Matteo Cernison

Social Media Activism

Water as a Common Good

Amsterdam
University

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Protest and Social Movements

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In memory of Berta Cáceres

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This book is the result of eight years of life, research, and writing. During this time, I broke three cars (once while trying to reach and interview an activist), relocated to ten different houses and three different countries, changed methodological approach and research questions, and met about 200 water activists in different parts of Italy and Europe. First, I would like to thank every one of them: you opened the doors of your assemblies, organizations, and houses, spending precious hours with me while you were fighting and winning one of the most important political battles of your and our lives. Above all, I am particularly grateful to the *Segreteria Operativa* of the Forum: in 2011, I discovered at the Rialto Sant'Ambrogio an incredible laboratory of ideas, observing exceptional levels of professionalism and dedication to a cause. Remixing the words of one of the members of this group, I can say '*Quelle settimane con Luca seduto accanto a Nino furono belle*'. Furthermore, special thanks go to the activists and friends who shared with me the experience of Marseille, and, in particular, to two activists from Genoa, who decided to reveal to me very important news during a dinner on the hills that surround the city.

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List of Abbreviations

15-M	*Movimiento 15-M* (Spanish movement that emerged in 2011)
AATO	*Autorità d'Ambito Territoriale Ottimale* (Optimized Territorial District Authority, a local authority on public services, including water)
ADUSBEF	*Associazione Difesa Utenti Servizi Bancari e Finanziari* (Users Association Defense Banking and Financial Services, an Italian consumer association)
AIDA	Attention, Interest, Desire, Action (acronym indicating a marketing model)
AMREF	African Medical and Research Foundation
ARCI	*Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana* (Italian Recreational and Cultural Association)
ATTAC	*Association pour la Taxation des Transactions financières et pour l'Action Citoyenne* (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions and Citizen Action)
CEVI	*Centro di Volontariato Internazionale* (International Volunteering Centre, an Italian NGO)
CGIL	*Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro* (Italian General Confederation of Labour)
FIMA	*Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua* (Italian Forum of Water Movements)
G20	Group of Twenty (governmental forum of the world's major economies)
HTML	Hypertext markup language
ICT/ICTS	Information and communication technology/technologies
ICWSM	International Conference on Weblogs and Social Media
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PD	*Partito Democratico* (Italian Democratic Party)
RAI	*Rai – Radiotelevisione Italiana S.p.A*, the Italian public broadcasting service
WWF	World Wildlife Fund

Introduction

In 2011, while the Arab Spring was rapidly changing the political scenery of the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea and the *Indignados* were beginning to occupy the Spanish squares with the help of tents and innovative social media communication tactics, Italian society faced a different, yet linked, form of mobilization. Since the previous year, a broad and heterogeneous coalition of social movement organizations, gathered in the framework of the *Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua* (Italian Forum of Water Movements), had been promoting a referendum campaign against the privatization of water services, a popular issue in Italy for over a decade.

Radical left activists, environmentalists, ecclesiastics, and members of leftist parties extensively publicized the idea of considering water as part of the commons, convincing apolitical and informal groups of citizens – football fans, designers, cyclists, or gastronomic associations – to support their struggle, finally persuading about 25,000,000 Italian citizens to vote. In order contact the youngest segment of the population and bypass the filter of the mainstream media, these relatively traditional networks of activists decided – for the first time in the country – to rely in a heavy way on social media (and, in particular, on Facebook) to spread their political messages to a wider population. Some hundreds of veteran activists and thousands of people embarking on their first political experience organized events that spread both online and offline, adapting to a new digital environment their previous tactics of communication and organization, or importing in the campaign their everyday experience of using the Net.

Due to the numerous and different actors participating in the campaign, to the strategy of loose coordination that the Forum adopted, and to the different possibilities of use that the digital environments permit, divergent tactics and combinations of online/offline actions emerged. For instance, activists succeeded in distributing petitions to millions of citizens, presenting them as placeless Facebook events. Famous singers organized free concerts for everyone who could prove that they had voted by showing a validated electoral certificate; similarly, a disperse 'community' of bartenders, chefs and sport instructors coalesced online to follow this example, offering breakfasts, pizzas or yoga lessons to the voters. Activists started to share their local initiatives (human chains on riverbanks, leaflets distribution on the beaches, bicycle rides with referendum flags) in a new, interactive section of the central website of the campaign, giving in this way

national visibility to their ideas, and promoting mechanisms of imitation and diffusion of symbols in other local contexts. Associations supported informal car-sharing services, combining email, telephone and social media use to offer free rides to the elder voters. Well-organized communities of activists decided in closed Facebook groups to invade with messages the comment spaces of the main online newspapers, while average social media users manifested their support for the issue, adding one of the numerous referendum badges in their photo profiles.

In May and June 2011, these heterogeneous, pervasive initiatives of communication slowly colonized the entire Italian online sphere, leading the referendum supporters to a sound victory on 13 June 2011. Together with this political achievement, the water activists obtained a complete communication success. Initially reluctant, some of the main Italian newspapers became active players in the campaign: for more than a month, these media hosted in their websites special sections that listed numerous local initiatives that the referendum supporters were organizing, while their cartoonists created symbols and images that the activists contributed to share online. Furthermore, according to the Facebook Memology – the official Facebook list of the most current issues on users' personal statuses (Bianchini 2011) – the two Latin words *referendum* and *quorum* were the most adopted on the Italian Facebook space in 2011. Finally, this powerful wave of communication started to become visible, in a distorted and adapted form, even in the programmes of the national television services: as one of the Forum key activists declared, the campaign 'blew up the cathode ray tube' (Munafò 2011).

Web and social media political campaigns are complex communication phenomena, in particular, when a cluster of connected social movement actors contributes to their development. Following the coordinated or semi-spontaneous actions of numerous organizations and activists, these campaigns tend to fragment in separated propaganda initiatives, which take place in real-life tangible places, in online environments, or in a combination of both. In this book, I describe in detail the intricate set of creative and sometimes divergent communication tactics that activists elaborated during the Italian referendum campaign on water. Through the description of this single (yet evolving and multifaceted) case, I present how numerous practices of activism and campaigning entered in relationship with the use of digital technologies, of social media, and, in particular, of Facebook. This book explores in detail the link between the referendum campaign on water and the online communication that supported along the following three lines.

First, it aims at exploring how the decisions to create online platforms of interaction and to cooperate on Facebook influenced the campaign in

its entirety, contributing to changing the experience of being an activist, and fostering the adoption of different forms of internal organization and action. Due to the relative autonomy of the activists and of their groups, the case of the Italian referendum on water property permits me to analyse a wide set of online-aided (or, in some cases, online-based) forms of activism in a moment of intense evolution. Of course, some of the disparate, creative and diffuse activists' strategies of communication that I described in the previous paragraphs were part of the protest repertoire of movements since well before the creation of the web and of the social networking sites. Nonetheless, the use of social media interacted with these previous practices in interesting ways, and gave to expert activists as well as newly arrived sympathizers a different space in which they could mobilize, experiment with new ideas, and adapt old behaviours to a new environment.

Due to the high level of variation that I observed, the book does not aim at presenting to the reader a well-defined 'Facebook effect' on activism and campaigning, even though I claim that social media and other forms of digital communication visibly influence activists' practices. As recurrently happens in media studies, scholars tend to contrast optimistic and pessimistic views on how new forms of communication can influence participation. In this case, researchers have suggested that digital media 'encourage new protest dynamics online', increasing the ability to create fast, telegraphic actions (Earl and Kimport 2011: 204), while other authors have proposed that social media can open the way to dangerous surrogates of activism (Morozov 2011, cited in Marichal 2012a: 10). However, in my research I had the opportunity to observe the contemporaneous emergence of both new forms of 'digitally empowered' activism, and of less engaged, short-term practices of participation. In some cases, these two apparently divergent phenomena combine, creating complex digital structures that coordinate the small local efforts of a disperse population of less engaged activists.

This research also provides a detailed presentation on how online participation and social media use have changed for many people 'what it feels like to be an activist' (Marichal 2012a: 112). My answer to this question is necessarily plural: in an environment that includes social media, the experience of being an activist changes in part following the choices and the attributes of the activists. This book concentrates its attention on the characteristics of the campaign that seem to interact most with the evolution of the media sphere: in particular, questions regarding the level of centralization of the communication efforts, the combination of digital and physical spaces, and the role of perceptions in determining how activists adopt social media recur in the book.

Second, this research aims at helping other scholars who want to investigate large-scale digital campaigns, presenting a set of methods and theoretical approaches that can be useful in describing large flows of digital communication (with a particular focus on the use of Facebook and on the traditional web). To a certain extent, online interactions are human phenomena that share numerous traits with their previous non-digital counterparts: for instance, at first activists tend to use Facebook to spread virtual leaflets, to invite people to their offline events, to distribute press releases to their online audience instead of to journalists or newspapers. However, the interaction between online and offline plans slowly permits the emergence of new and sometimes unexpected phenomena, which are very difficult to analyse when following standard methods of research. Diana Owen, in her description of how new media are contributing to modify the form of political campaigns, indicates that research should renovate its toolset, in order to analyse in detail this evolution:

> Much of the existing scholarship has employed well-worn theoretical frameworks that are not entirely appropriate for the new media age and have relied on orthodox methodological approaches, such as survey research and content analysis. In order to track new developments and voters' use of campaign media innovations, theories [...] should be defined or recast. Creative research methodologies [...] should be employed. (Owen 2014: 832)

Luckily, during the last 20 years scholars have extensively analysed online interactions and their interplay with the 'real' world. In several independent debates that emerged at the confluence between sociology, media studies, and computer science, researchers have adapted traditional methods of investigation to this new environment, arriving in some cases at proposing epistemological turns to better conceive the digital as a space of interaction. In this research, I widely discuss, combine and connect these approaches, with a particular attention to the ethnographies of digital environments, to versions of social network analysis centred on the online spheres, and to the theoretical discussion on the boundaries between virtual and 'real' spaces. The reader can adopt this book, therefore, as an introduction to these debates, as a sort of applied handbook on the methods and on the theories that discuss how researchers can observe distributed online phenomena.

This research combines two main approaches. On the one hand, I observe numerous online 'traces of communication' (for example, networks between sites, or sets of Facebook notifications) as a digital source of data, which

I adopt to analyse the diffuse mobilizations that preceded the vote. On the other hand, I describe how activists were interacting on and with the web. This second approach – mainly based on interviews and participant observation in offline and online contexts – permits me to understand how actors and organizations have differently adopted digital technologies, and under which conditions the use of social media or collaborative websites have permitted an evolution of activists' practices.

Third, readers can approach this text by considering it as a detailed description of a significant political event. In particular, the referendum campaign contributed (in part in an unintentional way) to modify the equilibrium of Italian party politics, destabilizing the right-wing coalition that was governing the country. Furthermore, the Italian referendum is part of a larger worldwide effort to contrast neoliberal politics on the issue of water property: the Italian experience is deeply connected with struggles on water in Latin America, while similar campaigns appeared in the last ten years in numerous European countries, in the European institutions, and at the level of the United Nations. Analysing the Italian campaigns in support of the water referendum, this book traces the emergence, the evolution, and the outcomes of one of the most successful social movement actions in recent Italian political history. The online creativity of the water coalition and its deep penetration in the country largely derived from the ten-year-long effort of a nucleus of activists engaged on this issue at the local, national, and international levels. Therefore, one of the goals of the book is to present the history of this mobilization, maintaining a focus on the variegated online production of the activists, and on how the intense referendum campaign influenced through time the structure of the Italian Forum of Water Movements.

Case Study: the Italian referendum campaign against water privatization

Even though the Italian referendum campaign gave life in 2011 to a spectacular explosion of web communication, it had emerged two years before as a traditional, offline political phenomenon. In November 2009, the cabinet leaded by Silvio Berlusconi and the large centre-right majority that was supporting it in the parliament introduced a crucial modification to the Italian legislation on water management. Thanks to an article of the so-called *Decreto Ronchi* (decree 135/09), the government and the parliament permitted a very strong presence of private actors in the water distribution and sewage

systems, ending the previous 'in-house', mainly public management of the resource as of 31 December 2011.

This action encountered the opposition of a very large network of social movement actors, mainly represented by the umbrella organization *Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua* (Italian Forum of Water Movements, hereafter FIMA), which quickly reacted to this privatization attempt. This network, which had mobilized two years before to promote a citizens' initiative for public water, chose to oppose the law by using the ambitious tool of direct democracy: a call for two referendums, which aimed at abrogating the newly introduced article, and some previous norms that were permitting the participation of private actors to control the management of water. The network emerged from the collaboration between national organizations of the left and independent local water committees. During this campaign, the FIMA infrastructure coordinated (in a very loose way) the efforts of highly different political organizations. Environmentalists, trade unions of public service workers, leftist and Catholic cultural associations, organizations linked to the Social Forum experiences, activists of competing political parties are only some of the groups that successfully collaborated during the referendum struggle.

In spring 2010, FIMA gave life to a first wave of mobilization, promoting an extensive collection of signatures, a step that is legally required in Italy to ask for a referendum. Relying on very 'mundane tools' (Nielsen 2011) of digital and face-to-face communication, such as national mailing lists, blogs, leafleting, and debates, the referendum promoters succeeded in gathering about 1,500,000 signatures in two months. In particular, the presence of the water activists in the entire country and their well-designed strategy of coordination between centre and periphery contribute to explain the success of this first phase of mobilization.

One year later, in spring 2011, FIMA designed the referendum campaign that preceded the vote relying on a highly different communication strategy. Trying to enter into contact in a very short time with the majority of the Italian population, the activists gave life to mashup sites that combined locally produced content, they connected their physical actions in online spaces, and they started to adopt Facebook as their main platform of interaction and communication. In May 2011, the referendum proposers reached a very high level of visibility on social media. On the one hand, this new visibility encouraged the emergence of spontaneous grassroots groups, which supported in creative ways the campaign in its very last phases; on the other hand, it attracted the attention of other media, which started to consider the referendum as a newsworthy political event.

The extensive use of social media – together with the fact of entering into a phase of intense campaigning – influenced the practices of communication and to a certain extent the models of internal organization of the referendum supporters. For instance, the very small office that coordinated the work of the numerous independent FIMA actors increased its relevance, but at the same time succeeded in elaborating a strategy of decentralized digital communication. Furthermore, several professionals (fundraisers, graphics and web specialists) entered into relationships with the campaign organizers and sometimes the solutions that these actors proposed influenced the interactions between the activists, organizations, and centres of coordination of the campaign. Social media campaigning seemed to require, on the one hand, a stronger coordination of the activists' actions, and, on the other hand, a contemporaneous decentralization of the communication efforts.

Thanks to this successful campaign, on 12 and 13 June 2011 about 57 per cent of the Italian citizens participated in the referendums, voting in about 95 per cent of the cases in favour of the two proposals of FIMA.[1] After sixteen years of failed referendum attempts, for the first time in the Italian history a committee of proposers exclusively made of social movement actors succeeded in winning the vote.

Connected Activism: loose interactions on social media and their possible effects on campaigning

In studying the evolution of web communication during a referendum campaign, I situate my work within the very broad and 'fashionable' discussion regarding the relationship between digital technologies on the one hand, and activism, campaigning and political behaviour on the other. Nevertheless, the analysis of similar relationships can follow several divergent paths: the use of the term 'relationship' permits the retention of a certain level of theoretical ambiguity because it does not oblige the author to declare which one of the two elements (digital media or campaigning) is influencing the other.

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1   Together with the referendums on water privatization, the voters approved two other motions on the same day: the first one opposed the reintroduction of nuclear power in Italy, while the second granted a special prerogative to Italian ministers that served to decelerate legal actions against them while they held office.

In general, researchers tend to adopt, at least in the years that immediately follow a media innovation, a more restrict and clear focus: they try to observe how the newly introduced media is influencing society, and, in particular, how it affects the way people mobilize. This framework of research, implicitly linked with technological deterministic assumptions, periodically tends to generate a debate between optimistic and pessimistic visions.[2]

For what concerns the effect of social media on the ability to mobilize, numerous authors see more risks than opportunities arising from these new forms of communication. In particular, two different kinds of criticism emerged: first, regarding issues of privacy and control of the users (Andrews 2012; Trottier 2012; Morozov 2011; Fuchs 2011); second, regarding the possibility of substituting real-world activism with less efficient, short-term online surrogates (Morozov 2011). In contrast with this view, other scholars have suggested that social media could empower political communities (Effing *et al.* 2012; Tufekci and Wilson 2012; Howard and Hussain 2011 for instance, supporting new forms of online protest, or quickly increasing the number of mobilized people (Earl and Kimport 2011).[3] Furthermore, numerous studies that analysed the international wave of mobilization of 2011, and, in particular, the Arab Spring, the Spanish 15-M, and Occupy, implicitly adopted a positive view on social media use in activism.

While the main research questions in this field still regard the possible positive or negative impact of technologies on political activities, and the connected idea that digital and social media promote some models of activism instead of others, a growing number of scholars are framing the discussion on the topic in different ways, following at least three models. First, some scholars increasingly assume a neutral point of view on the issue, observing 'what kind of activism [social media] encourage' and how these media change 'what it feels like to be an activist' (Marichal 2012a: 111). Second, other authors introduce elements of complexity within the previously presented theoretical model, suggesting that the digital technologies have different and sometimes contrasting effects on different kinds of organizations, or models of activism (e.g. Garrett 2006; Diani 2000; Mercea 2013). Third, a growing number of scholars is paying less attention to the 'classical' research questions on the effects of social

2   Roughly simplifying a complex debate on science and society, I can say that a technological deterministic hypothesis states that a new technology tends to produce a well-determined effect on society, because of its intrinsic features: in this approach, scholars consider less relevant the active role that people play while they adopt technological innovations.

3   See Tufekci (2017) for the negative aspects of this rapid growth.

media on activism, focusing instead on what people do with the web (e.g. Hine 2000; Pickerill 2003; Mattoni 2012; Gillan *et al.* 2008), and on the coexistence of different models of online action and communication (e.g. Bennett and Segerberg 2012b). In this last approach, researchers investigate how activists elaborate different strategies of communication, adapting digital tools to their purposes. Therefore, they invert in their analyses the terms of the relationship between technologies and activism, observing how different kinds of activism can differently shape the experience of using the web, social media, and other online tools. In this view, scholars often describe how social movement organizations with different communication cultures tend to produce different types of content and strategies in the new media environments, replying on the web space and in their use of social media their previous political characteristics (Kavada 2012).

In this book, I combine some of these partially contrasting perspectives on how researchers should study digital activism and campaigning. To a certain extent, I suggest that social media can have some effects on the ability of people to mobilize, introducing a new, in part placeless, environment of interaction. However, I show throughout the chapters how the characteristics of the different organizations involved in the water referendum played a crucial role in mediating a possible effect of digital communication and social media. These media offered very different kinds of opportunities, for instance, to the semi-professional team coordinating the campaign, to the water committees, to the isolated sympathizers, and to the numerous grassroots groups that engaged during the last months of mobilization.

Moreover, I follow the idea that organizations with different political cultures can adopt social media in divergent ways, in particular, because most social media environments permit the adaptation (at least in part) of individual experience of use. In particular, I show how the activists' perceptions of online spaces can influence their actions on these media. However, a similar perspective – centred on the actors and on their practices – implies a risk: research can become a classification of the always-divergent uses of the online platforms, which seem to depend in an exclusive way from the different cultural characteristics of the organizations that adopt them. To avoid this limit, I try to individuate in the variety of uses some recurrent models and strategies that appear particularly successful, showing the ways in which social media seem to facilitate the emergence of different models of activism, at least for some kinds of political organizations.

Methods to Investigate Large-Scale Campaigns: a challenging object of study

Political campaigns are complex forms of communication and participation: while in most cases a central organization coordinates them, they are increasingly assuming decentralized forms; contemporaneous events occur in numerous separated places, requiring the work of independent groups of activists. Furthermore, the use of different methods of digital communication to connect the activists and their public augmented this complexity. For instance, campaigners adopt social media spaces to interact among themselves (giving life to online-only relations), they use the web to contact large communities of sympathizers (creating forms of online-only propaganda), and they connect on different digital platforms to organize their local or national actions (supporting interactions that are both online and offline). To analyse these phenomena, scholars should experiment with new methodological solutions, which combine previous existent methods and adapt them to the investigation of online interactions (Owen 2014). At the same time, researchers should extend the experimentation to the epistemological level (see Rogers 2004), proposing different ways to conceive the digital spaces as objects of study, and the social phenomena that partially happen online.

In this book, I trace a picture of the Italian referendum on water property relying on a combination of very different methods, which help me to capture (from divergent points of view) how the campaign developed. In particular, the research relies on a form of social network analysis of the web, on the ethnographic observation of the interplay between digital and offline spaces, and on 42 interviews with the activists. Furthermore, I observed how the campaign grew on Facebook, relying on a daily analysis of the notifications that I received from about 200 water groups and activists. Finally, I wrote a software program in Python to detect the presence or absence of certain keywords in the sites that were supporting the campaign. In particular, this book devotes particular attention to two of the previously presented methods, social network analysis and the ethnography of digital connections, aiming at contributing to a further development of these approaches.

Due to the relational nature of most digital media, social network analysis is one of the most applied methods that researchers adopt to observe the web, social media, and online phenomena. Numerous authors have represented as networks the online interactions between chat users, blogs, sites, or personal social media accounts (e.g. Park and Thelwall 2003; Bruns 2007; Rogers and Ben-David 2008; Bennett and Segerberg 2012a). In most cases, these

researchers mainly conceived the collected online data, and the network that they traced, as a source of information that is useful to understand the characteristics of an offline event. For instance, Caiani and Wagemann (2009) traced the connections between websites of the Italian and German extreme right, aiming at depicting the structure of movements that were particularly difficult to approach offline. However, in some cases social network analysis has helped to investigate large-scale digital phenomena *per se*, observing them as different, independent networks of communication that were mainly happening on the web. In this book, I focus, in particular, on this second approach: tracing a network among the sites that supported the 2011 referendum campaign. I aim at obtaining a bird's-eye view of how the mobilization was structured on the web. In particular, I consider a series of broad online 'maps' of the water campaign – focused on the traditional web instead of on the social media environment – as a preliminary guide to understand the referendum struggle. In order to identify the intricate relationships that happened on social media during the campaign, I mainly rely on the use of qualitative methods, and, in particular, the ethnographic approach.

Ethnographic research is increasingly observing the interplay between online and offline phenomena (Hine 2008).[4] According to Gabriella Coleman, digital media are an interesting object for ethnographic research, due to their 'diversity and pervasiveness' in our society (2010: 488). Moreover, mainly starting from the offline/online dichotomy, she interestingly distinguishes different research 'paths' in ethnography. According to her, some works investigate how cultural identities are remade with digital media, others observe 'practices, subjects, modes of communication, and groups entirely dependent on digital technologies for their existence' (*ibid.*: 492), and a third group investigates 'the lived experiences of digital media, discussing the conditions in which they are made, altered, and deployed' (*ibid.*: 495). In my initial plan of research, I mainly aimed at following the third path that Coleman indicates: I wanted to explore how activists used computers, produced social media content, and gave life to the online 'public water' sphere. However, events shifted my attention to the first model of ethnography that Coleman describes: above all, I explored how water activism changed due to the use of social media and other forms of digital communication.

To conclude, a relevant aim of my research has been to test and combine different methodological and scientific traditions that tend to follow independent paths of development. By mixing them, I suggest that it is

4   See Coleman (2010) for a review.

possible to achieve a better understanding of the dynamics that characterize large-scale phenomena – such as campaigns – that are happening both online and offline. In particular, by combining forms of social network analysis of the web, digital ethnography, and a focus on media practices (see Mattoni 2012), I achieved my goal of observing how social movement actors interact on, interact with, and create digital communication in a phase of intense campaigning.

Structure of the Book

Social media campaigning, and every social phenomenon that happens in part on a digital environment, is an object of study that is difficult to delimit and conceive. In some cases, researchers tend to oversimplify the interplay between online and offline relationships, most of all at the theoretical level, mixing causes, effects, and symptoms of a semi-digital mobilization. The aim of the first chapter, therefore, is to present the theoretical approaches that constitute the basis of my research in order to present to the reader the ways in which I conceive the digital environments that I observed. At the end of the chapter, I introduce the research dimensions that emerged from my data, and the research questions that I decided to investigate.

The second chapter is an overview of a set of methods that can help to investigate diffused, loosely connected web phenomena, as the Italian referendum campaign on water property surely was. Even though I describe in detail, at the end of the chapter, the methodology that I have adopted in this research, the readers can approach this part of the book in a different way, considering it as an independent introduction to some creative techniques of analysis of web and social media-related phenomena. The first sections of the chapter discuss the main problems that research centred both online and offline can face. Then, I present four methodological approaches that inspired my research: two of them are centred on the idea of the network and on the online forms of social network analysis, while the remaining two are forms of ethnographic research dedicated to the analysis of digital phenomena. Finally, the last section of the chapter describes the combined methods that I adopted in the book.

I discuss in Chapter 3 – the less 'digital' of the book – the issue of water privatization in Italy, the emergence of FIMA, and the evolution through time of the Italian referendum campaign. In particular, I present the 2011 campaign as part of broader conflicts, on different scales. First, the chapter describes how the Italian case is part of a global opposition movement.

This global network promotes the idea of considering water as part of the commons or as a human right, opposing in this way to a market-oriented view that sees water as an asset with an economic value. Second, the chapter presents the rise of an Italian water coalition in the years that preceded the 2011 referendum campaign under analysis. Finally, I describe the main phases of the referendum mobilizations, and the relationships that the water referendum committee established with other political actors, and with the media.

The fourth chapter observes the mobilization as a network. Maintaining a very broad point of view, it presents the results of a social network analysis of 441 websites that supported the referendum struggle while maintaining a close relationship with FIMA. Blogs of committees, sites of the main organizations, individual activists, but also political parties and news hubs are part of this relational representation of the web. In particular, I concentrate attention in this chapter on the centralization/decentralization of the communication efforts, on the role of the local water committees, and on the different characteristics of the main sites that acted as communication hubs during the campaign. Finally, using a specially created software program, I explore the presence or absence of different keywords in two areas of the network, in order to understand how communication circulates within this portion of the web. For readers who are particularly interested in the digital versions of social network analysis, the entire chapter can constitute an introduction to this family of methods.

I adopt a more detailed focus on single activities, initiatives and patterns of communication in Chapter 5, where I observe in detail how activists evolved their communication strategies during the campaign. First of all, I present how the Italian water activists passed from a model of online communication based on mailing lists and websites to a model that included Facebook, YouTube, and completely revised sites. I describe this evolution as a passage from an instrumental view towards digital technologies to a representation of digital spaces as complex environments. Secondly, I observe how the referendum promoters looked for new communications and technical skills during the campaign, with a particular attention on the role of the external experts who volunteered for the water coalition. Thirdly, I observe online communication as part of a broader media environment (cf. Mattoni 2012), where digital strategies interacted with content and choices that were related to television, newspapers and other media. Finally, I show how the two main websites that coordinated the campaign emerged from different social interactions, and different perspectives on digital communication.

In the sixth chapter, I focus on a single social media platform, Facebook, and I investigate the impressive wave of communication that emerged on it during the last month of the campaign. This analysis mainly derives from the very large number of water-related Facebook notifications that I received in the weeks that preceded the vote, which I listed in an ethnographic diary. The first sections of the chapter describe this experimental form of ethnography, and the ethical issues that arose as a result. In the following sections, the chapter explains how activists slowly decided to communicate on Facebook, observing the numerous patterns of communications that emerged during the campaign. In particular, I focus on the interactions that happened within an online group, on the use of images, on the circulation of viral events, and on the relationship between online communication and actions that were happening offline. Finally, I show how different ways of perceiving Facebook coexisted during the campaign, strongly influencing how activists used this platform.

I dedicate the concluding chapter of the book to discuss the different communication strategies that the activists elaborated, to evaluate the methods that I adopted, and to present my proposals for further research.