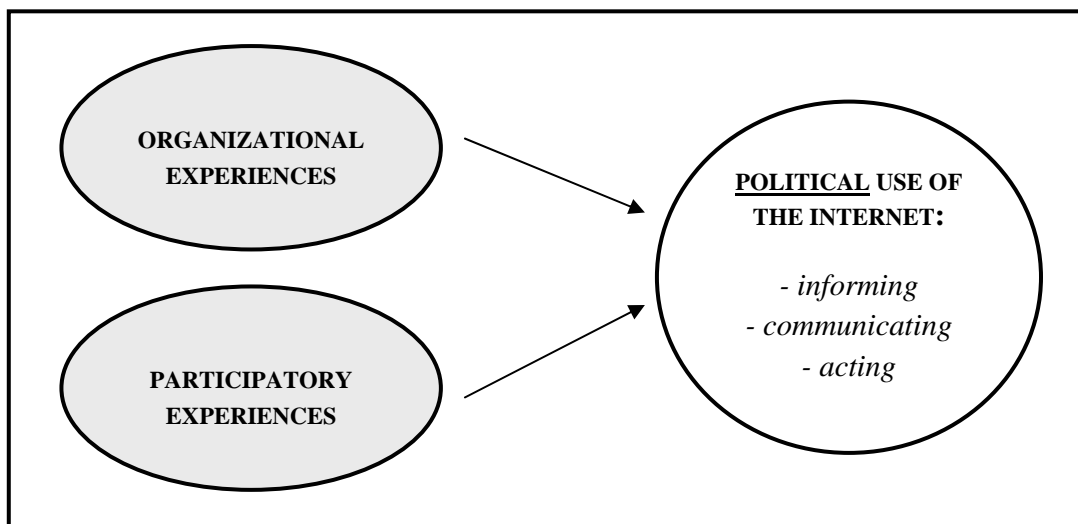
This result is interesting in that it seems to support those scholars (i.e. Norris 2001) who claim that online participation does not come out of the blue but is indeed related to offline participation. However, these data only refer to politically active citizens and do not tell us anything about the political use of the Internet of unengaged citizens. More research is needed on the latter because only by focusing on those citizens who are not active offline can we assess the real capacity of the Internet to involve previously unengaged citizens in politics.

Another interesting result that requires more discussion concerns the fact that the political use of the Internet is especially associated with what I called offline participatory experiences. As we have seen, organizational experiences per se are not

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International), women's group, citizens' committee, environmental organization, peace group, self-help group, voluntary organization (charity), religious organization, human rights organization, gay/lesbian/transgender rights organization, humanitarian/development assistance organization, international solidarity organization, social centre, migrants' association, organization for the unemployed, student group and alternative media. The index of the political use of the Internet included the above mentioned indicators: look at the website of the European Social Forum; look at the websites that provide information on the global justice movement's protest events; visit a website of any source of 'alternative information'; express political opinions in forums/mailing lists/chats; exchange information online within your political group; post reports of action online (in mailing lists, forums, blogs, websites, etc.); sign online petitions or participate in campaigns through mailing lists; participate in a net-strike and/or in other forms of online radical protest.

[12] Even if I do not want to disregard the impact of the Internet in shaping ways in which politics is perceived and experienced - especially by younger generations - it is clear that political socialization, political culture and the values of the interviewees are the product of offline processes.

[13] Partial correlations controlled for the following variables: gender, age, education.

strongly associated with the political use of the Internet while participatory experiences are strongly related to it. Data provides evidence that opportunities for online engagement offered by the Internet fit particularly well with people already used to engaging in different forms of action offline. In a nutshell, findings show that in a highly mobilized population (like that of one of the participants in a protest event) participatory experiences matter more than organizational ones in explaining the political use of the Internet.

Still, it is interesting to open the black boxes of organizational and participatory experiences in order to assess which specific forms of organizational and participatory practices are more likely to be associated with the political use of the Internet. Are experiences in different social movement families related to different styles of using the Internet politically? More specifically, are experiences in new social movement organizations or charity groups more likely to be associated with the political use of the Internet than those in solidarity groups? Are there differences in the political use of the Internet between people with organizational experiences in new left and old left groups? Do people with diverse repertoires of action make a different political use of the Internet? Are innovative or moderate repertoires more likely to be related to the political use of the Internet than radical or traditional ones?

In order to provide an answer to these questions, organizational and participatory experiences have been split into different categories. In relation to organizational experiences (table 2), I created five categories recalling different movement families: old left organizations, new social movement organizations, charity groups, solidarity and rights organizations and new left organizations.[14]

The hypothesis behind this classification of organizational experiences is that different movement families would adopt (and adapt to their needs) the Internet in different ways. Diverse social movement families have in fact different identities, organizational formulas, repertoires of action, and forms of communication etc. that affect their technological choices.

Table 2 shows that experiences in charity groups are not significantly related to the political use of the Internet; experiences in old left organizations are weakly associated with using the Internet for internal communication; participation in the activities of new social movement organizations, compared with other organizational experiences, are particularly related to supporting online campaigns/petitions; and engagement in new left groups is especially associated with the informative dimension of the political use of the Internet. Interestingly, all organizational experiences (excluding those in charity groups) are associated with the active use of the Internet to produce political information (publishing online reports of protest events).

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[14] Clusters of organizational experiences were built on the basis of the score of correlation coefficients concerning similar organizational experiences. The additive index "old left" includes the following organizational experiences: political party, trade union, socialist/social-democratic, communist (3rd International), and Trotzkyist organization (4th International). The additive index "new social movements" includes the following organizational experiences: women's group, citizens' committee, environmental organization and peace group. The additive index "charity groups" includes the following organizational experiences: self-help group, voluntary organization and religious organization. The additive index "solidarity/rights groups" includes the following organizational experiences: human rights organization, gay/lesbian/transgender rights organization, humanitarian/development assistance organization and international solidarity organization. The additive index "new left" includes the following organizational experiences: social centre, migrants' association, organization of the unemployed, student group and alternative media.

Table 2 – Organizational experiences and political use of the Internet (Kendall's tau-b)

Political use of the Internet	ORGANIZATIONAL EXPERIENCES				
	Old left	Charity groups	Solidarity / rights groups	New social movements	New left
ESF website	n.s.	n.s.	0.114*	0.228**	0.170**
Protest organization websites	n.s.	n.s.	0.135*	0.176**	0.303**
Alternative information websites	n.s.	n.s.	0.174**	0.179**	0.297**
Publishing protest reports online	0.178**	n.s.	0.175**	0.252**	0.279**
Expressing opinions in forums	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	0.214**
Communicating with own group	0.137*	n.s.	0.144*	0.176**	0.195**
Petition/campaigns	n.s.	n.s.	0.139*	0.193**	0.173**
Radical online actions	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	0.152*	0.126*
Additive index	n.s.	n.s.	0.179**	0.266**	0.326**

Note: partial correlations controlled for the following variables: gender, age, education.

Considering the additive index of the political use of the Internet, we find a great variance among organizational experiences in different social movement families. Taking into account different organizational experiences, we notice that only certain types of experience are not associated with the political use of the Internet while others are more associated with it: experiences in new left organizations or new social movements are more likely to be related to the political use of the Internet. In Italy social centers have been in charge of the creation of media centers during important protest events (like the anti-G8 summit in 2001; see Andretta et al. 2002) and have been at the forefront of innovative (and conflictual) use of the Internet (see Freschi 2003). Many alternative media and many groups active on immigrants' rights have been born within social centers and developed later as something independent. Student groups also rely heavily on Internet communication, this sector of the population being among one of the most wired. As for new social movements, even if technology has been seen with skepticism by environmentalists, most of them have eagerly adopted the Internet (Pickerill 2003: 36). Peace groups have particularly used Computer-Mediated Communication to organize important global days of action like the worldwide 15th February protest in 2003 (Walgrave and Rucht 2007). The Internet has also helped the international coordination of women's groups, playing a key role in the development of the World March of Women (Leonardi 2000), though it also caused challenges because of access problems in the Global South (Guay 2002).

As for participatory experiences (table 3), repertoires of action were divided into four groups: traditional, moderate, unconventional and radical.[15] Looking at the table below, we again notice that the association with the political use of the Internet varies a great deal depending on different repertoires of action.

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[15] Clusters of participatory experiences were built on the basis of the score of correlation coefficients concerning similar participatory experiences. The additive index "traditional experiences" includes the following participation experiences: worked in a political party and took part in a strike. The additive index "moderate experiences" includes the following participation experiences: sign a petition/public letter and attend a demonstration. The additive index "unconventional experiences" includes the following participation experiences: participate in a sit-in, boycott products and attend an alternative form of demonstration (i.e. critical mass, May Day parade etc.). The additive index "radical experiences" includes the following participation experiences: take part in a wild cat strike, occupy public or private buildings and practice direct action against property/land.

Table 3 – Participatory experiences and political use of the Internet

Political use of the Internet	PARTICIPATORY EXPERIENCES			
	Traditional	**Moderate**	**Unconventional**	**Radical**
ESF website	n.s.	0.135*	0.333**	0.141*
Protest organization websites	0.109*	n.s.	0.400**	0.272**
Alternative information websites	n.s.	n.s.	0.413**	0.219**
Publishing protest reports online	0.132*	0.186**	0.402**	0.252**
Expressing opinions in forums	n.s.	n.s.	0.326**	0.225**
Communicating with own group	0.185**	n.s.	0.365**	0.161**
Petition/campaigns	n.s.	0.269**	0.399**	0.137*
Radical online actions	n.s.	0.134*	0.331**	0.235**
Additive index	0.114**	0.192**	0.542**	0.297**

Note: partial correlations controlled for the following variables: gender, age, education.

While having practiced traditional and moderate forms of action is not strongly associated with the political use of the Internet, experiences of unconventional and radical forms of action are clearly associated with it. However, while unconventional forms are equally associated with different dimensions of the political use of the Internet, radical ones tend to be associated with Internet use directly oriented towards protest. First of all, the low association between traditional repertories of action and the political use of the Internet could be explained by the fact that the index was built to include forms of action related to traditional political actors like parties and unions, not amongst those more oriented toward a creative and inventive (political) use of the Internet. The interesting result is that more innovative forms of action such as participating in sits-in, boycotts and alternative types of demonstration are more associated with the political use of the Internet. Alternative types of demonstration such as critical mass and the May Day parade against precarious work rely heavily on the Internet and this would help explain the results. Boycotts can also be considered an individualized form of action (Micheletti 2003) and this characteristic would fit very well with the political use of the Internet which is largely an asocial activity.

It is worth noticing that data seems to confirm that participants tend to reproduce their offline styles of action online (see also Calenda and Mosca 2007). In fact, those interviewees that adopt moderate repertoires of action are more likely to engage in moderate online forms of action like e-petitioning and e-campaigning while those more used to engage in radical forms of action offline are more likely to employ online radical forms of action such as acts of electronic disturbance.

The two sides of the Internet:
pros and cons of Computer-Mediated Communication for social movements

After presenting quantitative data gathered on the individual level, this paragraph focuses on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews.

First of all, we notice that the perception of the impact of Internet use by social movement organizations varies according to the different targets of their action. The Internet can be used both for in-ward oriented communication and for out-ward oriented communication, both for addressing public opinion in general and specific and peculiar constituencies or groups of citizens, such as public decision-makers and politicians. However, our interviewees claimed that the Internet is more effective for strengthening specific types of communication.

In general it does not seem that the Internet favored more interactions with public decision-makers as such actions made via the Internet were often ignored and seldom effective. It is clear that online mobilization has more chance to influence decision-makers only when such issues have a certain visibility in the public discourse through traditional media. According to some interviewees, public decision-makers are generally neither competent nor interested in these online actions (interview 1). As a matter of fact, actions of electronic disturbance such as net-strikes and mail-bombings are not often recognized by their targets.

The Internet seems to be more effective in targeting other groupings. For example, it facilitates the movement's relationship with the media because press releases, photos, and documents are published on websites that are used by journalists as sources of information for their articles. The Internet is also conceived as an important means for cross-referencing different media. Thanks to this medium, some groups more specialized in information production can act as the live sound track of political events (like counter-summits and social forums) as they happen (interview 2). The Internet allows multi-media coverage of protest events through audio files, photos and video, textual reports and discussions etc. In addition, when covering an event some websites permit their users to upload documents online, thereby generating a considerable amount of information collected in different formats and by people with different points of view. In the Internet era, awareness of the fundamental importance of communication is widespread and people become active producers of information. These media-activists have gained a central role in the coverage of protest events of the global justice movement and in the creation of transnational public spaces like in the case of the Euromayday parade (see Doerr and Mattoni 2007).

Websites are employed to cover the current activities of the movement but also operate as archives and databases. Many interviewees refer to them as places of memory, where social movements can narrate their history, keep track of their past actions and store their documents and materials. This is for example clearly what happened with the ESF memory project using the Internet to recover and systematize information and knowledge produced within the European Social Forum process (http://www.euromovements.info/english/index.htm).

A clear understanding of the role of different Internet tools emerges from the interviews: different applications are used for different aims. If websites are used by SMOs as places to present themselves to the general public, other tools like forums and mailing-lists favor an ongoing communication and discussion among individuals. As a member of the eco-pacifist network Rete Lilliput stated:

> "we have carried out our activity for more than one year without a website basing ourselves almost exclusively on the mailing lists … linkages between different knots and groups worked well but the lack of a website penalized us because … a public website is also visited by journalists and by the curious" (interview 4).

Most interviewees stressed the importance of mailing lists in the activity of their organizations. These applications, that are greatly appreciated and extensively used, are defined as "permanent assemblies". One activist of a local social forum in Venice underlined the contribution of the Internet in terms of transparency of the organizational process (for similar results see also Kavada 2006). Mailing lists are used to include people that could not attend physical meetings by disseminating assemblies' minutes (interview 3).

The very nature and contribution of the Internet to grassroots political processes is however contested and discussed. While some groups declare an instrumental vision of the Internet, other ones underline that it is a political locus in itself. According to a member of the national executive of the Young Communists:

> "The Internet is really a political space. It's not just an instrument. It's a place where, notwithstanding the great push towards privatization and control, millions of people cooperate to build critiques and to attack the private idea that Microsoft and Windows propose of the Net. It is also a political space in that it represents a place of confrontation and discussion without precedent" (interview 5).

The symbolic/expressive function of the Internet is stressed by those groups declaring that the Internet helped in developing and strengthening their identities. This type of function is especially recognized by groups like local social forums which generally lack a physical place for their meetings. In these cases the Internet is referred to as a "virtual headquarters" or a "real virtual community" (interview 1).

Being conceived as a political space in itself by some SMOs, it is not surprising to discover that, beyond the instrumental conception of the Internet, some SMOs raise a meta-reflection discussing the implications of new technologies and their relationship with power and politics. Melucci already stressed this characteristic of new social movements discussing the self-reflexive nature of the organization. As he observed (1989: 74):

> "in contemporary collective action, the organization has acquired a different status. It is no longer considered a means to an end, and it therefore cannot be assessed only in terms of its instrumental rationality. The organization has a self-reflexive character and its form expresses the meaning (or goals) of the action itself. It is also the laboratory in which actors test their capacity to challenge the dominant cultural codes".

The case of Rete Lilliput reflects very well what Melucci observed. This network focuses a significant part of its action on the issue of political consumerism; i.e. a peculiar form of citizen engagement in politics with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices through consumer choices based on attitudes and values concerning issues of justice, fairness or non-economic issues (Micheletti 2003). According to political consumer strategy, consumers should conceive themselves as voters and corporations as candidates. Following this logic, shopping in a supermarket would correspond to voting in an election (Gesualdi 2003). Consumer-voters should use their shopping power to "punish" corporations-candidates producing goods without respect for the environment and workers' rights, while rewarding fair trade producers. Very interestingly, Lilliput is trying to move the idea of political consumerism from food and clothes to other areas of consumption, such as technologies. For this reason, the old website created with proprietary software was discarded and substituted with a new one hosted on a server working with free software (interview 4). The adaptation of the logic of political consumerism to new technologies was also made explicit by Lilliput in a document explaining that

> "deciding to use free software and to elude the Microsoft monopoly is no different to choosing to buy fair trade products, participating in boycott campaigns or depositing your money in an ethical bank: using free software means consuming critically also in the informatics domain"

(Glo Internet 2003).

The discussion on technology within social movement networks is often reported with a reflection on internal democracy. Contemporary social movements are making

big efforts to democratize their organizational practices (della Porta et al. 2006) and the Internet is perceived as an opportunity for facilitating the spread and share of power within an organization and to widen participation in its organizational life, improving internal democracy. The Internet can help to open an organization to rank-and-file activists. One of the reasons explaining the success of this information and communication technology among social movements is its prefigurative nature (Downing 2001). In fact, it fits very well with the nature of post-ideological groups concretely practicing daily the values and principles of another possible world (i.e. radical democracy) and not postponing them to the future.

However, the adoption of new technologies can also produce inequalities of power. Websites requiring technical knowledge select those with the knowledge to tackle them. Experience has also shown that centralized management of information slows down the process of dissemination (interview 8). In such cases the webmaster can make arbitrary choices and can become a de facto gatekeeper. This is the reason why many groups created new websites to limit or get rid of webmasters increasing and favoring the participation of non-experts (interviews 4, 7 and 8).

An open publishing system is employed on some websites in order to widen participation of their users. Principles such as non-hierarchy, public participation, minimal editorial control, and transparency tend to inform the websites employing open publishing, though they do so to varying degrees (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_publishing). Although their adoption and implementation can be problematic, open publishing and open management systems are considered antibodies to the monopoly of power in the hands of a few technologically skilled individuals. One of the first websites close to social movements adopting open publishing was the Indymedia network. Nevertheless, even Indymedia does not completely apply the logic of open publishing (Atton 2003). The Italian knot of Indymedia combines open publishing and the method of consensus. However a shared definition of the latter doesn't exist; it should be understood as a decision-making method stressing the importance of the decision-making process in itself, avoiding decisions made by vote and trying to build a wider consensus on decisions through an ongoing discussion. In the case of Indymedia-Italy, until its recent cessation, the right column of the homepage was open to contributions by all, but messages with explicit fascist, racist and sexist contents could be removed. Decisions on the information to be inserted in the central column of the homepage were taken through discussion in an open and public mailing list adopting the method of consensus. All the decision-making processes had to pass through the national mailing list (Italy-list) in order to give anyone the possibility contributing to a specific decision (interview 6). The adoption of the consensual method is however problematic. In fact, it was one of the causes of the recent end to the Italian Indymedia network. Reasons explaining the (temporary) collapse of the network were in fact the decline in participation, the bureaucratization of the project and the consensual decision-making method, thought to work only poorly in the mailing lists (Alice 2006).

As many SMOs are aware of the risks deriving from Internet communication, some of them try to intervene directly on this issue, spreading technological skills within their organization. As argued elsewhere (della Porta and Mosca 2005a), SMOs can play an important role in socializing their members to Internet use. Being places where a great importance to new technologies is given, practices of media-activism and hacking developed within social centers. Most of them host what are know as "hacklabs"

(hackers' laboratories), that is laboratories with a clear ideological leftist orientation socializing people to informatics knowledge, free software, freedom of expression, privacy, digital rights and self-management.

Some of the groups I interviewed created groups of people specifically to deal with Internet issues and to try to diffuse knowledge on Internet use among their participants (interviews 4 and 9). These groups are expected to inform and educate in using Internet communication in a proper manner as it takes time to learn to use email, file sharing and downloading, search engines etc. They also raise awareness on the alternatives to Microsoft's proprietary software.

Another issue worth discussing concerns the characteristic distinguishing the Internet from previous media of communication: interactivity. In some cases it can be seen that interactive tools are not used by SMOs because they feel that they would require a great effort. This concerns especially more traditional organizations such as trade unions which some scholars have called "dinosaurs in cyberspace" (Ward and Lusoli 2003). Most of them fear losing control of interactive spaces on their websites. As they don't have enough resources to devote one member of their staff to moderate interactive spaces, they just prefer to avoid them (interview 10). However, if on the one hand the presence of staff monitoring such spaces is important if one wants them to impact on organizational decisions and processes, on the other hand the presence of moderators can hinder free expression, and even censor inconvenient claims. In those cases while an explicit and clear netiquette (online code of conduct) can favor a polite and constructive discussion, the presence of moderators could have negative effects on the dialogic process (i.e. structuring it around pre-defined issues) and thus should be kept to a minimum.

With some exceptions, the tendency of "old" organizations such as trade unions has been to use the Internet as previous media of communication, not fulfilling its most innovative aspects (such as interactivity) and using it for top-down forms of communication. Findings like this have been highlighted by different studies concerning the websites of political parties (Margolis et al. 1999; Gibson et al. 2003) and institutions (Coleman et al. 1999; Trechsel et al. 2003). This evidence raises the question of whether old organizations jumping online are reproducing on the Internet their vertical styles of communication. A generation gap within and between "old" and traditional organizations/members and "new" and innovative groups/activists in conceiving and understanding the Internet is referred to by some interviewees (interviews 1 and 11).

While the generation gap hypothesis needs to be deepened and tested with further research, we can see that many interviewees (i.e. interviews 13, 14, 15 and 17) tend to underline the importance of face-to-face relationships, irreplaceable by online communication. Many interviewees point to the fact that face-to-face interactions allow the construction of relationships of mutual trust, something that cannot be generated online (Diani 2001; Kavada 2006). That is, Computer-Mediated Communication is perceived as being something that can effectively complement face-to-face interactions but cannot substitute them. As a spokesperson of the World March of Women claimed:

> "Internet contacts are important but we are aware that we cannot build a movement only with them: we need physical contacts with people in order to build personal and political relations otherwise it is impossible to grant continuity to our action" (interview 12).

Another important issue that is stressed by most of the interviewees is the difficulty related to the employment of the Internet as a decision-making tool. It has been

suggested that the suitability of the Internet for making decisions could be application dependent: "applications facilitating real-time communication, such as chat, are better suited to decision-making, as they allow for complex negotiations to take place more quickly and efficiently than email and email lists" (Kavada 2006, 11-12). Still, many interviewees rejected the idea of using the Internet for making decisions. Others underlined that moving decision-making processes online can create new inequalities because access limitations, familiarity with written culture[16] and technical expertise give power to a limited number of people. Thus, technology can become a new source of power asymmetry. Fear of excluding some activists led in some cases to limiting the use of new technology while giving value to face-to-face communication. (interview 19).

Together with the limits of the Internet for making decisions, our interviewees point at the risk of overvaluing the Internet's effectiveness in mobilizing offline protestors. Some criticized the attitude of other SMOs and activists to "virtualizing" the conflict and relying too much on the Internet as an instrument for bringing people out onto the streets (interview 16). According to the spokesperson of a local social forum:

"we also need to be militant, to draw posters and write leaflets and to have physical contact with the people otherwise we won't change the world! …our struggle needs a visible and physical presence" (interview 1).

Among structural limitations of Computer-Mediated Communication, our activists are also aware of the issue of the digital divide. As we have seen, Internet access is still very much restricted to well-educated people with high incomes, while women and older people generally have lower rates of access. In the Italian case, according to different surveys and estimates, only a percentage of the population below 50% currently accesses the Internet. The majority of Italian people are still excluded by this media. As some interviewees noticed "a lot of people still don't even know what the Internet is" (interview 13) and "if you want to reach people in the street or in your district, you have to adopt different tactics" (interview 18).

Some conclusions: contrasting the two sides of the Internet

As the quantitative analysis showed, the Internet is used politically by many participants in protest events who employ it to gather alternative information, discuss politics online and perform different types of action online. Secondly, we also found that the Internet is more likely to be used by those individuals with previous radical and unconventional participatory experience while organizational experience is less important in this respect. Thirdly, interviewees tend to reproduce their offline styles of action online.

The qualitative interviews have shown that the Internet represents a "double-faced" medium for social movements in that it provides new opportunities for practicing politics but it also implies a series of risks and challenges. On one side it is horizontal, bi-directional, interactive, and cheap, and it empowers resource-poor collective actors and individuals. On the other side, the problem of the digital divide raises a discussion on the democratic nature of this medium.

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[16] Being mostly text-based, the Internet (at least in its 1.0 version) fits better with people with a background in written culture. Those more skilled in writing and used to dealing with the written word would then be more capable of profiting from such technology especially in interactive and dialogical spaces online.

While most of the literature focusing on the Internet and politics tends to assess the positive contribution of Computer-Mediated Communication to political processes, this paper has stressed both positive and negative consequences of the Internet for social movements. Some scholars (i.e. Garrett 2006; Pickerill 2003) have underlined the need to consider also the undesirable effects of the Internet: what types of constraint does it pose to collective action?

The tables below are an attempt to present a systematic comparison on different dimensions of the limits and opportunities of Internet communication for social movements. First of all, the Internet is used to address different targets in more or less effective ways (table 1). Some groups organized online campaigns to exert pressure on public decision-makers. However, in many cases politicians disregarded these. According to interviewees, this concerns especially the older generation of politicians who - because of cultural and/or generation characteristics – have not incorporated the Internet into everyday life: most politicians experienced a belated socialization to the Internet and they are forced to use it without a complete understanding of the potential of this medium (i.e. interactivity) using it as they would a previous media of communication. As a consequence, online actions such as net-strikes and mail-bombings are not recognized and understood as genuine forms of action.

However, we could also provide a different explanation for such phenomena. First of all, public decision-makers refer to the "power of numbers" (DeNardo 1985) in order to evaluate these online protests. They question how many "flesh and bones" people are really present behind this kind of action. Electronic disturbance could in fact be the result of a coordinated action of a very small group of like-minded people supported by technologies. Second, public decision-makers are mainly interested in what their voters think about a specific issue but they are not very concerned by claims raised by people that are not part of their own constituency. As the Internet makes communication easier beyond geographical borders, people supporting campaigns online are often geographically dispersed and belong to different electoral districts. The border-less nature of the Internet explains the limited impact of online campaigns on public decision-makers.

Table 4 - Limits and opportunities of Internet communication to address different targets

Targets	PROs	CONs
Public Decision-Makers	Possibility to organize direct pressure campaigns on deputies / representatives	Border-less nature of the Internet
Journalists	Description bias could be limited	Selection bias is not overcome
Public Opinion	Disintermediation	Digital divide and "googlearchy"

The Internet is considered by interviewees more effective in addressing journalists and in attracting (mass) media coverage. The "description bias" of traditional media - relying mostly on press agencies to give an account of political events - could be partly overcome. Thanks to the Internet there has been a great increase in sources of information and journalists now have direct access to SMOs' websites where press

releases, mission statements, documents, leaflets, photos, video, f.a.q., etc. are stored. When covered, movements now have more chance that their point of view will be taken into account but in the end journalists are always those who build up the news, manipulating and modifying the movement's original claims. Besides, movements cannot overcome the "selection bias" of the press. Journalists are still the gatekeepers of offline information and they tend to give greater visibility to institutional actors (Gitlin 1980; Ryan 1991).

Some scholars (i.e. Bennett 2003) have pointed to the capacity of the Internet to produce a short circuit with traditional media, with information flowing from the cyberspace to the television, reaching public opinion. In any case, the Internet allows for a disintermediation of social and political actors from traditional media. However, the possibility of social movements using the Internet to address the general public is severely limited by the digital divide, i.e. lack of access to Internet communication, especially for older and less educated people. The Internet raises the risk of selectivity and exclusion for people without access to it. Besides, the great majority of Internet users tend to use search engines to orient themselves in cyberspace (Koopmans and Zimmermann 2007). As some studies proved, website visibility is strongly determined by "googlearchy", i.e. the tendency of search engines to give greater visibility to the main actors in the political game. This means that general users, ignorant of the existence of social movements, are less likely to be directed to their websites when using search engines.

As we have seen, interviewees also underlined how different tools serve different functions: websites are mainly used for external communication, while mailing lists and forums are employed for internal organizational communication and are conceived by activists as ongoing assemblies where discussion goes on and on. SMOs use the Internet to address their activists, engaging them in their organizational life and establishing an ongoing relationship with them (table 5).[17] Still, it risks being a "redundant" and "self-referential" medium in that it seems capable of reaching, on the whole, already active and informed people. In addition, efforts to strengthen internal democracy through the adoption of new technologies can be frustrated by the presence of a few technologically skilled individuals who manage and control them. That is, technology can become a new cause of power inequality, creating new hierarchies. In fact, people with technical skills can exert great power within an organization heavily reliant on Internet communication. This problem has been partially faced by SMOs developing technological tools that can be easily used by non-experts, designing more participatory websites and also creating specific groups devoted to members' socialization to new technologies. Some SMOs' websites, inspired by the principle of distributed management system, are not managed by a single webmaster but by a group of people. Hence, the continuous search for democratizing the organization offline is mirrored online. This seems to confirm that Internet use is shaped in accordance with offline identity (Calenda and Mosca 2007).

Table 5 - Strengths and weaknesses of Internet communication for social movements

How the Internet affects…	PROs	CONs

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[17] Most social movements consider the interactive features of Web 2.0 applications extremely important for implementing their democratic ideals. However, when the interviews were carried out many organizations declared they had not yet employed this kind of application.

…internal democracy	Activists' involvement in the everyday organizational life	Power inequalities related to expertise and technological skills
…reflection on power	Using free software to save money and to practice political consumerism	Lack of expertise hinders a massive adoption of free software
…social relations	Multiplies frequency of communication	Its capacity to create dense networks (and mobilize) is sometimes overvalued

Social movements are self-reflexive actors very concerned with democracy and linking it to the politics behind technology. Hence, technological choices become a new way of practicing political consumerism. Not only does free software allow organizations to save important material resources, but its philosophy also challenges the monopolies of transnational brands and corporations (like Microsoft). Notwithstanding, political consumerism of technologies seems to be restricted to a limited number of people since lack of expertise and information hinders a massive adoption of free software by activists. Moreover, the absence of a critical mass of free software users limits the incentives to employ this kind of software.

Last but not least, the Internet is employed by social movement organizations and activists as a complement to (and not as a substitute for) face-to-face social interactions. Among interviewees nobody thought that the Internet could replace face-to-face communication but it is much appreciated because it multiplies possibility and frequency of communication among dispersed individuals. Besides, sometimes the capacity of the Internet to inform and mobilize people in the streets is overestimated.

As qualitative interviews have shown, the importance of this new medium of communication is very well recognized but activists also stressed its limits and claimed that it is a necessary but not sufficient condition for political action: face-to-face interactions are the core of political action. That is, the political use of the Internet is just a continuation of politics by other means.

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1 – spokesperson of the Abruzzo Social Forum.
2 – president of the weekly magazine, *Carta* (paper).
3 – activist of the Venice Social Forum.
4 – activist of the working group on the Internet from the Rete Lilliput.
5 – spokesperson of the Young Communists.
6 – activist of Indymedia-Italy.
7 – creator of the online magazine, *Social Press*.
8 – president of the Italian World Shops Association.
9 – activist of the social centre, Bulk.
10 – webmaster of the trade union for metalworkers, Fiom (Federazione Impiegati e Operai Metallurgici).
11 – editor of the communist newspaper, *Il Manifesto*.
12 – spokesperson of the Italian branch of the World March of Women.
13 – activist of the non-violent group, Casa Pace (House of Peace).
14 – president of the pacifist online portal, PeaceLink.
15 – spokesperson of the Rete Lilliput.
16 – delegate of the rank-and-file union Sin COBAS.
17 – collaborator of the online magazine, *Social Press*.
18 – activist of the Italian branch of the World March of Women.
19 – spokesperson of the COBAS Confederation