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## **Introduction**

Media technologies have been at the heart of the history of social movements and political struggle. Tarrow (1998) applied Anderson's (1991) understanding of imagined community to the analysis of social movements and suggested that the rise of the popular press in Britain and France at the end of the 18th century triggered the creation of new associations that developed around the production and exchange of printed materials. Downing (1995) traced the roots of dissident publications back to the revolutionary pamphleteers of the American War of Independence and showed how media activism has been a central form of political action from the 19th century women's press and the suffragette movement to the civil rights movements of the 1960s (1995: 180–191).

If media technologies have been at the heart of the history of social movements and activism, the development of the internet has profoundly transformed the way in which media activism was imagined, understood and practiced (Meikle, 2002; Atton, 2004). According to many, internet technologies had enabled a new way of understanding political participation, which was fundamentally different from earlier social movements, and deconstructed older, identity-based forms of political engagement and belonging (Juris, 2008; Catsells, 1997).

In the last decade, however, the rise of social media activism has brought about another important transformation in the field of media activism. Scholars questioned and analysed the different ways in which political activists were appropriating and using social media technologies, to organise and partake into collective actions and mass protests (Gerbaudo, 2012; Barassi and Treré, 2012; Barassi, 2015; Kavada, 2015; Castells, 2012;; Wolfson, 2014; Postill, 2014). They also investigated the complex relationship between technological affordances and the emergence of new political repertoires of protest (Gerbaudo, 2015; Wolfson, 2014) and considered collective understandings of online political identity construction (Kavada, 2015; Milan, 2015; Treré, 2015).

Although insightful what is missing from these analyses is a careful appreciation of a fundamental aspect of social media activism: the relationship between political self-construction, digital storytelling and identity. Whilst some communication scholars in the past have considered the relationship between digital storytelling and 'alternative' publics (Bennett and Toft 2008; Couldry, 2008), within the current literature on social media activism the only example of work, which

tackles the complex relationship between the self-construction of political activists, identity narratives and digital storytelling is the work of Vivienne (2016), which explores everyday activists' use of digital technologies as tools for self construction through narratives.

The aim of this chapter is to address this gap in the field by introducing the concept of digital 'political biography'. Drawing on the findings of an ethnographic study of activists in Italy, the UK and Spain the chapter will argue that social media have become a platform where activists construct their political biographies with reference to both civic engagement and family life. The understanding of the interconnection between social media technologies and political biographies amongst activists is particularly important today, because it can enable us to ask questions about the tension between the creative elements of social media practices for political activists and the broader political economic implications activists data flows on the commercial Web.

### **Social Media Activism: How does it differ from other forms of Media Activism?**

As argued elsewhere (Barassi, 2016) there are two fundamental characteristics that differentiate social media activism from other forms of media activism. In the first place, political participation on social media is heavily personalised (Fenton and Barassi, 2011; Bennett and Segerberg, 2011). This personalisation is expressed by two different processes. On the one hand the individual relies on personal networks to gather and share information, mobilise and organise. On the other hand, the individual displays one's own identity narrative through the production of political posts, comments and images. In the second place, political participation on social media is based on a new logic of visibility. In her engaging critique of social media, Milan (2015) argued that in the last few years we have witnessed a transition of political repertoires, from a politics of identity to a politics of visibility. Politically engaged citizens and activists today are constantly sharing posts and information about their political experiences and direct actions, and their political practices are often defined by a mediatized understanding of visibility.

In the last few years a lot of attention has been placed to these different characteristics of social media activism. On the one hand scholars challenged techno-optimistic understandings of individual agency on social media (Castells, 2009) to argue that the personalisation of social protest leads to a series of challenges for

protest movements by calling into question the effectiveness and strength of a given protest (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011) and challenging collective discourses and representations (Fenton and Barassi, 2011). On the other hand, scholars have mapped the social tensions that emerge within social movements in the collective construction of a 'we' (Barassi, 2015; Gerbaudo and Trere, 2015; Kavada, 2015; Milan, 2015).

The question about the personalisation and individualisation of media activism on social media has inevitably lead scholars to critically investigate the complex relationship between social media, protest cultures and processes of collective identity construction. Different scholars, in fact, reached the conclusion that the very notion of collective identity is being re-negotiated on social media platforms. Treré (2015) for instance draws on Goffman's (1959) analysis of self-representation and argues that activists not only construct their identity through 'frontstage' tactics (such as social media posts) but also through 'backstage' practices (such as discussions, private messages etc.) and that these practices are key to the construction of collective identity.

In the same special issue, Kavada (2015) shows that the process of collective identity construction on social media, or 'identization' as she defines it, is tightly linked to what Melucci (1996) understood as those sets of common practices, codes of conduct, demands and statements that are then codified in shared 'texts'. Both scholars, together with the other scholars who have participated to the special issue, provide us with a critical, and thorough understanding of processes of collective identity construction on social media, by arguing that – although these platforms promote forms of media activism that are individualised and personalised – overall they are also crucial to the construction of a common 'we'.

These works are of central importance as they shed light on the fact that social media platforms, like other forms of media activism, become the space where collective identity is not only imagined but also practiced. The understanding of collective identity as defined by both imagination and practice can be found within the work of Diani and Della Porta (1999) who argued that within new social movements the construction of a common "we", is made possible both by imagination and the constant social participation in collective action (1999:85-88).

Although insightful, what is missing from this body of literature, is a careful exploration of how activists often use these platforms not only to negotiate the construction of a common "we" but also as tools to construct one's political "I".

## **Within and Beyond the Collective: The importance of Self-Representation in Social Media Activism**

In the literature discussed above, it is clear that scholars are aware of the fact that social media activism does not only enable processes of identity construction that are linked to the construction of a collective we, but also to intimate and personal processes of self-representation and construction (e.g Treré, 2015). Yet within the literature the discussion about processes of self-construction is somehow overshadowed by broader debates about collective identity.

In this paper, I wish to focus precisely on these processes of individual identity construction. In contrast to collective identity which can be understood as a collective process of negotiation in the construction and identification of a common 'we', I want to highlight those individual *processes of negotiation which works towards a self-construction, adaptation and incorporation to a specific common "we"*. In other words, my intention is to focus on the notion of political identity as related to the self.

The importance of individual processes of self-construction withing social movements emerges clearly in Diani and Della Porta (1999)'s analysis of three different women's collectives. According to the scholars, collective participation was a definer of the individual identification process, the individual was not only empowered by the reference to the collective 'we', but most importantly adapted itself to that 'we' in a constant process of self-construction. A key example that they advance is the one of Irma a member of a women's collective in Milan, who explained "For me, being part of a women's group is an essential influence, not only on my way of life, but also on my thinking. It is important to know yourself. The collective has died and be reborn many times over, along with my aspirations. But wherever I go I will always find a women's group".(Diani and Della Porta, 1999: 84).

It seems to me, therefore that any understanding of social media activism, should take into account not only how these technologies enable the construction of a 'common we' but also how through these technologies activists enact one's own sense of political 'self', which moves through time across different political collectives and realities;

In order to understand this process, it might be interesting to look at the anthropological literature on political identity. According to Escobar (1994) and Pratt

(2003) political identity is a relational concept, a concept, which defines both self-consciousness and participation to communities of imagination and practice. In contrast to other scholars who largely focused on the notion of identity practice, anthropologists were interested in ‘political identity’ as a complex human process. For them, political identity is not something carried as a definer of the individual, but a process of self-imagination, which is constantly constructed through the everyday practice in the encounter with others (Escobar, 2004:252).

This understanding of political identity is largely influenced by the belief that individuality is shaped by both an internalised cultural perception of the ‘person’ and a sense of distinctiveness and agency (Morris, 1994: 10-14). The difference between these two realms can be found in the famous Mauss’ understanding that human beings have a sense of self (*moi*) which is different from the culturally constructed understanding of the moral/collective person (*personne*) (eg. the good Christian, the good citizen, the good activist) and that both of these levels – contribute to the construction of people as persons. The self cannot be understood as an a priori category, but rather as a feeling of individuality and distinctiveness from the group (Cohen, 1985).

Anthropological theory is usually disregarded in communication studies, and in understanding self-representation scholars often refer to Goffman (1959) or Foucauldian models of subjectivity. However, the anthropological literature is particularly interesting because on the one hand it highlights processes of subjective construction, that are not only defined by domination and self-governance as Foucauldian models suggest or social interaction and performance on the other as Goffman would explain. The anthropological literature is interesting because it combines a bit of both by showing that self-construction is an intimate processes of negotiation with past and present personal experiences as well as with hegemonic meanings and cultural differences. This perspective can be very important in the study of social media activism.

In addition to this, and as we shall see later, the anthropological literature on social movements is particularly relevant to the study of social media activism for its attention to the concept of *identity narrative*, as developed by Pratt (2003). This understanding, as we shall see in the next two parts, sheds light on an important yet underinvestigated dimension of social media activism: the relationship between digital storytelling and the construction of political biographies.

## **Self-Representation on Social Media: The Question about Digital Storytelling and Voice**

In the last decade, within communication research we have seen the emergence of different studies that have focused on digital storytelling. The earliest works in this regard can be found in the volume edited by Lundby (2008). One of the big merits of the book lies in its ability to address both the creative dimension and the structural constraints of digital storytelling online. In fact, on the one hand some contributions focus on how personal narratives and authenticity have been transformed in the digital age (Hertzberg Kaare and Lundby, 2008) and how digital technologies have redefined the relationship between authorship and authority (Friedlander, 2008). On the other hand, other contributions explore how all digital stories are immersed within broader processes of mediatization (Lundby, 2008; Couldry, 2008) and are constrained by the affordances of social media technologies (Brake, 2008).

At the heart of these debates about online digital storytelling lied the question about the relationship between ‘voice’ and democratic emancipation, which as Couldry (2010) has argued is one of the key questions of our times. Within these debates scholars focused broadly on the relationship between digital storytelling and ‘alternative’ publics (Toft and Bennett 2008; Couldry, 2008) and argued that online storytelling is just one aspect of a broader transformation brought about by digital culture, where the ‘need to tell one story’ is simultaneously defined by both political economic structures in the digital age as well as broader emancipatory transformations (Thumin, 2012).

All these contributions provide us with important keys of analysis on digital storytelling and the construction of alternative publics. Yet what seems to be missing from this body of literature, is an in-depth exploration of the lived experience of political activist. This is thoroughly explored in the work of Vivienne (2011, 2016). Drawing on qualitative interviews, discourse analysis and ethnographic methodologies amongst queer activists, Vivienne makes a powerful claim about the importance of understanding the complex relationship between digital storytelling, activism and processes of identity construction. One of the main merits of her work is represented by the fact that drawing on philosophical and postmodern thought she understands identity as a contradictory and messy process, which is tightly linked to performance, and hence storytelling. In this framework, she demonstrates that digital media (and she



is broad in her definition) are the spaces for people to carry out – through digital storytelling - the work of constructing one’s own ‘networked identity’ by building bridges between multiple, co-existent, understandings of self, family and community (2016: 132-173).

Vivienne’s work is insightful and thought-provoking and I believe, that so far is the most important contribution to the analysis of the relationship between social media activism, self-representation and digital storytelling. Her work on ‘everyday activists’ is crucial because it shows that in the study of social media activism we need to develop an approach that departs from the appreciation that as Alleyne (2001) has argued not only life histories are used within political groups as a model of reference, but also political action is often related to a life project. This understanding lies at the very heart of social movement research, which argues that *collective repertoires* are internalised in persons (Tilly,1994:244). Such an approach would entail that we shed light on the fact that self-imagination and identity construction are tightly interconnected to the process of storytelling on social media.

### **Social Media Activism, Identity Narratives and the Everyday Construction of Political Biographies**

As it emerges from the above discussion, on the one hand contemporary debates about digital storytelling lack an in depth focus on the everyday, ethnographic realities of social movements. On the other hand, debates about social media activism lack a thorough understanding of the relationship between digital storytelling, self-representation and processes of political identity construction. I realised this gap in the literature as I was carrying out my own research. Between 2007 and 2013, I carried out a cross-cultural ethnographic analysis of three different activist groups. After working for a year with a political organisation, which was involved in the Labour movement in the UK, I carried out research with other two organisations: one embedded with the Italian Autonomous movement and one with the Spanish Environmental movement. In the last few years, I also engage in a digital ethnography of 10 activists’ Facebook profiles, and analysed how activists’ Facebook timelines enabled practices of self-construction through digital storytelling.

My own research revealed that through social media, activists constructed a personal narrative, which was highly political. On the one hand, they used these platforms to show their participation to collective initiatives and to negotiate

collective meanings and codes (Kavada, 2015; Trere, 2015). On the other hand, they used these platforms to frame their personal experiences in political terms. It was by looking at these two different and messy processes of self-construction, which required the internalisation, adaptation and self-imagination (Escobar, 2014) of collective political narratives that I came to the conclusion that on social media, activists were constructing a political biography through digital storytelling.

The concept of *political biography* is largely influenced by Pratt's concept of *identity narrative*. Pratt (2003) argued that in the study of social movements and political activism, we have much to gain if we approach the understanding of identity as *narrative* and appreciate how this narrative develops on two different, albeit interconnected, axes. On the one hand, identity narratives are constructed through the *hierarchical axis*, which suggests who 'we' are, through opposition and the creation of the *other*. On the other hand, identity narratives are constructed through the *biographical axis*, which establishes who people are through the medium of time and by looking at personal experience (2003:10)

My research revealed that on the Facebook timelines, these two axes interconnected and overlapped. The *hierarchical axis* of the narrative was constructed through an everyday process of association to or disassociation from specific political collectives, issues or events. This finding emerged very well in the Facebook timeline of Dario<sup>1</sup>, an activist engaged in environmental politics in Spain as well as with LGBTQ collectives. Dario's Facebook timeline was constructed through a variety of different - at times incoherent and accidental - posts which highlighted his praise, enthusiasm and support for the multiple activities and events of different political groups. The timeline also included a self-representation of his own participation to specific direct actions, demonstrations and events. What I found particularly interesting of these digital practises is the fact that by posting comments and photos on Facebook, as well as by sharing links and information, Dario effectively constructed his sense of belonging to the different political collectives he was part of. At the same time, he distanced himself from the work of 'other' collectives. This process of inclusion and 'othering' was reinforced by the comments and interactions with other activists who belonged to the groups in question. This discursive dimension of his identity narrative, therefore, speaks directly to Pratt's (2003)

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<sup>1</sup> Fictional name to protect the participant's anonymity.

understanding of hierarchical axis of political identity, whereby people construct who they are with reference to the collective and to the construction of the 'other'.

Dario's social media use also highlighted that he not only constructed his online selves in relation to the collectives they belonged to (hierarchical axis), but also used these online platforms to reflect upon his daily personal experiences, family life, and early childhood in a political way (biographical axis). This was a common practice shared amongst the other activists as well. There were multiple ways in which activists constructed the *biographical axis* of their identity narratives. As argued elsewhere in greater detail (Barassi, forthcoming) activists used social media platforms to re-think their childhood experiences, and everyday family relations in political terms. Hence they either uploaded old images of childhood, and created a textual narrative around this images that was highly political or they posted images of their family members and discursively constructed these images by presenting their family members as political and moral agents. The construction of the biographical axis of the identity narrative, however, was not only defined by practices of self-construction in relation to one's own childhood and family life but also in relation to everyday personal experiences. Activists discussed how they experienced their everyday, mundane chores, at the post office or at work in a political way. Alternately they reflected on what they witnessed on the streets, in shopping centres or on their own day-to-day consumer habits. All these personal experiences were discursively framed in relation to their sense of political self and as a reinforcement of their political values.

My research revealed that on social media activists brought together different dimensions of their complex political identities. This finding relates well to Vivienne's argument that digital storytelling is often used to do the 'work of network identity' and hence build bridges between multiple, co-existent, understandings of self, family and community (2016: 132-173). Yet my research, which drew on Pratt's (2003) concept of 'identity narrative', brought Vivienne's (2016) understanding a bit further. In fact, by focusing on the hierarchical vs biographical aspects of identity narrative construction, it showed that the production of one's own networked identity involves two very different processes of digital storytelling and meaning construction and that through this dynamic interplay activists constructed their 'political

biography' on social media, a digital and widely public auto-biographical story of their political self.

The concept of 'political biography', therefore enables us to appreciate the permeability and social impact of online digital storytelling amongst activists. Political biographies, as shown, are largely shaped through the same process as the identity narratives described by Pratt (2003). However, according to Pratt (2003) identity narrative is an internal process of self-construction or self-narration through oral history. This implies that, in the majority of cases, no trace is left behind, and one could constantly re-create his or her own identity narrative. The same cannot be said about the construction of political biographies on social media that become digital artefacts which define activists political identities. Of course social media posts can be deleted or edited, but my research revealed that this is seldomly the case and that if one wanted could research almost 10 years of political posts shared by activists. Part of the reason for keeping this archive, as I was told by Mark, an activist engaged in the autonomous movement in Milan 'this is my story, this is my life'. Hence when thinking about political biographies on social media we need to appreciate them for their personal and affective dimension, which is linked to one's own sense of agency and distinctiveness as well as to the actualisation of a sense of creative self. At the same time, we need to perceive these as public narratives that can be shared analysed, exploited and remediated and that are open to public scrutiny and surveillance.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that there two fundamental characteristics that differentiate social media activism from other forms of media activism: the personalisation and visibility of political participation. Research on social media activism has largely focused on the complex ways in which personalisation and visibility of political action have transformed collective mobilisation and the construction of collective identity. However, as this chapter has argued, within current research on social media activism little attention has been placed on the complex relationship between social media activism, digital storytelling and processes of self-construction. The aim of this chapter was to address this gap.

The chapter brought together the communication literature on digital storytelling and voice with the anthropological literature on the person and political identity. It has shown that, through social media, activists develop a complex personal

narrative that is simultaneously shaped by processes of identification and distancing to political groups as well as by processes of meaning construction of their own biographical experiences. This dynamic interplay of personal data flows enables the construction of their ‘political biography’ making political beliefs, opinions and actions widely public. Whilst the aim of this chapter was to focus mostly on how political biographies are constructed through social media activism, there are critical questions that emerge on the broader political and social implications of these narratives on the commercial Web. As argued elsewhere (Barassi, 2016), what is becoming clear is that these personal data flows online are tightly linked to processes of digital profiling (Elmer, 2004) and, as Gangadharan (2012, 2015) has argued, digital profiling can have a fundamental and often discriminatory impact on social minorities. Hence, after appreciating the relationship between social media activism and the construction of political biographies as we did in this chapter, we should start tackling critical questions on the impacts these narratives can have on the political profiling and discrimination of activists.

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