

# POLITICAL PARTICIPATION 2.0: YOUNG CITIZENS IN THE VIRTUAL AGORA BETWEEN TRANSPARENCY AND REPRESENTATION

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**Abstract:** *The integration of social media in contemporary social dynamics is growing more and more, while constant change is the characteristic of the new paradigms they provide for the analysis of our time. Starting from this point, this paper aims at focusing on the contradictions of the forms of youth participation that use such virtual places as their interface. In particular, two topics will be discussed: the first will be how some specific features of the national background influence the forms of web-based politics; the other will be how the model of "transparency at all costs" could instead promote forms of political "representation" not too unlike those characterizing top-down political communication.*

**Keywords:** *young citizens, representation, transparency, political participation.*

## 1. THE ISSUE OF TRANSPARENCY

One of the most evoked notions about web-based participatory forms is transparency, a term which has become almost a totem of current times. The focus of those studies that have considered such issue is the strong connection which has developed between media and transparency. Indeed the web, characterized by the possibility to widen communication flows, and most importantly by the possibility to overthrow possible hierarchies and divisions between interacting subjects, has been seen by many analysts as the ideal tool to promote fluid and open forms of narration, inspired precisely by an ideal of transparency. In tune with this view, Habermas (1992) sees the new technologies as promoting a public agora, while Rheingold (1994) envisages the possibility of a sort of larger community "as big as the world" developing through the web. In this case, therefore, the idea of a digital public agora is connected to the principle of transparency. Indeed Habermas, in elaborating a participation model of the "deliberative" kind, i.e. able to lead to decision-making, maintains that, if public communication is to serve the purpose of real

democracy, it must be inclusive, provide equal terms and at the same time be transparent. In this regard, Habermas (1986) considers authentic public communication as a phenomenon not unlike spontaneous dialogic exchange. It is a strongly idealized model, which undoubtedly seems connectable to the web's communication potential. The web indeed – as maintained also by Castells – puts forth a need for un-veiling the dynamics of decision-making and the backstage intrigues behind political communication, to use Goffman's words. In this regard, though, transparency risks giving way to scandalmongering and morbidity, to the pretension to focus on political actors' private dimension rather than on their professional one. Therefore Castells (2009) talks about scandalmongering politics, related to forms of communication centred on the emotionality of the public that interacts on the web. Thus there emerges a connection between, on the one hand, the un-veiling in communication dynamics brought about by web-promoted transparency and, on the other, a certain way to construe the representations of public issues, to a large extent turned into a show by the formats of the digital world.

However, the notion of transparency appears here in a rather “simplified” dimension, as it represents a process which is partially a bottom-up one, i.e. one able to a limited extent to involve the users in the production of knowledge and in publicly relevant actions. In the scandalmongering perspective, more than in the deliberative one (which seems indeed an idealized model of public communication of which scandalmongering represents a degeneration), transparency appears to be subdued to the interests of big decision-makers who are able to exploit the interactive features of the web in order to “manipulate” the public through the use of specific communication tactics. All this sets aside the dynamism and ferment which are sometimes shown by thriving web communities whose role is not neglected by the observers of the political and public phenomena developing on the web.

In this regard, Vattimo’s proposal appears to be relevant in the definition of a transparent society. For him, the idea of transparency in a hyper-mediatized society is not so much related to deeper awareness in the construction of public opinion and in the development of active citizenship, but rather to the complexities of contemporary world. Media, and more specifically the web, produce an explosion of perspectives, ways of interpreting reality, narratives and narrations representing at its best the web-sphere, which is always inhabited by communities and movements, but also by active subjects and *prosumers*. More specifically, Vattimo discusses self-transparency in order to highlight how nowadays it is difficult to talk about hetero-direction in the formation of public opinion. There is no single centre, no central power able to inculcate a single view of reality sold as authentic, hence “transparent”. Instead, mostly thanks to the web, we can perceive our being in a polydimensional society, where new ways of interpreting reality are constantly produced and co-constructed. There is a sort of perpetual motion of opinion-making and construction of knowledge which is not strictly regulated and tends to grow in a self-feeding cycle. There are also some risks of degeneration within the framework of this

interpretive paradigm: the self-transparent model urged by the new media can lead to the spreading of dull, empty behavioural styles, like the narcissistic styles influenced by the aesthetics of reality shows (Vattimo, 2011). This danger encompasses also education: in this regard Rivoltella has noted that the web, rather than representing a tool able to connote the models of democratic participation, tends either to empower or disempower them. More particularly, he meant to highlight how negative can be – even in the field of media education – the spreading of certain behavioural patterns favoured by the specific features of the web-sphere. Here too a case in point is the narcissistic and exhibitionistic aesthetics promoted by reality shows (Rivoltella, *apud* Cassano, 2009:256-259)<sup>1</sup>.

Another view of the idea of transparency, seen as involving complexity rather than awareness in the field of decision-making and communication processes, leads us to a new paradigm of public communication. Such paradigm is the opposite of the deliberative one and can be defined as the “cultural” one. The latter maintains that interactional situations (including those we are interested in, namely those related to the web) do not develop in neutral contexts, but are conditioned by the cultural settings of the actors involved. This perspective draws on Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*. This latter concept underlines how cultural capital conditions the actions of all individuals, influenced in their social settings by knowledge and behavioural habits learnt even in their own familiar contexts (Bourdieu, 1988). From the point of view of political participation, the cultural model develops in the notion of *civic cultures* proposed by Dahlgren. This term stands for the whole set of social and cultural preconditions that inevitably connote the exercise of one’s citizenship rights in a specific group or community (Dahlgren, 2009). In a sense the web, favouring the emergence of several

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<sup>1</sup>Pier Cesare Rivoltella’s argument, presented in the course of a conference, is mentioned in Cassano A., “Forme e Paradossi della politica digitale”, in *Rassegna Pedagogica*, 1.4.2009, pp. 256-259.

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communities able to develop participatory processes (and also dynamics of a totally different kind), promotes a magmatic spreading of points of view and worldviews always influenced by the social and cultural conditions of the actors involved. In this perspective, Vattimo's idea of transparency appears to be absolutely relevant for the interpretation of several participatory phenomena that have been prompted by the web.

### 2. PARTICIPATORY DYNAMICS AND YOUTH ACTIVISM IN THE ITALIAN NATIONAL CONTEXT

Transparency is one of the basic issues of democracy on the web. These terms appear as one of the keywords in the speeches of many Italian leaders. It is precisely this repetitiveness that must prompt us to reflect on the way this notion is perceived by web-based communities, taking into account also the specific features of the national context. The latter, with its own characteristics and historical and social connotations, cannot be neglected in an analysis carried out within a "cultural" perspective. Web-based communities definitely show the traces – even in their unquestionable vitality – of what is also the *habitus* provided by the related cultural macrosystem.

Let us analyze, for instance, the results of the last national elections, starting from some data related to the youth, which is deemed to be the segment of the population more receptive to the forms of public communication and participation prompted by the web. Some surveys carried out in the period of the last national elections (February 2013) have produced interesting results. Some have underlined that, taking into consideration the general background, characterized by a dislike for politics, a fairly solid participation of young voters could be detected. A research carried out by the Demos institute, for example, found out that an interest in politics was expressed by slightly more than 40% of people between the ages of 18 and 24 and slightly more than 41% between the ages of 25 and 34. These data look important if one

considers that on the whole, according to the same source, the rate of political participation was slightly more than 25% and that, in a survey carried out seven years before, Demos had detected definitely lower rates of youth participation. Young people seem to get an interest in public issues mostly through forms of protest (45.2% of the interviewees between 25 and 34 expressed a strong dissent) and associations (both young people between 18 and 24 and between 25 and 34 show percentages slightly higher than 45% as regards engagement in voluntary work, and the percentages related to the interest in activities connected to local initiatives are very high). Such a picture is not surprising: young people are the among the most engaged social group in some of the biggest national issues of the day (first and foremost unemployment and lack of perspectives), and they are likely to be the most skilful ones in using the web, which fits well the promotion of dynamics of community participation and socialization.

On the other hand, as shown by some surveys carried out by me and Paola Nicolini in 2010 and 2011, the web, and notably social networks, can be suitable tools for creating situations of contact in which young people who are able to play the role of opinion leaders easily manage to attract their peers in small participation initiatives, doubling or reinforcing dynamics of socialization also available off-line and exploiting the simplicity and intuitiveness of the operations performed on digital platforms (Cassano & Nicolini, 2010:89-104).

What can be more interesting is to understand how such receptiveness has turned into a political choice in the elections: there is no doubt that since 2010 the political landscape on the web has further expanded. If in earlier times there would emerge only ephemeral political leaders able to mobilize young voters through the web and the social networks (like Vendola or Pisapia), before the latest national elections almost all politicians opened up their own Twitter account; in particular, Beppe Grillo's movement, which developed precisely on the web, has become a concrete option for voters. An option chosen

by many young voters, it seems, for both the Demos survey and other polls have detected the highest percentage of preference for the Five-Star Movement precisely among the younger population (according to Demos, 30.6% of young people between 25 and 34 voted for Beppe Grillo's Movement in the election for the Chamber of Deputies<sup>2</sup>). Such data should urge us to reflect on the limits of young people's web-based political participation, on the basis also of "cultural" settings related to the Italian national context.

From the electoral point of view, in several European countries most of the web-based political participation has been channelled into the so called *Pirate Parties*, characterized – as Villani-Lubelli reminded us – by a leaderless and strongly collectivist form of organization. The coordinators of such parties alternate rather frequently and they have, indeed, just a coordinating function, and do not "direct" their parties' activity (Villani-Lubelli, 2012). The Italian context has instead seen the rise of Grillo's Movement as the main expression of web-based national politics, and the results it got at the last elections confirmed it. However, the Italian context is characterized by some specific features related to the latest socio-cultural evolutions. First of all, as many observers have already highlighted, the political stalemate of the most recent years has brought about an explosion of deeply-felt anger and estrangement from "traditional" parties, which later fuelled the Five-Star Movement. Moreover, the national political landscape has shown, due to the strong influence of media on political life and communication favoured by Berlusconi's electoral success, a remarkable tendency to a strong leadership that reproduced itself also when the web entered the political sphere. In web-based politics such tendency, which perpetuates itself in an almost physiological need by all parties to identify a charismatic leader, has not been embodied only by Grillo. Some important political figures had already taken advantage of the possibility to attract followers offered by the web, in order to

promote their own image: Vendola, for example, had been able to get the support of many young people thanks to the constant work of his *Fabbriche* ("workshops") and they had managed to lead a very effective web-based electoral campaign based on his personal characteristics (Cassano, 2012:27-38). The question is that this digital tendency to a strong leadership has produced mixed results, prompting different modes of participation, but also in fact limiting the bottom-up, participatory and anti-oligarchic nature of the web. Analyzing the nature of Beppe Grillo's blog, Maria Francesca Murru had already highlighted how the Genoese comedian ran his website as a digital gatekeeper, i.e. as a single subject able to manage, and in case to rectify, the information flow coming from citizens. Furthermore, the same author has underlined the presence of a strong individualistic component in the *civic culture* that had followed the blog: many citizens did participate, but they showed a way to interpret reality as an "individual-based process, not mediated by social rules and conventions" (Murru, 2012:64-72). It can be argued that Beppe Grillo has fundamentally retained this *modus operandi*: although he has become the promoter of a lively and animated web-based movement able to spontaneously express its own candidates through the tools provided by the web, he conceives political communication in a top-down format. In this sense, the leader manages the movement's internal dynamics by providing leadership and vetoing, thus directing the participation of the other members of the community in a strongly centralized and personalized way. Such view of web-based activism, connoted by individualism and a tendency to a strong leadership, is clearly the outcome of a participatory culture strictly related to the *habitus* created by the Italian national context, which has favoured the blossoming of these two shared features that have subsequently limited and influenced the *modus operandi* of web-based *civic cultures*.

Such outline, therefore, allows us to argue what might be the problems related to youth participation at the national level and what might be the contradictions in the relation

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<sup>2</sup>The Demos data quoted here are taken from the page <[www.demos.it/a00848.php](http://www.demos.it/a00848.php)>.

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between transparency and representation in web-based participation.

### **3. TRANSPARENCY AND REPRESENTATION. ASPECTS AND CONTRADICTIONS**

The outline sketched above of some features of the Italian national context may help us define the issue of transparency in web-based political communication from which we had previously started our analysis. In particular, it is now possible to analyze an example of “transparent” web-based politics that has stood out in the current context: i.e. the historic meeting between the Democratic Party’s leader Pierluigi Bersani and the Five-Star Movement’s representatives at the Chamber and the Senate that was broadcast in live streaming. This proved certainly a “symbolic” event in national politics and represented an illustration of the pretence of transparency favoured by new media and strongly claimed by Grillo’s Movement, as well as by other actors operating in the field of active citizenship. At a closer look, however, it represented a valid example of the contradictory and paradoxical relation between transparency and representation within our socio-cultural context. The notion of transparency vindicated by the Movement is that of un-veiling the backstage intrigues in order to promote more clarity and ‘clean-handedness’ in political dynamics, often seen as the outcome of agreements and interests hidden from the public opinion. However, in the hyper-mediatised Italian cultural context, the meeting acquired a different value, and it appeared mostly a duly spectacularized way of exhibiting the adoption of a definite position. After all, live streaming is a form of re-mediation, to use Bolter’s words, i.e. the adaptation of a broadcast medium (the TV) to the new digital reality (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). This does not allow us to put aside the idea of performance implicit in a TV exhibition of any political actor who, in front of cameras, necessarily ends up playing a part, to use Goffman’s words (Goffman, 1997). This view clearly contradicts the

mentioned notion of transparency. That is why, when the representative of the Movement accuses the leader of the Democratic Party to run the meeting in a way analogous to a TV format, she gave voice to a paradox: in live streaming the actors involved cannot avoid being conditioned by the presence of an audience, however distant it may be. It is more or less the same kind of conditioning felt by a political actor when s/he takes part in a TV talk show. After all, it is the same kind of conditioning experienced by any individual when s/he interacts with others in a mediatised setting, whether it is a TV format or a social network. No matter how this individual can claim to be truly his/herself, i.e. to behave in a way which is natural and consistent with his main personal features, s/he will not be able to avoid being influenced by the part played in that moment and the perception of being observed. Almost naturally, such actor will tend to be receptive towards criteria of social desirability or will tend to express an idealized self. It is clear, at this point, that such notion of transparency has nothing to do either with Habermas’s ideal of transparency as development of awareness by the public opinion, or with Vattimo’s view of transparency as an occasion for different perspectives to face each other: it is rather closer to the degenerations of such perspectives, namely the adhesion to a spectacularized or sensationalistic aesthetics of public communication and of the possibilities of participation. This indeed proves to be the main paradox in the relation between participation and transparency. On the one hand there is the thriving liveliness of web-based communities, which are especially active among the youth, on the other the ideal of transparency promoted by many political actors, which at the same time, though, tends to become mere narcissistic aesthetics.

### **4. CONCLUSIONS: WHAT PERSPECTIVES FOR EDUCATION TO ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP**

One might ask oneself, in the light of what has been argued, what could be the

possibilities to go beyond the aforementioned paradoxes, especially considering that web-based participation, notably by young people, is emerging as one of the main resources for education to active citizenship.

The question of *e-citizenship* is one of the main issues of media education, and many experts rightly identify in the development of a strong critical ability one of the fundamental factors to develop digital culture in a participatory key. In this regard, it is necessary to promote educational paths stimulating collaboration and cooperation on the web as well, and this precisely in order to increase young people's awareness of the potentialities of electronic media. It is also necessary, though, for educators to deconstruct and reconstruct some myths such as that of transparency, i.e. to have the young reflect on what is a mere reproduction of narcissistic aesthetic models, often perpetuated through top-down communication modes, and what means taking part in the public debate with awareness and openness towards other views, in a bottom-up perspective.

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