The intersection between "obvious" and "catalyzed public" through the mediating domain of civic cultures

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Abstract

The paper intends to analyze how the new forms of interaction and engagement allowed by the interactive and participative online technologies can help to foster empowering civic practices. It develops a theoretical reflection on the potential intersections areas between *audiences*, thought as the "persona ficta" (Dayan, 2005) that emerges in the role of enacting attention towards an external performance, and the *public*, thought as a collective entity that calls external attention and contains a fundamental orientation to shared and consensual action. It will be argued that in order to analyze the co-presence and potential overlapping between these two collectivities, it is necessary to adopt the concepts of "mediation" (Silverstone, 1999) and "civic cultures" (Dahlgren, 2009). The paper will develop this hypothesis though the empirical analysis of a case study focused on Beppegrillo.it, an Italian weblog acting as a communicative platform for the development of a civic and political movement.

1. Introduction

The notion of public sphere as it has been formulated by Habermas during his long intellectual carrier (1962; 1981) offers one of the most known compass to judging the quality of the linkages between acts of citizenship and practices of communication. In the deliberative model of democracy proposed by the German philosopher, communication is not ancillary of institutional politics, but rather it is the life blood of democracy insofar as the quality of decisional processes is strictly dependent on the quality of public discussions through which collective resolutions have been reached. The ideal of public sphere is fully realized when dialogues between citizens take that particular form of communication which is truthful, sincere, power-free and appropriate for all participants independently of their status. Opposing to the strict normative standard of rational and procedural public discourse, we find "culture-oriented model of public sphere" (Herbert, 2005: 106) for which Habermas's ideal speech situation is not only a smoke-screen to conceal forms of domination, but also a dangerous «cordon sanitaire which blocks off the public articulation of issues of collective identity and visions of the good life» (Benhabib, 1996: 7). Culture-oriented models of public sphere (Benhabib, 1992; Fraser, 1992) highlight the impossibility to erase power inequalities in public discourse and to bracket cultural belongings and status differences in deliberative dialogue. If the boundaries between public and private, and consequently between opinions about good life and arguments about justice and truth, are not ontological but deeply cultural and discursively

built, a fully unfolding of democracy could be assured only by the proliferation of alternative voices in a culturally inclusive public sphere. From that point of view, the quality of political participation become tightly related to questions of "cultural citizenship", considered as a notion that links issues of belonging, rights and responsibilities to questions of cultural power, of control over the flow of information, meanings and powerful ideological strategies (Stevenson, 2005).

Inside that cultural-oriented model of public sphere, where cultural citizenship takes the place of rationality, new forms of engagement, permitted by interactive and participatory applications of web 2.0, can be judged with regard to their contribution to the revitalization of public and cultural participation. Digital technologies of communication contain in their material configuration great potentialities for participation, interaction and collaborative production of contents. The very low costs for production and distribution of contents through the web platform potentially allow every users to take the role of speaker, building his own reputation through a heterarchic economic of attention, potentially free from commercial logic and from any kind of political control. The basic logic of web 2.0 primarily deals with the combination of active creation of media contents (from inter-textual mixing of preexistent media contents to the production of new and original contents) with practices of interpersonal communication through social networks. Consequently, besides the multiplication of information flux, we observe the concretization of unprecedented possibilities for social connection (and disconnection) beyond the national boundaries of traditional public spheres. Some events have made visible the ongoing renovation in public and political practices not only in western democracy but, more relevantly, within the difficult contexts of authoritarian regimes[1]. Net-based communication activities have been particularly useful and incisive in shaping organizational dynamics of new social movements, as for instance in the case of the alter-globalization movement (Bennett, 2003; Dahlgren, 2009) or in the more recent Occupy Movements (Gaby-Caren, 2012; Costanza-Chok, 2012). In both circumstances, it is possible to recognize a fil rouge between the open, horizontal and decentralized communication dynamics adopted by the movements and the fluid nature of their membership and ideological belongings.

Within discourses on post-democracy (Crouch, 2000), new media practices are often celebrated as the panacea for the legitimation crisis of western representative institutions (Castells, 2007) and as the driving force for a deep cultural revolution, leading to horizontal empowerment and to a more egalitarian society. Bruns (2008) hypothesizes a "produsage-based model of political deliberation", based on fluid heterarchy of participants, meritocratic leadership structures, continuing processes of political deliberation, naturally arising from the spread practices of open source, citizen journalism, Wikipedia.

However, the real consequences of that changes still need to be verified, as well as the analytical approach should be immunized by too much optimistic hyperboles that

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[1] The literature on that topic in recent years is very rich. To name but a few: Burns-Eltham, 2009; the Special Issue of Communication Review "Twitter Revolutions? Addressing Social Media and Dissent", 14(3), 2011; Castells, 2012.

very often give way to technological-determinist bias. That bias not only attributes to technological dimension the great power to determine interactional and cultural processes of a society, but pours into technology the modern ideal of a full transparent, power-free and beneficial communication: «Communication is a registry of modern longings. The term evokes a utopia where nothing is misunderstood, hearts are open, and expression is uninhibited» (Peters, 1999: 2).

The basic aim of that paper is to suggest an alternative route which could allow to get out of these reductionist temptations, starting from two assumptions.

The first one can be synthesized by the concise statement of Graham-Wyatt (1999: 694): «internet doesn't exist». As it has been widely shown by the rich research strand of Social Shaping of ICT (Lievrouw, 2002), each technology can be used in variety of ways and it only makes sense within a specific social context from which it receives symbolic and pragmatic meanings. Thus, the argument is that civic practices on the web should be studied starting from the fundamental premise that different social contexts will give birth to different experiences of internet and of its participatory and interactive potentialities, without however forgetting that «its diffusion does create new openings to struggle for democracy» (Warschauer 2003: 183).

The second postulation has to do with the conceptualization of interaction and communication. A substantial strand of studies focused on the internet's democratic potential (See e.g. Whilelm, 1999; Tsaliki, 2002; Wright e Street, 2007[2]) developed mainly at the end of '90 and during the first five years of 2000, have analyzed dialogical exchanges taking place in the cyberspace, trying to assess the extent to which they conformed to the Habermasian *ideal speech situation*. However, if analyzed from a comparative global view, final results of that empirical researches show that power inequalities and social hierarchies existing offline are far from be neutralized by mediated social interactions. But, as it has been demonstrated by the rich criticism elicited by Habermas' s communication theory (See e.g., Alejandro, 1993; Peters, 1993; Kohn, 2000; Mouffe, 2000), the responsibility of communicative power imbalances doesn't reside uniquely in the technological frame and in its uses; rather, it should be detected in the intrinsic inseparability of language, meaning and power. The present paper moves within a theoretical frame that acknowledges the mutual constitution of meaning and power and the productive tension between agency and constrain implied in every discourse (Chouliaraki, 2008).

2. Mediation, civic cultures and obvious publics

Starting from the two last assumptions – reject of technological determinism and recognition of the mutual constitution of meaning and power - and moving within a culture-oriented model of public sphere, the here developed analysis proposes that the new forms of media interaction taking place in web 2.0 and their influence on civic practices could be studied on the basis of a apparently traditional concept as that of *mediation*

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[2] See Dahlberg (2011) for a comprehensive outline of the main theoretical frameworks that have been hitherto used to assess digital democracy.

(Silverstone, 1999). Recently, the issue has been formulated through compelling arguments by Livingstone-Das (2009). Beside the concepts of "genre" and "literacy", they stress the relevance of "interpretation" as the analytical clue that still is able to describe contemporary processes of mediation and the dynamic relationship between encoding and decoding, virtual and realized text that they imply: «It should be apparent that we favour these three concepts because (..) they are all concepts of the <u>interface:</u> of text and reader, literacy and legibility, ultimately - structure and agency; they permit crucial indeterminacies, interdependencies and contingencies; but they neither reduce to technological or social determinisms nor celebrate unlimited polysemy» (Livingstone-Das, 2009: 6).

Considering the great mobility of audiences and fluctuation of contents in the digital environment, the apparently tautological concept of *mediation* could be particularly useful to focus on meanings' movement across texts, discourses, experiences and technologies.

Inside this theoretical framework, the paper proposes to consider civic engagement as one of the possible thresholds across which meanings and representations circulate in the context of digital media.

That threshold is exactly the one which interposes between the two categories of «persona ficta» identified by Dayan (2005): the «obvious public» and the «obtuse public». The term «persona ficta» is used to describe the different entities, collective or not, that emerge in the role of enacting social attention through reaction and response. Even if they are not intended as description of the essence of a collectivity, these categories can drive the inquiry into mediated political participation insofar as they point to the constitutive features of different kind of publics involved in political and cultural processes.

Dayan offers a starting differentiation between «obvious» and «obtuse» public from which the two definitions originate: «I noticed that some publics were there for anyone to see, and that other publics required professional mediation in order to become visible. I called the former "obvious public" and the latter "obtuse publics". Then among obtuse publics, I noticed that some were triggered into existence and that others were just pronounced to exist. I called the former "catalysed publics" and the latter "pronounced publics"» (Dayan, 2005: 67). All three entities relies on collective fictions and processes of imagination for their very existence, but with a decisive difference. For «obvious publics» the fiction is a condition of existence, they are «a process combining a persona ficta, the enactment of that fiction, and the experience involved in such an enactment» (Dayan, 2005: 43). On the contrary, «obvious public» don't care for the collectivity they are claimed to form; the fiction is not a condition of existence but only one of the pleasures offer by the text.

Two central elements that mark the difference between the two publics are 1) the enactment of fictio and 2) the sociological experience implied by that enactment. The *enactment* is realized trough two key dimensions: the performance and the reflexivity. About the first one, Dayan tells that «a public - obvious - not only offers attention, it calls for attention», it acts through visible performances involving «a large-scale dramaturgy, a Goffmanian exercise of self-presentation» (Dayan, 2005: 52). The reflexivity is the sense of shared identity transforming publics into collective subjects «that are imagined in first

person, by a "we"» (Dayan, 2005: 53). The sociological experience of a obvious public is made of specific styles of interaction, registers of sociability, temporal stability and loyal commitment on the part of its members.

A public in its origin could be mediated by potentially heteronomous fiction, but it gains the status of obvious only at the moment in which that imaginative dimension is creatively domesticated and autonomously appropriated through a public performance, through reflexivity and through social experience.

What Dayan defines as «constitutive features of a public» are nothing but *mediation* processes, movement of meanings across representations, experiences, spaces. Fiction is the first mediation processes (so the question could be: from where does that fiction spring out? Inside, outside the public?), the second one is the enactment of fiction through public performance and through reflexivity (what degree of coherence does it preserve with respect to the starting fiction? Which "we-sense" and which dramaturgic self-representation does it develop?), finally the third one is the concretization of enacted fiction in social experiences (which are the shared practices, the spatial configuration, the involved social identities and their degree of commitments to the issues?)

I propose to envisage the categories of *obvious* and *obtuse* public dynamically, as the description of a hierarchic ensemble of *status* (condition), describing specific configurations of the relationship between mediated interaction and civic engagement. However, in order to describe the dynamic evolution between the different *status* of publics, we need an hypothesis about the driving force of that development, that is an element, or better, a cluster of elements that would explain the conditions of possibility that allow the passage from catalyzed to performing public.

The hypothesis promoted in that paper is that the model of *civic cultures* (Dahlgren, 2009) synthesizes exactly that crucial cluster of factors we are searching for. Civic cultures are thought as the ensemble of factors that can shape civic agency and thereby impact on citizens' engagement and participation in democracy. They consist of pattern of meanings, practices, communication, and are organized in a integrated circuit of six dimensions of mutual reciprocity: knowledge, values, trust, spaces, practices and identities.

These six dimensions allow us to trace the pertinent area of inquiry about citizenship and political participation. We are not studying every possible kind of *obvious public*; theoretically even some expressions of the participatory culture of gamers, bloggers and fans that have been studied by Jenkins (2006) can in some case take the shape of obvious publics. Rather, here the analytical focus is about those publics that Fraser describes as inclusive in principle (1992), which set their agenda around an abstract notion of public good and general interest, and discuss about the social distribution of resources and power. Within that framework, the analytical relevance is attributed only to those *mediation* processes that are related with some of the six dimensions (or maybe to all of them) of civic cultures.

Moreover, civic cultures can be considered as the cluster of crucial factors that can drive the evolution of a public between different *status*. The civic cultures are made up of

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three axes: the cognitive (where we find the informative dimension), the symbolic (consisting of trust, values, identity) and the pragmatic-organizational (dealing with practices and spaces). It is only the mutual interdependence of these three axes that could explain changes and evolution in the forms of the public.

The web offers unprecedented opportunities to potentiate the so-called "constitutive features" of publics: it makes easier the realization of autonomous performances, the practices of reflexivity and connectivity, thus increasing the probabilities that an obtuse public, born of a heteronomous text, transforms itself into a obvious public through the enactment and the social experience of its fiction. However, it's not the case that all these potentialities find actualization in the web; online public agoras don't assure the empowering of each social identity that finds in the internet possibilities of aggregation. That means that, if there is an evolutionary transformation of publics across different *status*, that involves not only their constitutive features (whose conditions of possibilities reside in the pragmatic-organizational dimension of civic cultures), but also the values they invoke and the issues they put forward (symbolic and cognitive axes of civic cultures). Thus, the advantage of reasoning within the framework of civic cultures is given by the fact that the presumed interdependence between the six constituting dimensions allows to explain both the static and the dynamic of political publics.

As a consequence, civic cultures are both the object of translations (the fictions from which publics raise out can be conceived as a "dramaturgy" of values, trust, identities, and their enactments goes through the pragmatic-organizational axe of civic cultures) and the driving force which makes any further mediation possible[3].

3. Civic cultures in the digital environment

How can the theoretical framework here configured be useful to examine the new forms of mediated civic engagement that are developing in the web?

Coherently with the culture-oriented model of public sphere, we can start thinking of public sphere as a cultural space in which different individuals and groups actively construct their own understanding of real and ideal civil society by filtering overarching discourse and narratives through multiple spheres and communities. The idea is that of a thick weave of public sphericules (Gitlin, 1998), collectivities and associations nested with one another and also within a putative larger national sphere (Alexander-Jacobs, 1998: 29). The analytical aim thus becomes that of grasping the logics behind that "nest-building", the kind of discursive connections allowing the proliferation of political publics, separated but reciprocally intertwined within the boundaries of a shared meanings' horizon. The analytical issues at stake don't deal uniquely with the thematic content focused by each cultural cluster, but also with how they are internally organized, which kind

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[3] That dualism can be explained referring to the analytical status of culture and to the tension between agency and structure that is bestowed in it: «Culture must be analytically treated as a general orientation that can offer road markers for patterns of doing and thinking, yet it can never provide definite predictions – not least because it is always to some degree in transitions» (Dahlgren, 2009: 103)

of autonomy they preserve in relation to the larger publics, and whether their detachment reflects the *status* of obvious publics. But, since our starting question is deeply connected to the specificity of digital media milieu, the research objectives extend to include the way in which the availability of media technologies, facilitating contents production and distribution outside the traditional mediating centre of political parties and of institutional media, can influence the dynamics of propagation, overlapping or disconnection between differentiated discursive spheres.

As already stated in the previous paragraph, it is plausible to suppose that the new forms of media engagement and interaction could multiply obvious publics insofar as they make easier all the processes that are necessary for an autonomous appropriation of the fiction from which they spring out. However, the chosen analytic framework implies the overcoming of that hypothesis, because it postulates that the evolution between different forms of publics (what we can ultimately envisaged as *civic agency*) is always the result of a ineradicable interdependence between the material preconditions of publics' constitutive features and their symbolic dimension. Within that cultural circularity, the question could be reformulated in the following manner: which kind of civic culture is able to exploit all the participatory and interactive potentialities of the web in order to transform the constitutive features of a generic public into those of a obvious public?

That basic issue will be now translated into an inquiring glance though the analysis of an empirical case study.

4. beppegrillo.it: antagonistic civic cultures on the threshold

Beppegrillo.it[4] is an Italian weblog acting as a communicative platform for the development of a civic and political movement which is lead by Beppe Grillo, a well-known comedian.

It has been created in January 2005, as a support of the tour that Beppe Grillo was doing in the theatres of almost all regions of Italy. The shows consisted in long monologues characterized by ironic register and mainly focused on political issues (themes including political and corporate corruption, freedom of speech, finance, technology, renewable energy). The blog grew up very rapidly, and by now it has become one of the most visited and commented in Italy and also in the global blogosphere where, according to Technorati, is included among the 20 most read blogs of the world (see e.g. Technorati, 2006). In the meantime also the movement progressively grew up, gaining more and more media visibility. It has gradually taken up a more explicit political orientation with the organization of very successful public demonstrations combined with the collecting of signatures for some draft laws, and the presentation of civic lists at last national elections in February 2013. The blog has now a well established structure. Its "counter-hegemonic" stance represents one of the main identity claims postulated by the founder and his supporters. It is constantly updated by a daily new post signed by Beppe Grillo and contains in the homepage the archives of the main campaigns promoted in the past by the movement, supporting in this way the creation of collective and shared memory.

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[4] www.beppegrillo.it

If observed from the point of view of the large national public sphere, the social and political phenomenon generated around *beppegrillo.it* appears as a case in point of the evolution from an obtuse public (represented by the audiences that followed his past television performance and actually follow his theatre spectacles) towards a obvious public (constituted by the thousands of citizens that have taken part in public demonstrations and presented their candidature in general and local elections under the aegis of Beppe Grillo). At the end of that progression, that collective entity, at the beginning only evoked within the discursive frame prearranged by the comedian/blogger, has started *acting* through visible performances and a public dramaturgy of self-presentation. The entry in the second phase has been characterized by a fierce struggle within the overarching national public sphere, during which the so-called «Beppe Grillo's people»[5] has hardly fought to mark the boundaries of its "counter-public" identity, weaving a web of discursive connection and disconnection. One of the most debated controversy has dealt with the category of "anti-politics" which has been attributed to the political movement inspired by Beppe Grillo mainly by politicians belongings to the well established national parties and by well-known intellectuals and opinion-leaders. There has been a relevant discursive operation (that is not fully exhausted but sill continues nowadays) by which many influential voices of national public spheres have tried to normalize and keep under control the subversive potential of the phenomenon; to that, so-called *Beppe Grillo's people* has replied affirming that their proposal is instead authentically political because it comes back at the roots of participatory democracy.

The aim of the empirical analysis here presented is the inquiry of the cultural dynamics of that supposed evolution, in order to prove if and how far the original obtuse public has transformed itself into a obvious public, able to imagine itself as an "us" through a reflexivity process that is partially autonomous from a third part's gaze (in that case, the "gaze" of Beppe Grillo, *first cause* of this public). For this purpose, two processes of mediation have been analyzed.

The first one deals with the communicative and civic proposal formulated by the comedian through his blog. It could be envisaged as the first act of "structuring" a discourse about civic culture, in the form of both a "fiction" and a peculiar discursive genre. That first step of mediation will be studied through the analytical tools of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Jørgensen-Phillips, 2002; Fairclough, 1995) applied to a selected sample of the texts published in the blog. This methodology has been chosen because its theoretical premises are profoundly coherent with the assumptions postulated in that context. CDA considers that every instance of language use is a communicative event consisting of three dimensions: it's a text (that should be studied in its formal features and in the pattern of meanings thus generated), it's a discursive practice (that is the production and the consumption of texts which should be studied focusing on how authors and receivers draw on already existing discourses and genres to create and to interpret a text), and finally it is a social practice (thus reproducing or, instead, restructuring the broader social order). Every communicative event draws on pre-existent "orders of

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[5] This is the name used by both detractors and supporters to indicate the political movement inspired by Beppe Grillo.

discourse" which can be defined as the sum of all the genres and discourses which are in use within a specific social domain: «the uses of discourses and genres as resources in communication is controlled by the order of discourse because the order of discourse constitutes the resources that are available. It delimits what can be said. But at the same time, language users can change the order of discourse by using discourses and genres in new ways» (Jørgensen-Phillips, 2002: 72). Discourse is seen as constitutive but also as constituted by surrounding social dimensions. Every communicative act opens a breach of contingency and potential innovation in established social structure even if, at the same time, its conditions of possibility are inescapably determined by it. That dialectic, established within a communicative event that is shaped by pre-existent social context and at the same time contribute to shape it (through the mediating field of "order of discourse") constitutes an analytical clue that can be used to break in the previously underlined duality of civic cultures, which are both the object and the driving force (the amount of resources that makes it possible) of mediation processes. In fact, the notion of communicative event proposed by Fairclough coherently mirrors the set of constraint and agency that, according to Silverstone, is implied in each threshold of mediation (Silverstone, 2002). The second step of the analysis focuses on the second process of translation that, in Fairclough's model, corresponds to the discursive practice of "consumption". Through qualitative interviews, it has been possible to study the reception field of Beppe Grillo's blog and how its peculiar cultural morphology has influenced the actualization of some of the potential readings offered by the first mediation processes. The interviews have been conducted with a non-representative sample[6] of blog's readers and activists of the political movements that are inspired by Beppe Grillo but partially autonomous from him in their political initiatives.

4.1 STRUCTURING CITIZENSHIP: DISCOURSES AND DISCURSIVE GENRES

First of all, the qualitative contents analysis has been aimed at identifying the order of discourse within which Beppe Grillo's blog intended to place itself. For this purpose, all the texts published by the blog in the first three months of activity have been analyzed, paying attention to the sum of mobilized resources in the form of genres and pattern of meanings.

Since the beginning, it has been clear that the comedian intended to catalyze the crucial nodes of a *civic culture discourse* inside an antagonistic perspective. He proposed reflections on the betrayed trust's linkage between politicians and citizens, on the manipulated and propagandistic representation of reality offered by national press considered as completely enslaved to political and economic power, on the corporate corruption and on the paradoxes of fraudulent finance.

It is possible to observe an evolution during that monitored period, consisting of a gradually increasing presence of the *pars construens* of the discourse, besides the *pars destruens* which appears as a prolongation of Beppe Grillo's theatre performances. That

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[6] The sample was composed by 25 people aged between 31 and 56 years; 60% males, 40% females; 52% high school diploma, 48% university degree. Interviews have been conducted during autumn 2009.

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means that, day by day, Beppe Grillo's discourse creates a space for alternatives to the described dramatic situation. That dual structure of reality is immersed in and reinforced by an overarching discourse proposing new trust connections, new spatial and temporal coordinates along which civic action could be situated. It constructs a temporal line whose beginnings are rooted in one of the crucial narrations of the country: that of Resistance Movement, the fall of Fascism and the promulgation of The Constitution of Italian Republic. At the same time, the discourse re-structures the geography of civic action which is ultimately removed from institutional political space (political parties, big national media, political institutions) and, after a long celebration of the "empty" - that is the impossibility of any kind of intervention on the reality - it is finally placed in the internet which is exalted as the foundation of a new political palingenesis.

The post published on January the 28th offers a very emblematic synopsis of what Beppe Grillo's blog will offer to its readers in the following months. He says: «I am a partisan of third world war, the war for information. The problem is not that we haven't information, we are submersed by information. The only way to assure the survival of democracy is to avoid that government could control the freedom of citizenship in sharing information and communicating»[7].

The relevance of that post resides in the fact that in it Beppe Grillo places himself within a chain of equivalence between the two moments of *democracy* and *information*. That articulation of discourse anticipates the two discursive genres that will be mobilized by the blog in the following months: that of information gate-keeping (the comedian/blogger presents himself as the person who is able to amend the distorted fluxes of information between institutions and citizens) and that of political representation (Beppe Grillo is not a neutral reporter of an objective reality, but he fights as a partisan inside that same narrated reality). I argue that textual deployments of both genres have in common the same organization of the symbolic space of the blog, divided in Goffmanian terms (1959) in two parts: a visible *front*, accessible by the audience, and a hidden *back*, under the exclusive control of the blogger.

The genre of gatekeeping is developed through three main strategies. First of all, there is an alignment into some of the canons of modern mythology of journalism (Sorrentino, 2006): the account of the reality is always synchronized with the external social temporality and up to date with recent events; it uses the witness statements of experts to validate the narrated truth; sometimes the speaking voice is concealed by strategies of objectification. Secondly it offers a popularization of expert knowledge (Linde, 1987), using a small and fragmented subset of concepts present in expert theory. Thirdly, it domesticates creatively some of the communicative features of the blogosphere (Matheson, 2004; Deuze, 2003). In applying these strategies, the rudder of contents production and news selection is firmly in the hands of the blogger: links at the sources are almost never direct[8], there is no comparison between different version of the represented reality and the

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[7] *www.beppegrillo.it/2005/01/e_scoppiata_la.html*

[8] They link at homepages and rarely at the quoted articles.

selection criteria of the sources are not made explicit, justified or discussed with the audience, but remain hidden in the secret of the *back*. Not only the blog doesn't realize any kind of participatory process in the production of contents - that would be coherent with the semi-participatory usage frame of blogs (Carpentier, 2007) - but it doesn't open any opportunities for interaction with the audience, thus appearing very far from the negotiated epistemology of news that is emerging in some areas of the web (Matheson, 2004).

Very similar mechanisms are put into action in the genre of political representation. That genre starts with the first post of the blog, which informs readers that the new topic does not deal with the calendar of Beppe Grillo's theatre performance (as it was happening till the previous post) and contains only a title: "this is the place of weeping[9]". The cahier de doléances will become in the following months a picture more and more realistic of the people to whom the blogger intends give public representation. He will publish a lot of letters written by readers of the blog and focused on its main topics (precarious work and iniquitous working conditions, inefficiencies of welfare state and in the administration of justice, etc.). However, even if the social identity of the authors will be explicit (they are precarious worker, mothers with disabled children, citizens defending the environment of their town from unauthorized buildings, etc.), there will not be any kind of transparency in the process of constructing representation. The readers cannot know if the published letter comes from a comment of a blog's post or instead from a private message sent to Beppe Grillo; there aren't any clues (like hour, day or name of the author) that would allow to find that letter in the thousands of daily posted comments; but, above all, there isn't any kind of correspondence between the ranking of comments (they can be voted by all the readers) and the selection of published letters made by Beppe Grillo. The comedian/blogger appears thus as the *primum movens* of a public that it is in fact dispossessed of any kind of communicative tool that would have allowed the creative enactment of the fiction from which it originates.

4.2 Receiving and achieving citizenship: truth, trust and individualism

The second step of analysis focuses on the mediation process residing at the reception stage of the communicative and civic proposal of Beppe Grillo. The aim has been that of highlighting the decisive aspects of those civic cultures that have reacted to and enhanced the civic culture bestowed in the blog trough dramatizations and peculiar discursive genres. Two main points about the cultural morphology of blog's audience are worth to be mentioned, both of them concerning the experience of citizenship in a mediated public sphere. They are disintermediation and de-institutionalization. The blog's readers seem to have deeply incorporated in their daily practices of participation to the public sphere (here I use the category of "participation" in a broad sense, so as to include a general public orientation concretized in searching information and the more intense forms of membership within active publics) the process of disintermediation from traditional gatekeepers as political parties and institutional media.

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[9] That is the English translation of "Muro del Pianto", the name that Italians use to indicate the "Western Wall of Jerusalem".

They conceive knowledge as a process that is to be charged to the single person, not to social rules or conventions, but only to the discernment of the single reader up to whom is the task of truth ratification. In the same way, they think about citizenship as a "project of the self", as an individual search for the truth which has been denied by economic, cultural and political élites, but aprioristically exists in the web, without the need of mediating factors lighting or shaping it.

The process of de-institutionalization has to do with the kind of trust connections implied by the civic culture of readers. Not only they don't trust in specific media, as the main Italian newspapers or television news, but more radically they seem to have lost any kind of institutional trust (Silverstone, 1999) on media in general, that is on the possibility to tie up their service to shared rules and social agreement.

Beppe Grillo's blog has crept into that cultural space made empty by disintermediation and de-institutionalization. Its communicative path unhooks the genre of gatekeeping from institutional trust as far as it denies some crucial aspects of its foundation, as the professional competence or the presence of processes of news production that are readily denied by a shown off spontaneity[10]; at the same time, it anchors the genre in a frame of trust mainly based on the process (cultural contiguity between the representation and the reality experienced by readers) and on the identity (on the idiosyncratic features of Beppe Grillo as an individual) (Silverstone, 1999). Therefore the separation of the symbolic place of the blog between the visible and open *front* where news arrive already packaged within a rigid interpretative frame, and the hidden *back* where news are selected and sources judged in their credibility, is not perceived as a problem by an audience that have fill up the empty space of disintermediation and deinstitutionalization with a personal trust linkage.

The same mechanism drives the genre of political representation. The lack of participation in the building of political representation doesn't compromise the acceptance of the Beppe Grillo's civic proposal. The readers don't consider the blog as the place for building a collective identity and that belief is not the mere consequence of blogger's structuring act, but it is coherently integrated within a specific representation of society and politics. The idea is that contemporary society is too much divided and fringed thus precluding the development of any kind of social aggregation except for that based on power and economic profit. The blog places itself in that context and its role cannot be different than that of awaken individual - not yet collective - consciences. The construction of an "us" is thus a project which will not take place in the blog.

5. Conclusions

The relationship between communication practices and citizen engagement is complex and not linear. For that reason, the theoretical and empirical path here followed

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[10] The blog is actually managed by a marketing company, Casaleggio Associati, which has in charge all the editorial business of the comedian (from theatre performance to the sale of books and dvd). Sometimes Beppe Grillo makes references to a "staff" helping him in the management of the blog, but without specifying clearly the kind of contribution coming from it. That situation is unproblematically accepted by interviewed readers, who are firmly convince that the great part of news published in the blog comes from signallings and complaints received by Beppe Grillo from private citizens.

suggests to inquiry it through a circular analytical model which draws on the traditional notion of *mediation* of meanings across the thresholds of technologies, practices and texts. Two main parameters have been introduced in order to assess these circles of significance. The first one arises from the categories used by Dayan (2005) to classify the various *personae fictae* originating from the social production of collective attention. The distinction among obvious and obtuse public can be used as a benchmark to evaluate the static dimension of publics. The model of civic cultures instead is useful to describe the dynamics of publics; a specific kind of dynamics consisting of a productive tension between structure and agency, within which communicative events shape and are at the same time shaped by the overarching cultural context. That analytical framework has been applied to the case study of *beppegrillo.it*, with the methodological support of CDA. The chosen methodology has proven to be very useful because it allows to analytically grasp the surroundings of the text in the form of discursive practices. The study of the way in which Beppe Grillo's blog has creatively domesticated the two discursive genres of information gate-keeping and political representation has demonstrated that, against an ideological celebration of political potentialities of the web, none of its main technological affordances have been actualized in the blog's communicative frame.

Thus, the analyzed blog has been very efficacious in offering a democratization though the media (Wasko & Mosco, 1992) insofar as it has offered great opportunities for public representation and ritualistic participation in the public sphere. However it has not been able to produce a democratization in the media, refusing all the interactive and participatory potentialities offered by the material configuration of digital technology. Thought through the categories of Dayan, the blog has produced a very relevant fiction, a big narration in the Italian public sphere whose weight is proved by thousands of people following the blog and participating to public demonstrations. However, as it has been argued, that narration contains, in its discursive deployment, remarkable evidences of closure, that could potentially hinder the process of enactment and, consequently, the process through which the emerging identity creatively domesticates that fiction. The qualitative interviews have revealed that the obtuse public has not been able to transform in an obvious one because of a contingent convergence of two conditions: the discursive closure in the deployment of the starting imaginative dimension and the specific cultural features of the involved civic culture.

However, I do not intend to generalize those empirical results. There is no doubt that in the big narration offered by Beppe Grillo there are potentialities for an autonomous entity which starts to think itself as an "us"; in parallel, civic cultures remain essentially plural, thus it is not possible to exclude that different cultural morphology of the reception field could bring different evolution in the *status* of a public. ✎

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