

Populism and the changing media landscape:
Understanding the rise of the Five Star Movement in Italy

By

Eugenio Pazzini
BA, University of Portsmouth, 2014

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Supervisory Committee

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Supervisory Committee

Oliver Schmidtke, Department of Political Science
Supervisor

Valerie D'Erman, Department of Political Science
Departmental Member

Abstract

The thesis develops an understanding of the relationship between populism and the changes in the media landscape brought about by the advent of web 2.0. Its aim is to explain the rapid emergence of the Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement in Italy. A contextual analysis of the structures of opportunities reveals that the key to understand the 'success' of 5SM lays in the fact that the political actor fully exploited the affordances of the Web 2.0, making them resonate with the 'thin' ideology of populism. The advent of web 2.0 can then benefit political actors employing a populist ideology in three ways; enhancing the declining trust and separation between people and the political establishment, providing a seemingly more direct form of communication with the electorate and providing a new way of constructing the 'people' of populism through the networks.

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Introduction

During the past 20 years, and increasingly since the global economic crisis of 2008, a number of political actors challenging the status quo came to prominence in the western world from diverse national backgrounds and with different ideologies and discourses ranging from extreme right to extreme left. Academics have widely debated the emergence of such political actors and linked it to a number of problematic tendencies culpable of strengthening a separation of the political class from its base.

For instance, Peter Mair (2002, p. 89) noted how all western European countries showed converging trends such as declining party membership and identification, declining voter turnout, and increasing volatility of the vote, suggesting the worrying hypothesis that political parties were losing their representative functions. To this scenario, Kriesi (2014, p. 361) added the importance of structural changes involving the supra-national level and the impacts of globalization in the increasing divorce between policy makers and the population. Several studies of political economy reiterate the relevance of the supra-national level and associate such a crisis of democracy to the ongoing stagnation, rising inequality and unemployment associated with neoliberal globalization, the financialization of capital, the increasing push towards deregulation and ultimately the global financial crisis (Öniş, 2017, p. 2). Moreover, the implications of such global level activity are shaped by the effects of the media on politics influencing the shifting balance of the party functions with increasingly diverse ways of linking voters with the politicians (Kriesi, 2014, p. 365). Nonetheless, the fact that some countries produced populist actors with a higher constancy than others suggests that

domestic factors also interfere with all the above trends.

This is surely the case with Italy. In fact, since the 1990s many political scientists have argued that the country provided an especially fertile ground for populism, or even a populist paradise, and is thus a suitable case study for the analysis of such phenomena with actors such as the Northern League and Silvio Berlusconi (Tarchi, 2015; Verbeek & Zaslove, 2016). Within this context, the most recent mobilization is represented by the comedian Beppe Grillo and his related Five Star Movement (5SM).

Grillo was already a well-known public figure before coming to politics (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2013, p. 429). In 2005 he established his blog, through which most of his political campaigns would take shape. He started his political activity, completely ignored by the mainstream media (Pepe & Di Gennaro, 2009, p. 2), with his ‘V-days’ (Fuck-off days) rallies in 2007 (V-day, 2007, Sept. 2) where he began collecting signatures for a referendum on public financing and censorship (Biorcio & Natale, 2013, p. 80). In October 2009 he founded the 5SM via his online blog where he announced his will to ‘rebuild Italy from the bottom up’ and required that the members would have not previously joined a political party (Grillo, 2009).

In the following year’s regional election the 5SM participated in five regions, gaining over half a million votes. In 2011, they gained 75 municipalities, including 9.5 percent of the vote in Bologna (Barlett, Froio, Littler, & McDonnell, 2013, p. 4). These initial successes increased in the local elections of 2012, when the movement achieved impressive results in northern regions, with peaks of around 20 percent in regions such as Emilia-Romagna and Veneto; and, against all predictions, gained an incredible 18.2 percent in southern regions like Sicily (Barlett, Froio, Littler, & McDonnell, 2013, p. 4).

The general elections of 24 February of 2013 were 5SM's main victory: it captured a massive 25.5 percent of the Italian electorate, winning 109 seats in parliament and 54 deputies in the Senate of the Republic.

This attracted worldwide attention as the movement, 'dangerous' and 'unconventional' (The Economist, 2 Mar, 2013), seemed to be peculiar in the electoral history of western democracies (Borreca, 2013, p. 8); another product of the 'Italian anomaly' (Lazar, 2013, p. 317)¹. The 5SM was the first candidate party in representative democracies to achieve such a result at the first national elections of 2013. From then onwards the Five Star Movement has attracted attention from various observers for a number of peculiar features. These are: a rather radical ideology that mixes aspects of populism and cyber-libertarianism calling for direct democracy through the net (Deseriis, 2017, p. 1; Natale & Ballatore, 2014, p.105); its 'post-ideological' claims to have gone past right and left divisions; the anti-systemic rhetoric that aggressively attacks the two 'castes' of politicians and 'traditional media' (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2013, p. 436); and a very peculiar organizational structure constructed through the new online media of communication, with both vertical and horizontal elements (Florida & Vignati, 2013), resembling features of both political parties and social movements (Diamanti, 2014).

Given the undoubted relevance of such a political actor to both the Italian and international context of crisis of democracy, the thesis will research an explanation for

¹ Critics of the Italian political system used the word 'anomaly' overtime to refer to a number of different problems, often lamenting an alleged lack of maturity and modernity of the country. Examples of 'anomalies' can be traced down to topics such as: the absence of a bourgeois revolution, a troubled national identity and a difficult relationship with the Italian state, strong regional autonomy, early experiences with fascism, the issue of development and of the 'Mezzogiorno', the presence of organized crime and recurring political crises over the last 30 years.

the emergence of the 5SM. After identifying the opportunity structure of a contemporary Italy ridden by the consequences of the global economic crisis and its ongoing structural issues, the gaze of the research will turn to the role played by the traditional mass media in contrast with the emerging ‘new media’ of Web 2.0. Indeed, while the structure of opportunities (political and discursive) suggests a general openness of the Italian party system to populist actors it cannot fully explain why it was specifically the 5SM that responded to the situation. To accomplish such a task, then, the thesis proposes a focus on the political, discursive and media opportunity structure.

Therefore the investigation unfolds along the features that made the social actor stand out as unconventional within the traditional western party systems; its use of populism and of the ‘new media’. It should be noted that populism will be defined as a ‘thin ideology’ comprised of a restricted core of ideas and a narrow set of concepts that distinguish itself from wider theoretical paradigm of ‘thick’ ideologies (Mudde, 2004). This entails a people-centric aspect, an anti-elitist one and a view that invokes greater power for the ‘people’. By ‘new media’ the paper refers to the impacts that Web 2.0 had on the media landscape at a communicative level. Such focus is important not only as it will provide an understanding of the 5SM, but also because it sheds light on one of the least discussed facets of the popular topic of populism; the use of the ‘new media’. In fact, while the relationship between populism and the mass media has been well explored, the same cannot be said for the new media of communication.

This thesis will then argue that the key to understanding the emergence of Beppe Grillo and the 5SM lays in the fact that the comedian fully exploited the affordances of the Web 2.0, making them resonate with the thin ideology of populism. Firstly,

contrasting the declining trust towards the political establishment and the mass media, from 2005 and with the help of ‘Casaleggio Associati’, the comedian established his blog as a source of counter-information. Secondly, he used the web to construct his ‘cyber-populist’ ideology of opposition towards the Italian party system as well as the tool of communication. Lastly, the decentralized organization of the party also depended on the use of the web.

It follows that by demonstrating that the web was key in the ‘success’ of the 5SM, one can also infer that Web 2.0 provides potential new ground for populist entrepreneurs to exploit. However, to avoid the rather common but reductionist analysis of communication that focuses more on the medium than on the content, this has to be put into its context. Thus, the argument that the success of the actors not only coincided with a new media landscape but also with a favorable political opportunity structure that give such technology its meaning in context.

The given research question will thus be structured into three chapters. The first chapter will provide conceptual clarity as to the relationship between populism and ‘new media’ and it will do so with the help of six subsections. The first one will define populism as a ‘thin ideology’ as well as understanding its rise as a response to the contemporary historical period and the insecurities brought about by neoliberal globalization. The second section will identify the qualitative changes of the new multidirectional and multilevel communicative sphere brought about by new technologies, and especially Web 2.0, as well as their risks. The third section will then relate the chapter with wider theoretical trends and thus investigate the impacts of the

new technologies at the level of the more autonomous individual as well as in the declining trust in political institutions.

The remaining three sub-sections of the chapter will then investigate the relationship between ‘new media’ and populism. The fourth one will show how, given the peculiar historical moment, Web 2.0 is a facilitator of a suspicious mindset that incrementally promotes a generalized mistrust towards the political establishment. The fifth one will argue that, from the point of view of communication, social networks provide a fictitious idea of directedness as politicians can directly speak to the base. This could favor populists that usually want to be seen as refusing the mediation of traditional parties and media. The last sub-section will show how, after the financial crisis, the ‘thin ideology’ of populism has been associated by a number of movements to cyber libertarian discourses. Here the communicative architecture of Web 2.0 has been made to resonate with the features of populism.

The second chapter will then proceed with an analysis of the case study of the paper and it will examine the political, discursive and media opportunity structure. It will commence with a clarification of the concepts of the ‘Political Opportunity Structure’ (POS), ‘Discursive Opportunity Structure’ (DOS) and ‘Media Opportunity Structure’ (MOS) that will be used to analyze the case study. The POS, with its focus on the nature of existing cleavages in society; the formal institutional structure of the state; the information strategies of elites vis-à-vis their challengers; and power relations within the party system and/or alliance structures, unveil important structural variables of the Italian party system. These aspects motivated the common perception of mistrust towards the Italian party system which constantly rendered the DOS favourable for the diffusion of

the discourse of '*partitocrazia*'.² The last section of the chapter will however argue that the above set of variables do not suffice to fully explain why it was specifically the 5SM that emerged. My suggestion is to employ a MOS. Changes in the media landscape, namely the advent of the 'new media', challenged the tight control of Berlusconi on information and over time produced new opportunities. Grillo was able to seize them better than anybody else in the peninsula.

Consequently, the third chapter will expand on the way Grillo exploited such opportunities. The chapter develops into three main sections. The first one will analyze how the 5SM depicts itself as a non-political actor, and it applies its ideology of cyber-populism to the Italian context. The internet here is used as the discursive glue that holds together the 'people', juxtaposing it to the 'elites' which are instead fond on mass media. The second and longer section of the chapter will focus on the mobilization repertoire of the 5SM. First, Grillo and Casaleggio fully understood the trend of declining trust towards traditional media and established parties and constructed the blog as a reliable source of counter-information as early as 2005. Second, most of the political communication of the 5SM happened online and offline, and only after 2013 did members of the 5SM start appearing on the mass media and releasing interviews. Thirdly, the 5SM presented some innovative features of mobilization that to some extent put into practice the ideology of online democracy. The *Movimento* shows a very loose organization with decentralized and horizontal features at the local level that contrasts with the vertical aspects visible mainly in the fact that Grillo owns the logo of the Five

² *Partitocrazia* here refers to a critique originally developed in liberal circles during the post-war period in Italy, denouncing clientelism and social advantages given to members of the two major mass parties of the time, the Christian Democrats (DC) and the Partito Comunista (PC). According to this critique the mass parties were dominating the Italian state and political life in general.

Star Movement. Arguably, the openness and decentralization of the 5SM made a number of activists feel empowered which was then key for the consolidation of their support. A third section will then investigate how the *Movimento* performed in practice in the national arena as well as observe the changing electoral composition of its electorate. This is followed by a concluding discussion.

Chapter 1: Populism and the new media

Populism has been on the rise for the past thirty years and many assume that part of this success lies in the relationship with the media (Moffitt, 2016, p. 70). Populist actors are often media savvy and able to manipulate media channels, while media, craving wider audiences, usually welcomes the provocative and therefore ‘entertaining’ populists (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 52). Nevertheless, the academic literature on this topic is rather piecemeal. Firstly, being mainly case-study-based literature, there is no wider theoretical work highlighting general trends (Moffitt, 2016, p.70). Secondly, it mostly deals with the ‘old’ media of mass-communication. This is of particular importance, especially in the light of the contemporary world, where the advent of new media such as Web 2.0, the digitalization of most forms of mass communication and of technologies such as smartphones, permeates each aspect of contemporary lives and has changed the dynamics in which the public communicates (Deuze, 2011, p. 137).

In addition, the importance of contemporary political events critically reinforces the need for understanding the relationship between these ‘new media’ and populism. For instance, Web 2.0 has been key to the success of a number of populist actors, including the case study of this paper: the Five Star Movement (5SM) in Italy. Therefore, there is a relevant lacuna in academic research when it comes to the ‘new media’ (Moffitt, 2016, p. 70). The main goal of this chapter is to investigate if populism has been empowered by changes in the media landscape, on the one hand, and how such populist actors have used the media for their political mobilization, on the other.

It is important to specify that the term ‘media changes’ encapsulates more than just Web 2.0. These ‘new media’ include smartphones, wireless technologies, increased

broadband capacity, innovative open-source software, enhanced computer graphics and three-dimensional virtual spaces, to name but a few. It is, however, Web 2.0 with its technologies, devices and application supporting the proliferation of social spaces on the net that has radically changed the way communication happens (Castells, 2009, p. 65). While the rapid advent of the new ‘semantic’ Web 3.0 might bring further innovations to communicative habits once again, the paper will focus mainly on Web 2.0. This is because the effects of Web 3.0 on communication are still to be fully determined (Castells, 2009, p. 64). Moreover, the case study analyzed below was born in 2009, when concepts such as web 3.0 and the semantic web were still unheard of.

This first conceptual chapter will set the theoretical framework necessary to develop the later discussion in the case study. I will argue that Web 2.0, along with its communicative architecture, has the potential to provide new grounds for populist entrepreneurs to utilize. The argument is threefold: First, Web 2.0 reproduces and amplifies individual autonomy and a characteristic reflexive way of thinking. This greatly widens the distance between ordinary citizens, the political establishment and traditional media. Second, from the point of view of communication, social networks provide a fictitious idea of directness as politicians can directly speak to the base. This could favor populists that usually want to look as if refusing the mediation of traditional parties and media. And third, after the global crisis, a number of movements associated the ‘thin ideology’ of populism with cyber-libertarian discourses. Examples here include the 5SM in Italy, the Partido X in Spain and the pirate parties in Northern Europe. Echoes of it can however be found also in certain discourse of mass mobilization such as Occupy and the Indignados and Podemos in Spain. Here the communicative architecture of Web 2.0 has

been made to resonate with the features of populism. Notwithstanding its contradictions, such development has so far provided interesting political experiments that are worth exploring.

This chapter develops into six sections. The first two will provide a definition of populism and an understanding of what the changes in the media landscape consist in. The third section will then analyze how such changes affected the individual and society, a necessary step to fully grasp the relationship with populism. The remaining three parts develop the arguments above and investigate the three levels of interaction between populism and the ‘new media’. Part four shows how, in a climate of mistrust, the ‘new media’ acquires the meta-function of fostering detachment with the establishment, while the fifth part analyzes the level of political communication and how the directedness of ‘new media’ can be made to resonate with polarized message of populism. However, mainstream and populist parties alike now employ such style, so that solely focusing on this side can lead to confusing results. In the sixth and last part, the paper argues that those who fully exploited the affordances of ‘new media’ are the cyber-populists that combine cyber-libertarian discourses with populism.

Defining populism

Defining populism however is not an easy task. To begin with, an initial obstacle is the fact that the term is routinely used in public discourses in a pejorative sense as irrational and anti-democratic. Some contend that it is a pathology of democracy, others argue that it is the mobilization of resentment (Betz, 1994), while some others consider populism as the opposite of the rational liberal politics of consensus (Hofstadter, 1964). Moreover, in

the last two decades academics used the term to refer to the number of emerging far right xenophobic parties such as the Northern League in Italy, the English Defense League, the National Front in France, and Jobbik in Hungary. Surely, the ethno cultural underpinnings behind such right-wing populisms are important; however, the ethno-cultural perspective does not take into consideration the existence of left-wing populism.

The latter is traditionally popular in Latin America but today is well visible in Europe and North America too, with political actors such as Syriza, Podemos, Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn. Furthermore, there are also a number of unaligned populisms such as the Five Star Movement in Italy today. Thus, to consider the concept in its entirety one firstly needs to step back from such intellectual prejudices. Populism will then be considered as a neutral term that can develop in both regressive and progressive directions. Such point of departure however discloses a second obstacle.

Scholars in fact often accuse populism of being vague and lacking a coherent definitional basis (Woods, 2014, p. 1). Firstly, the term has been applied to very diverse political phenomena. For instance, many date a first usage of the term to describe the *Narodniki* of the last decades of 19th century Russia: intellectuals attracted by the virtues of the humble people living in farmers' communities in the countryside (Moffitt, 2016, p. 13). The concept was also used to refer to the People's Party in southern United States addressing farmers' anxieties in the early 20th century. From these early 'agrarian populisms', the term continued to attract an increasing interest and, by the late 1950s, became a label addressing a wider array of political phenomena such as McCarthyism in Britain among others (Moffitt, 2016, p.15). Ultimately, in last thirty years, the usage of the term exploded with the emergence of a number of anti-establishment actors becoming

the controversial concept that this paper attempts to analyze. Nonetheless, if one digs beneath the many diverging definitions, it then becomes possible to find a number of recurring themes (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Woods, 2014, p. 3).

Jagers and Walgrave note that most forms of populism always refer to the ‘people’, and populists justify their actions by either appealing to or identifying with such unitary blocks of the ‘people’, as well as by showing an antagonistic anti-elite disposition (2007, p. 322). One way of disentangling the conceptual node is to define populism as a political style, in essence detaching the discursive practices from any content (Moffitt, 2016; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). On the other hand, the notion of style seems reductive as it is potentially applicable to any phenomena as a synonym of demagogy. A number of scholars are in fact eager to conceptualize populism as more than a political style.

In this regard, Zanatta (2004) argues that throughout history populism emerged as a response to epochal changes: from the erosion of the ancient order, be that the colonial, the hierarchical or paternalist orders; or by triggering the fractures of modernity such as the social question, the conflict between labour and capital; or the separation between religious and secular powers (Zanatta, 2004, p. 380). In these instances populist actors responded, whether more or less legitimately, towards a change felt unpleasant by large parts of the population. Furthermore, Zanatta identifies a common trait of populism throughout a history he defines as a ‘cosmology’, a popular worldview that puts the ‘common’ man at the centre, and that “*dates back to when societies were imbued with the sacred*” (Zanatta, 2013, p. 9). Despite the rather ambitious scope of such historical

approach, many other contemporary interpretations agree in attributing to the concept more content than a mere political style and demagogy.

For instance, Laclau's theoretical milestone (2005) finds an ontological substance to populism that can be traced back throughout history. For him populism is a political logic, the royal road to the political, which articulates discursively a number of different demands into one empty signifier in order to construct a united subject such as 'the people'. Such unitary block is subsequently mobilized against the unresponsive groups, institutions and/or 'evil others' that leave such demands unsatisfied. Indeed, the major political function of populism, for Laclau, is the creation of a rupture with the hegemonic order. Moreover, such 'logic' is present to different degrees in most political phenomena. On the other hand, many contend that the 'empty signifier' within which the demands are symbolized and articulated into one entity is too broad and its 'emptiness' risks directing focus onto style rather than its substance (Gerbaudo, 2017b; Woods, 2014). Moreover, Laclau, and most of those building on his linguistic approach, often overlook the role of the media (Moffitt, 2016, p. 72; Simons, 2011, p. 201), which is central to this paper.

Gerbaudo (2017b, p. 49) also rejects the discursive and stylistic definition of populism and prefers to attribute a political content to it. He argues that, in our present historical circumstances, populism is an expression of a specific political content that is at odds with the neoliberal turn of world politics that has dominated the last three decades. In his view, both right and left wing populism demand popular sovereignty, which entails a recuperation of territorial sovereignty as a base for self-government in response to the damage of neoliberal globalization (2017b, p. 49). At the core of the demands of these actors lies the perception that neoliberal globalization, with its borderless and

interconnected planet, created a risky and insecure place where there is no control nor regulation, which is instead traversed by flows of capital, services and people irrespective of local nations and traditions. In the European context this often takes the forms of opposition to the European Union accused of having reduced national sovereignty.

While the above statement was usually employed by the populist right, after the popular wave that followed the economic crisis of 2008, a number of populist actors from the left, such as Podemos, Syriza, Sanders, Corbyn, have employed a populist narrative (Gerbaudo, 2017b, p.50). McCormick (2017) argues that populism is the “*cry of pain*” of modern representative democracies but could also be the “*necessary vehicle to realize their effective reforms*” (p. 2) towards a more democratic process. It is an inevitable occurrence in regimes that adhere to democracy but for overextended periods have neglected the basic principle of ruling to their populations.

Hence, considering all the above, it seems appropriate to attribute to populism a more consistent core than mere style (Moffitt, 2016; Moffit & Tormey, 2014) and/or demagoguery. Along these lines, it is more appealing to define populism as presenting an ideological core. Most notably, Mudde (2007, p. 16) defines populism as a ‘thin’ centered ideology. Building on Freedman (1996), ‘thin’ - as opposed to ‘thick’ - ideologies only present a restricted core of a few limited concepts. The ‘thick’ ones normally show wide structural frameworks which give meaning to a number of concepts and stay consistent over a relatively long period of time (Mudde, 2007, p. 17). More specifically, ‘thick’ or ‘comprehensive’ political ideologies ‘*contain particular interpretations and configurations of all the major political concepts attached to a general plan of public*

policy that a specific society requires' (Freeden, 1998, p. 750). Nonetheless, ideologies are not all 'thick', as concepts are not eternally connected to a specific context and meaning. Freeden (1998) argues that concepts, as well as ideologies, do have elements that are not eliminable, some core ideas that keep appearing in all the known usages of the term over time. These core ideas are then combined with contingent elements creating the 'thickness' of a specific ideology.

However, there can also be 'thin' ideologies with a morphological structure limited to a set of core concepts. These, being core and decontested from the social environment, are unable to provide by themselves a '*reasonably broad, if not comprehensive, range of answers to the political questions that societies generate*' (Freeden, 1998, p. 750). It is here that Mudde (2007, p. 17) locates the 'thin' ideology of populism, which in fact does not provide any roadmaps on how to achieve the 'sovereignty of the people' while it has wide applicability.

Emerging at times of systemic changes or crisis that are felt as hostile by significant parts of the population, the thin ideology seeks to remedy such demands by giving primary decision-making power to the will of the 'people'. This social subject is articulated as one and united, and it is juxtaposed to some antagonistic groups, normally an oligarchy, an elite or some dangerous 'others' that have subjugated the 'people' in a distinction that reinforces this rupture. This distinction is also usually accompanied by normative statements, as the people are portrayed as having the good qualities of hard-working citizens, while the enemy is seen as evil, selfish, exploitative and conspiring. The populist actors normally do not claim to represent the excluded or subordinated group, but to be part of it. Indeed, they gain their legitimacy from this connection to the

popular will, by claiming to embody the popular will (Tarchi, 2015, p.55). Furthermore, by claiming to express the '*volonté générale*' of a subjugated majority, populism often asserts to bypass forms of mediation and representation.

At the same time, populism is not an unmitigated good (McCormick, 2017). A recurring dilemma is that populism often reproduces what it accuses the established system of doing, that is, it gives power to other groups besides the people in the name of people (often a charismatic leader or a political party). Indeed, citizens believe they can trust fellow citizens who supposedly deal with the popular demand on their behalf. History has however shown that often such groups pursue their specific interests instead. In such cases, populism surely undermines democratic practices. McCormick (2017) however argues that it is not enough to dismiss populism today and that one way of evaluating the progressiveness or its reactionary soul could be to examine whether such an actor launches institutional reforms to facilitate the self-ruling of the citizens.

In sum, one can then extrapolate three traits that compose a populist ideology. It firstly includes a positive image of the unitary and monolithic people, thus being (1) people-centered. Secondly, it offers a negative view of the ruling elites, normally blamed for the ongoing problem, therefore being anti-elitist (2). Thirdly, there has to be a vision of the allocation of power invoking greater sovereignty for such 'people' (3). This in turn means that such unitary block can reject the constitutionalist division of powers between the many institutions as well as the right of minorities if they are not part of such people. A political communication that purports to indicate a populist ideology should portray these three features (Wirth et al, 2016).

For instance, a political communication expressing a populist ideology would,

over time, showcase statements regarding the unity of the people, defining its boundaries and stressing its virtues as well as highlighting negative feelings toward the ruling elites and demanding greater sovereignty for the people (Wirth et al., 2016). A further distinction shall be made in terms of the communication style, which refers to the way content is presented.

Here the connection between a populist style and a populist ideology is even looser. In fact, many mainstream actors use a populist style to make a message more appealing and interesting. For instance, one might use simplification, emotional and colloquial language to stress vicinity with the ‘people’, as well as use dramatization, black and white rhetoric and absolutism to stress the Manichean view of society. Finally, one can induce the claim to people’s sovereignty with references to the wisdom of the common man, common sense and simple decisions (Wirth et al, 2016). A communication strategy that shows support only for one of the features, such as the many mainstream actors employing a people-centered approach, does not qualify as populist. This is not a new trend and it has been occurring for decades.

The changes in the media landscape

Having put forward a definition and an understanding of populism, the chapter can move into an analysis of the exact extent of the changes that the ‘new media’ brought to the media landscape. As mentioned above, the term changes refers to the technological advancements of the last 10 to 15 years that have produced tools which challenged the primacy of the mass media as a tool of communication and ultimately impacted the communicative sphere. These range from Web 2.0, the digitalization of most forms of

mass communication, and of technologies such as smartphones, amongst others. For the political communication scope of the paper however, the critical tool in determining the qualitative difference of such shift is the Web 2.0.

The latter consists in “*web-based platforms that predominantly support online social networking, online community building, maintenance, collaborative information production and sharing, user-generated content production, diffusion and consumption*” (Fuchs et al., 2011, p. 3). Examples here revolve around social media, software and networks that have emerged in the last 10 to 15 years, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Castells suggested that, given the amount of material shared on a daily basis, we can consider a new form of mass socialized communication: ‘*mass-self communication*’ (2007, p. 248).

As with tools of mass communication, this new type of communication can reach a global audience but its own users generate the content (Castells, 2007, p. 249). In practice, the quality of the content involves a radically different relationship with the audience. With television for instance, professionals in the field of communication determine what to report, how and from what angle using techniques such as agenda setting, framing, priming and indexing for instance. Therefore, the message is created on one side, sent and received on the other side by the spectators through the screen (Castells, 2009, p. 157). Thus, it is a rather one-dimensional tool, as the audience receives the message. While a comprehensive analysis of television would result in a more complex picture than that—Eco (in Castells, 2009, p. 127) showed that audiences are never helplessly manipulated, as it might seem, but always interpreting and adding their

own codes and sub codes to the ones sent by the senders—with Web 2.0, the dynamic of such communicative practices changed radically.

The thesis asserts that the centrality of user-generated content represents the qualitative difference of this new form of communication. The central figure of such media landscape is not anymore just a sender or receiver, it is both concurrently (Castells, 2009, p. 130). Any individual with internet access can now create content and share it with a public or private audience. Such shared content is, firstly, multidirectional. Senders/receivers do not necessarily have to interact with each other and will not necessarily receive replies by the other recipient of the message as all these texts are published online. Nonetheless, the message could go viral and has the potential of reaching a global audience. Communication now is thus shared, multidimensional and multimodal. It is shared and multidirectional because the horizontal networks of communication on the internet allow one to produce and share content in many directions. It can be multimodal as one can share different types of media. These can range from text to images, memes to video and to the previous internet 1.0 and the open source contribution to software and ideas. It can be multichannel as it is transmitted through different technological tools and different organizational arrangements (for instance those messages that go through the internet, television, smartphones, radio or newspapers).

Furthermore, Castells (2009, p. 130), building on Eco and others, provides an exhaustive account of how mass-self communication enhances the autonomy of the individual. The recipient has to interpret the message they receive from this multidirectional environment, often not knowing the sender, thus incapable of evaluating

the different purposes and meaning that the sender might have attributed to a message. In fact, the sender shares messages with a more or less conscious idea of their audience.

Ultimately, such meaning is negotiated according to one's own codes and sub codes of meaning as opposed to those of the sender. Ultimately, all these communicative subjects interact with each other creating networks of communication with shared meaning.

Consequently, the audience in times of Web 2.0 is a "creative audience" (Castells, 2009, p. 132).

The aforementioned reveals the layers of complexity of this form of communication, as opposed to the previous form in which one had to negotiate meaning only in the situation of receiving information from the television. It follows that people became personally more aware of the directions and meaning behind information when they became producers. Furthermore, the advent of such platforms happened in concomitance with the digitalization of media. The result is that each media source, from the television channel to the newspaper, has become digitalized and their online presence has acquired an increasing status of importance. Therefore, any person with internet access now can access a great number of sources that are all next door to each other. At one level, this new media landscape complements and supplements the older forms of communication by bringing additional sources of information. At another level, the web becomes a means of information on its own, connecting citizens in an entirely different way (Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 2011, p. 50). Effectively, it fosters the already existing trends of autonomization: individuals can affirm even more easily their autonomy versus societal customs and institutions and the previous forms of media (Castells, 2009, p. 129; Deuze, 2011, p.142).

For instance, Web 2.0 can facilitate the diffusion of self-governing and collaborating practices that already existed with Web 1.0 and the Free and Open Source Software's development process. In addition, the multimodality of Web 2.0 allows for greater flexibility, therefore supporting the self-management of any chosen activity in any space. Hence, the consumer has become an active producer, a 'prosumer', due to the practices of participation such as editing, producing and distributing. Such a consumer is now an active creator, with a capacity to contribute and share multiple visions of the world they live in, with numerous others and with an increased ability to multitask and accomplish several communication tasks concurrently (Castells, 2009, p. 134).

In sum, these 'new media' can be said to facilitate an independent information seeking experience of its users; a key argument for this research. Such autonomy however does not mean that there are forms of control on Web 2.0. In fact, a number of scholars show how surveillance intended as the gathering of data, has developed rapidly online (Lyon, 2010). The concept involves a number of techniques of monitoring, policing, securing and marketing. For instance, major digital companies are able not only to gather data and create algorithms of consumers' behavior but can also spin their own search engines according to specific algorithmic principles. While this aspect of the internet does not affect directly the communicative realm of Web 2.0 and its relationship with populism, it still remains a significant trend as will be shown below.

The impacts of the 'new media' on the individual and society

At this stage, the question moves to how the multi-directionality and autonomy of the information gathering experience of the new media has impacted the growth of populism.

To accomplish such a task one should place the advent of such ‘new media’ within the specific socio-cultural dynamics of the contemporary historical conjuncture. It will appear that the changing media sphere facilitated the construction of a climate that has proven to be fertile ground for populist entrepreneurs as opposed to established political parties. Such an environment is characterized by a suspicious way of thinking and a growing of mistrust towards official information and media and consequently the political establishment. The trends are however not new, and the ‘new media’ amplified existing trends that have favoured a political space where anti-establishment actors can infiltrate, as well as a society more receptive to messages critical of mainstream views. Thus, the first point of contact of the ‘new media’ with populism lies at the level of opportunity structure, playing in favour of the detachment of people from the establishment.

To begin with, this way of thinking could be related to the type of reflexive state of mind that was already diagnosed decades ago as engrained to ‘late modernity’ and ‘postmodernity’. In this regard, a number of thinkers identified a reflexive thinking characteristic of postmodernity, where ontological insecurity about what is real creates a paradoxical ‘vertigo of interpretations’ and a climate of doubt where ‘anything is possible’ (Baudrillard, 2000). This cultural insecurity relates to what post-modernists called the ‘end of metatheories’ (Lyotard, 2000). Post-modernists prophesized the end of the grand narrative of science, where scientific knowledge was itself deconstructed as one discourse among many others and ultimately the product of interests, conflicts and power. In their words, science no longer held a superior position to other forms of knowledge (Aupers, 2012, p. 25).

Even though issues of scope and length do not allow for an in-depth analysis on these debates, many others have noted an ontological insecurity. Jameson connects such cultural shifts to the economic level, it is “*alienation from economic, bureaucratic and technological systems, accelerating under the influence of rationalization-cum-globalization, that sparks ontological insecurity (‘Nothing is what it seems’)*” (Jameson, 1991, p. 38). Furthermore, the scholars working on the distinct but related concept of ‘late modernity’ have noted similar aspects. In the early 90s Beck (1992) advanced his concept of ‘Risk Society’ whereby modernity, with the increased autonomy of individuals and technological innovation, leads to a global society characterized by an increased proliferation of risk and the need to respond to it. According to Bauman, a population’s uncertainty and endemic insecurity is conducive to a sort of fear that is based on “*our ignorance of the threat and of what is to be done*” (2006, p. 2). A number of factors could cause the perception of not being in control: the impacts of globalization on traditional values; the reduction of the role of the state; the increasing pace of everyday life; the destructuralization of labor; the shift to a knowledge economy; and the financialization of global capital.

Such insecurities were only to increase over the last two decades. It suffices here to think of the impacts that the greatest crisis of capitalism since 1929, the global economic crisis of 2008, may have had on people’s perception of the world surrounding them. Individualization, alienation, insecurities and risks lead to continuous individual and collective reflections onto what might happen. Thus, progress created a number of new issues that contemporary societies are increasingly much less able to control (Van Zoonen, 2012, p. 59). However, the institutions that one would like to turn to for

trustworthy knowledge and safety, such as the government and the political institutions, have their own problems of legitimacy. They are for instance not in control of the financial and banking sector, while many other powerful firms, such as multinational corporations, often seem to be able to escape accountability. This leads to a situation of generalized mistrust towards official knowledge and institutions, including governmental bodies and members of the political establishment.

In such a climate of insecurity and mistrust towards scientific truth and grand narratives, the only possible alternative source of knowledge is oneself. Van Zoonen conceptualized this well in her notion of 'I-pistemology' (2012), which attempts to capture the turn to the self, the 'I', "*as the origin of all truth*" (p. 57). A number of examples can help in clarifying the concept here. For instance, I-pistemology can be linked to the so-called culture of narcissism and topics like the growth of therapy, spiritualism and the personal media where one finds, improves and expresses oneself. Similarly, one can observe it in the turn to identity politics, where one's own body, voice and experiences are not only political but became a source of truth (Van Zoonen, 2012, p. 60).

Furthermore, people also turn increasingly to conspiracy theories. The latter can be seen as another cultural response to the contemporary age. Conspiracies function as 'cognitive maps', they represent systems that have become too complex to represent as well as personifying faceless forms of rule and control into identifiable actors (Jameson, 1991). This is for some instigated by the growing sense of exclusion and disempowerment (Blanuša, 2015, p. 14). For instance, if one considers conspiracy theories to do with the anti global warming, vaccines or the Illuminati, the picture is

clear; some powerful groups such as the Illuminati or the big pharmaceutical companies are said to act behind the scenes to establish world order or private profit. Conspiracies then motivate and are motivated by the perception of the existence of some evil actor/s behind the scenes. Ultimately, they increase the level of mistrust towards official narratives coming from the state and politicians in favour of a reality that one can personally pick online.

In sum, an ontological insecurity mixed with feelings emanating from experiences of growing uncertainties and exclusion from the decision-making process augments the level of suspicion of the autonomous individual towards official narratives and institutions such as the state and politicians. Arguably, it is on such a socio-cultural landscape that one can fully observe the impacts of the 'new media'. The multi-directional and autonomous information seeking experience of Web 2.0 could not help but amplify such trends. Whether more or less explicitly, the fact has been identified by many.

Aupers (2012) for instance argued that Web 2.0 epitomizes the latest stage of the late-modern individual. Ritzer (2012) also illustrates how post-modern concepts can be easily applied to the Web 2.0. He argues that online social media provide a great example of 'implosion of perspectives', where one can change identity as one changes clothes. Moreover, Ritzer contends (2012) that the internet at times became 'hyperreal'; more real or more beautiful than reality. For instance, Amazon has more books than any libraries in the world, or on Instagram filters can make nearly any image look better than in real life.

Clearly then one can argue that the internet allows a space for users to address their wider doubts and insecurities and to deconstruct official news and versions of

reality. Under this light, it should not come as a surprise that Web 2.0 and the ‘virality’ of its information has led to an explosion in popularity and availability of conspiracy theories and theorists; ‘prosumers’ who read, negotiate and rewrite their own history (Ritzer & Jergenson, 2010).

The first level of interaction between populism and the ‘new media’

As far as this research is concerned, the most interesting impact of the ‘new media’ is that, by being a tool of mass socialized communication, they make such suspicious ways of thinking a mass phenomenon. Moreover, it also happened in conjunction with the great economic crisis and its recession of 2008. The increasing rate of social exclusion in many western countries fueled a popular wave of protests that was aided by these new technologies. In such a social environment, the first consequence of these ‘new media’ was to amplify the divide between the political establishment and its associated forms of political communication (the traditional media) and the ‘people’. This divide has been labelled with different buzzwords: *‘truthiness’*, *‘post-fact society’*, *‘fact-free politics’*, *‘age of suspicion’* and *‘civic narcissism’* (Van Zoonen, 2012, p. 58).

Thus, a characteristic of the contemporary age is the increasingly widespread perception that the government as well as the traditional mass media and journalism are a manipulative ‘power block’ (Fiske 2006, in Aupers, 2012). Web 2.0 is not only a great facilitator of such characteristic types of suspicious thinking, but it is also perceived as increasingly more ‘true’ and ‘democratic’ as supposedly providing direct access to information. Quandt (2012) argues that the old institutionalized media cannot address the interests and demands of an always more segmented society with its limited number of

publications. From the point of view of the audience, the old media appears increasingly more unresponsive if compared with the new tools. The small sub-networks of social media are in fact much more likely to change quickly and therefore appear more responsive. In addition, social media communication resembles to an extent the real life one-on-one communicative structure, as users mainly have friends or acquaintances online.

Consequently, most online information depends on an accumulation of personal trust. At a subconscious level, one tends to trust more the Facebook newsfeed, rather than television channels and newspapers. Quandt (2012) shows how the reposition of such high trust in 'new media' lay on rather misleading assumptions, as for instance demonstrated by the presence of fake accounts spinning information online during electoral campaigns. Moreover, the so-called 'selection bias' renders personal news feeds likely to select news that match ones political bias and worldview. Nonetheless, regardless of the extent to which such trust is grounded on misleading assumptions, the claim that internet users tend to trust online information more than that coming from traditional media is supported by the empirical studies below as well as by case study analysis of the Five Stars Movement of the following chapters.

In this regard, Ceron performed an empirical analysis of data retrieved through Eurobarometer surveys related to 27 countries. The study concluded that, while there is relevant general decline in trust towards governmental institutions and media, the consumption of news from traditional sources like newspapers and televisions resulted in higher trust towards political institutions, as opposed to news consumption from Web 2.0 sources (2015, p. 487). Therefore, those that employ the internet as a source of

information are more likely to trust those networks more than traditional media. Similarly, Tubella's analysis (in Castells, 2009, p. 133) demonstrated that the younger segments of Catalan society under 30, the most active online, were less likely to consume information from older television stations. Moreover, the study showed that the use of the internet of the surveyed individuals were directly proportional to their level of autonomy (measured in six dimensions of personal, entrepreneurial, professional, communicative, sociopolitical, and bodily) (Castells, 2009, p. 129). Thus, the study confirms that a growing number of people can affirm their autonomy from institutions of society, traditional forms of communication and official narratives much more easily with Web 2.0. Given the increasing spread of online technologies, then one would expect such trends to grow, and in fact by 2017 the Edelman trust barometer illustrated how the trust in traditional media is low everywhere stating that "*people now view the media as part of the elite*" (Edelman Trust, 2017, January 17) .

Given the declining trust towards traditional media as well as the political establishment, one can see the extent to which the new media can benefit populism. Populists, in what Kramer (2017) names the 'meta-function' of the web, often exploit the low trust in traditional media. These actors not only can use the web to circumvent traditional media, but also use it to state a symbolic distinction from the mainstream environment. Populists, like most political actors, often accuse the television and press as lying if they receive coverage that does not support their message. However, they also attempt to demonstrate that they, as opposed to the established parties and media, have the key to the real information and represent the people's interests (Kramer, 2017, p. 1303). Therefore, it can be said that populism finds such a cultural environment a

favourable place for its anti-elitists and people-centered message and very often are active online trying to exploit such gap.

However, there are also important limitations to the above argument as the internet cannot solely be seen as favouring anti-establishment politics. Various techniques of surveillance put forward strong challenges to the argument of the independence of the internet, some of which can have implications for the research undertaken here. In fact, the algorithms of social media platforms have clear spins, such as the ‘automated personalization’ which scrutinize patterns of usage in order to predict consumer behavior and potentially influence the forms of consumption. The data and algorithms are officially supposed to be anonymous and not to favour any political parties. However, this also depends on the efficacy of a given country’s privacy regulation. It follows that in some countries mainstream and/or well-founded parties can for instance employ big data analytics to favor a more efficient canvassing, and obtain higher visibility in the online realm (Bennett, 2016). This can result in ambivalent situations where, on the one hand, the internet facilitates the growth of a culture of mistrust towards the institutions, while on the other it can favor those same institutions or powerful actors providing new subtle forms of spin, bias and control. It follows that, despite a more independent process of information gathering than the previous forms of media, such a scenario is not free of vertical forms of control often rearticulating pre-existing forms of hierarchy and power in a simply different dynamic.

The second level of interaction

While the first ‘level’ of interaction relates to cultural trends and perceptions, the second

one is concerned with the more technical aspects of the medium. In this regard, the literature on political communication stresses a link between the emergence of a number of populist parties and the use of social media as key in explaining the success of populism. Bartlett and others (Bartlett et al., 2013) contend that the degree of directedness and openness of the communicative sphere can benefit populists.

The approach, mainly focused on Web 2.0 and its platforms of social media, can disclose important insights. Undoubtedly, social media provide a more direct connection to the people than previous media did and the focus on communication (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1113). While the former mass media followed a logic of professional gatekeeping on a relatively passive audience, the new media evolve from ‘like-minded’ peer networks that can work as a direct linkage to the populace circumnavigating the journalistic gatekeepers (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1113). Both activists and observers of social movements and populist actors have stressed directedness as a key factor. Fabio Gandara, one of the founders of DRY (Democracia Real Ya, or Real Democracy Now), argued that the major contribution of social networks was that “*it gave people the impression of having a say in public affairs*” (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 88).

Della Porta and Mattoni (2015, p. 45) suggested that, despite the fact that social networks are owned by corporations rather than activists, they broaden the repertoire of communication of movements precisely because of such degree of openness, participation and the collectiveness of content creation. In terms of content creation, any political actor can benefit by noticing how users react to certain posts as well as to the overall opinions on different topics. Certain movements, both populist and not, often collaborate to craft political goals as well as employing signs and symbols that were

constructed online. Likewise, as far as the degree of openness is concerned, the advantages of the ‘new media’ are straightforward. The cost of entry is now far lower for anyone, as social media render obsolete the heavy machinery of older parties with the ability to address and mobilize voters online.

In the same fashion, the impression of directedness could work in favour of both reactionary and progressive populist actors. Anti-elitist and people-centered statements that claim to be willing to allocate power to the people can benefit from the immediacy of a tweet or a Facebook post. Taking part in likes, shares, comments and conversation could easily seem to reduce that gap between the political actor and its followers, as communication seem direct and unmediated. The assumption goes alongside the claim of being part of the people rather than just representing them. Engesser et al. (2017, p. 114), undertook a qualitative textual analysis of typical social media posts in four countries in Western Europe concluding that, given the short nature of posts, ideologies will be expressed in fragments. Thus, one sender might aim at keeping the post as easy as possible to make it more comprehensible in the shorter sentences allowed by social media. Consequently, ambiguous and open ideologies such as populism are well suited for such fragmented messages for allowing users to complement to such ideologies with their own elements, comments, posts and shares.

Moreover, a number of studies exposed how social networks can fit well the populist style of communication that over the last twenty years has acquired increasingly more appeal. Here, many noticed how a number of politicians gave increasing importance to the ‘media logic’ and the way they appeared on televised politics (Kriesi 2014, p. 366; Moffitt, 2016, p. 72).³ They used a language style imbued with simplification, emotional,

³ See Berlusconi in Chapter 2 (p. 50-53) for an example.

colloquial language and dramatization. While not necessarily linked to a populist ideology, this language could predispose one to the acceptance and preference of messages with a degree of polarization within (Moffitt, 2016, p. 73). Such trends remained unchanged with the advent of the social media.

Bartlett (2014, p. 94) argues that, apart from the higher trust reposed in social media, the short acerbic nature of populist statements can work equally well with a populist style. Catchy slogans, humor and outspokenness are a common language online where one is normally connected with friends. The above can match well a populist message that wants to be for the people and by the people, just like much televised political communication employs an emotionalized style for instance. The potential of this new field of communication did not go unobserved, and in fact most political parties are now active on social media. In this regard then, Web 2.0 complements the older media.

On the one hand, the degree of openness, collective creation of content and direct contact with voters might have given the hope of participation to many, especially in the early stages of the mass mobilizations of 2010. For example, one can think of the consequences that such 'new media' had in the cases of the Arab Springs and, to a lesser extent, with Beppe Grillo in Italy, when the ruling class was not prepared to deal with such tools. Over time however, most political actors understood the importance of these 'new media' as a way of connecting in newer ways with the electorate and realized that social media inactivity was penalizing. As highlighted by Milan (2015, p. 888), the social media developed into a space where every political actor competes with each other to acquire higher visibility.

Thus, one can argue that at the level of communication, the 'new media' have favoured the spread of a style that could potentially benefit actors employing a populist ideology. However, the full picture is slightly more complex. Over the past ten years, an increasing number of political actors, populist and non-populist, have embraced social media and many employed the popular populist style. What followed is that social media is now so popular between political actors that one cannot account anymore for the emergence of anti-establishment actors solely through the impacts of these online platforms. In addition, techniques of surveillance by mainstream actors can reduce the impacts of anti-establishment actors. Without denying the importance of the more open and directed nature of social media, approaches of the like should be combined with analyses of social and political contexts. Moreover, actors opposing the political establishment will eventually have to try to find new ways of constructing a symbolic rupture with the establishment if the latter is also well present online.

The third level of interaction

In this regard, an observation of today's political actors can show that there is another way of re-creating the rupture with the political establishment online: by constructing the addressee of populism, the 'people', through the networks. Here, it shall be noted that the research question, aimed at discerning the relationship between the 'new media' and the success of the 5SM in Italy, has assumed that the web can allow for a populist identity to be built online. However this is not an obvious link and its dynamics needs to be analyzed to identify the third and last potential impact of the 'new media' on the growth of populism. Therefore, while the higher degree of directedness and openness of the 'new

media' in relation to the previous mass media is quite undisputed, the question of whether such more autonomous online users are more or less likely to identify with the unitary ideology of populism is a matter of debate (Castells, 2009; Deseriis, 2017; Gerbaudo, 2014; 2015; 2017a; 2017b; Juris, 2012). This will in turn lead to the last section of this chapter

Some have argued that the new media landscape is less supportive in the construction of a common identity (Gerbaudo & Trere', 2015, p. 867). The question here is how does a populist ideology, with its seemingly opposed focus on unity and popular sovereignty, interact with the autonomy of Web 2.0. Lance Bennett (2012) for instance contends that, with the logic of 'connective action', the personalized sharing of content takes over the previous mechanism for organizing collective action that was based on social group identity, membership or ideology. Now group identities are more likely to derive from personal expressions of individuals, and other individuals are in this way more likely to be attracted by the charisma of one's personality. The logic of connective action would then relates to the larger individualizing trends noted by the sociologists of reflexive modernity.

While the analysis encapsulates relevant aspects of the new media landscape, some believe that it does not account for all of them. Milan (2015, p. 887) argues that identity building has changed but not disappeared. It now relies much more on a politics of visibility, characterized by performance, visibility and juxtaposition. The debate between Gerbaudo (2012) and Juris (2012) over the logic of networking, as opposed to the logic of aggregation, further clarifies this issue.

The logic of networking is associated with the practices of Web 1.0. It sees

individual actors build horizontal ties and connections among other autonomous beings, share information and collaborate via decentralized co-ordination. While network logic implies a praxis of communication and coordination between already existing collective actors, aggregation involves the coming together of actors as individuals (Juris, 2012, p. 268). This is associated with the mass social web of Web 2.0. Through the concept of being 'viral' and actions such as liking and hashtags, information re-acquires a mass communication note, and has the capacity to connect people immediately around the given symbol. However, the weak ties of such logic imply that, just as fast as a subjectivity aggregates, it can disaggregate back (Gerbaudo, 2014; Juris, 2012, p. 265). Nonetheless, the continuous relevance of certain networks over others suggests that aggregation did not just take over the logic of networking. Instead, they came to co-exist and interact while mediated by the political, social and cultural factors.

Following the wave of protests over the global economic crisis of 2008, such participatory use of networked media was combined with the populist connotations of protest, especially popular in Southern Europe (Deseriis, 2017). Gerbaudo (2014) in this regard even argued that the populist imagery chimes well with the two abovementioned seemingly opposed logics. The autonomous individuals, with fluid and easily mutable identities lost trust in grand narratives and mainstream information and instead turned to their own 'I-pistemology' (Van Zoonen, 2012; Aupers 2012). Such primacy of the self is amplified with Web 2.0 and the centrality of user-generated content. This autonomy nonetheless results in anxiety and uncertainty and therefore originates within the need for identifying with and believing in something, to be part of certain specific groups. Populism is indeed one of the many reactions to such individual anxiety. That is,

populism is group formation that takes away the endless risks, guilt and fears of the atomized individual in a fast paced environment (Gerbaudo, 2014).

In this need for creating communitarian links some have used the ‘new media’ as one of the lowest common denominators, as the empty signifier (Laclau, 2005), to build a common identity. Populism stresses unity but also sovereignty and self-determination of a given ‘people’ and if adapted into Web 2.0 the individual users find their point in common in their independence. This is the case for those that have merged discourses coming from cyberspace with the ideology of populism in a discourse that has been given slightly different names. These range from techno-populism (Deseriis, 2017), populism 2.0 (Gerbaudo, 2014; 2017), web populism (Lanzone & Woods, 2015) or cyber-populism (Natale & Ballatore, 2014). This paper prefers the latter definition of cyber-populism as it draws a direct link with its cyber-libertarian and populist ideological roots. Echoes of cyber-populism can be found in the ‘internet people’ of Beppe Grillo, the Swedish, German and Icelandic pirate parties, but also in the ‘99% percent’ of Occupy Wall Street and in the Spanish Indignad@s, Partido X and Podemos. Arguably, this current of populism is the one that made the most out of the ‘new media’.

In this discursive formation, the addressee of populism is actualized to fit the condition of modern social network societies. The usual populist target, the common person, is readapted in the online realm as the generic internet user. Thus, the ability to connect became the lowest common denominator and the common man is actualized to fit the atomized individual of the net. All the unsatisfied demands therefore converge and find their element of commonality through the web, so that the latter becomes key in the discursive construction of such ‘people’. Based on such a low identifier, the populist

focus on unity seems to be maintainable even within the contemporary trend of individualism. Indeed, one can find many expressions of the type ‘we internet people’, and often even the selfie became a method of political identification (Gerbaudo, 2014).

As far as the claims to sovereignty, it can be found in a number of discourses of contemporary populist actors who often call for direct democracy online. The interactivity of web 2.0, with its likes, re-tweets, comments, sharing of content and ideas have led some early activists, such as the co-founder of the 5SM Casaleggio, to think of it as informal mass democracy. Following the principle of one person, one vote, some of these actors developed the notions of democracy 2.0. Building on the idea of collective knowledge, where the sharing of ideas and amendments can lead to better results, the pirate parties employed the concept of liquid democracy and used decision-making software such as liquid feedback. Through such means, cyber-populists believe one can do away with the need for representation, enforcing instead direct democracy.

Cyber-populism can then be summarized as the belief that “*the government of the people, for the people, by the people can be achieved through means of information communications technologies*” (Deseriis, 2017). At first such discursive construction was put forward by the small pirate parties that developed the emerging discourse of liquid democracy from the free and open-source projects and communities. Soon however, the technological affordances of the communicative architecture of Web 2.0, fuelled by the frustration sparked by the global economic crisis of 2008, propelled a new generation that fused cyber-libertarian discourses to populism (Deseriis, 2017).

It should be clarified here that cyber-libertarianism can refer to different strands, each with different and contrasting goals. More precisely, Deseriis (2017, p. 3) classified

cyber-libertarianism into three strands; a capitalist one conceiving information as a commodity, a communalist one that conceives information as a common good; and an activist one that sees it as instrumental to achieve a public good. Logically, the diversity of such goals can result in tensions such as those between cyber-libertarians who see internet as the ‘neoliberal electronic marketplace’, while others consider it an ‘agora’ of direct democracy (Natale & Ballatore, 2014). This will also emerge in the analysis of the case study of the next chapters.

Nonetheless there are also commonalities. For instance, all cyber-libertarian strands share a deep distrust of bureaucratic and hierarchical authority as impeding the free flow of information. In this regard, “*Information wants to be free*” or “*a network governs itself*” are just some examples of the famous maxims from the early cyberspace. The Manichean worldview of populism expresses itself in an opposition and refusal of mediation with the political establishment and traditional media who are engaged in vertical control of information. The second maxim often relates to the structure of some of these actors that have features resembling online modes of governance, such as horizontality, decentralization, leaderlessness, and co-operative aspects. In this regard, it should be noted that, to date, commentators have observed two variants between cyber-populists: a leaderless one identifiable with the earlier pirate parties, Occupy and the Indignados, and one with a leader, identifiable with Podemos, and the Five Star Movement.

One should note here another element of commonality with the cyber-libertarian discourses; that is, the utopianism beneath cyber-populism. These movements applied the vision of technological sublime to the digital world, whereby the internet is the carrier of

a number of changes that can drive society to a better more decentralized, libertarian and democratic society. Internet is thus a 'supermedium', with the power of driving social change (Natale & Ballatore, 2014, p. 113). The horizontal structure emerging online promises to lead to a more open and democratic society and gradually political decisions will be taken online removing the need for representation. While this utopian aspect is arguably more pronounced in the earlier movements, residues of it are also evident in the variant of the Five Star Movement.

Gerbaudo (2017) however also identifies potential risks associated with cyber-populism. The first one concerns what was mentioned above, the fact that populisms often end up empowering groups other than the people. Such groups, claiming to embody the people, might ultimately exert a very centralized control over the online structures and its supporters. The shadow of centrality, an issue present in the more general concept of populism, can risk implementing a digital plebiscitary democracy rather than a direct one, with potential risks for maintaining the rights of minorities. The potential ownership of specific platforms could also provide less visible powers with forms of bias over the information and control of content. Direct democracy in this case could just turn out to be the approval or rejection of issues prepared beforehand by a few charismatic leaders, thus contradicting the claims of participatory democracy (Gerbaudo, 2017, p. 60). On a second note, Gerbaudo warns of how an over-emphasis on the procedure of actual direct democracy online can shift attention away from the political program. This is the reason why a number of movements advocating for online direct democracy have failed to make a real impact so far.

All in all this brief illustration of cyber-populism, while efficient in showing the

impacts of ‘new media’ in the development of contemporary movements, does not do complete justice to all its theoretical nuances. For example, issues of length and scope did not allow for further theoretical enquiries into the tensions at the hearth of this new discursive formation, but these are nonetheless important and could be material for further research.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this first conceptual chapter has clarified the ways in which the ‘new media’ interacts with populism connecting the discussion with wider literature and trends. Populism as a ‘thin ideology’ emerges at times of systemic changes or crises that are felt to be hostile by significant parts of the population, and seeks to remedy such demands by giving primary decision-making power to the will of the ‘people’. Gerbaudo (2017), as many, links the emergence of populism in the contemporary historical conjuncture to the global economy. In the aftermath of the greatest capitalist crisis since 1929, people are demanding to take political power back from the global markets, which are perceived as undermining democracy and self-determination. Thus, on one hand the populist ideology with its focus on the unity of the people is growing in popularity. On the other, this political trend happen in concomitance with a society increasingly more characterized by an individualistic culture of which the ‘new media’ of internet is considered a great facilitator.

Despite the apparent contradiction, the paper identified three levels of interactions between the ‘new media’ and populism. Apart from facilitating an ongoing trend of growing mistrust towards the political establishment and traditional media, the ‘new

media' provides actors, seeking to challenge such political establishments, new ways of constructing a rupture with it as well as a new way of communicating with the electorate. The case study of Italy and the 5SM will show well how such interactions happen in practice, the relevance of 'new media' to populism and how the two can work well together. Internet will in fact be key in understanding the emergence of the 5SM. To achieve such goal however, an accurate analysis shall depart from an understanding of the context in which the actor emerged. To this task it will be devoted the second and following chapter of this thesis.

Chapter 2: The soul of the Italian populist soil

The second chapter focuses on how the conceptual relationship of ‘new media’ and populism has played out in practice in the case study of Italy. Here, the effects of the global economy are surely influential; however, they are linked to a number of ‘Italian’ structural peculiarities, problems and crises. Consequently, both external and internal factors have created a favourable structure of opportunities for the emergence of the 5SM. By examining the political, discursive and media opportunity structure, the chapter will then be able to demonstrate the centrality of ‘new media’ to the emergence of the 5SM. I will argue that internal problems over the last three decades rendered the Italian party system constantly weak and open to challenger parties, however to understand precisely why it was the specific actor of the 5SM that responded to it, one also needs to analyze the changes in the media structure of opportunities.

After a brief elucidation on the theoretical framework of political, discursive and media opportunity structure, the paper will divide into two additional parts. The second part will then explore the political and discursive opportunities identifying three different waves of populism that in the past forty years produced a line of ‘populist’ critique with regards to ‘*partitocrazia*’, the oligarchy of the established parties. The third one will investigate the changes in the media-related structure of opportunities. It is the thesis’ contention that it is only through their understanding one can fully grasp why it was the 5SM that specifically emerged out of the most recent crisis.

The structures of opportunities

To clarify the analytical framework, the underlying argument of the paper is that the rise of populism has happened in concomitance with a specific structure of opportunity, including the political opportunity structure (POS), the discursive opportunity structure (DOS), and ultimately the media opportunity structure (MOS) (Wirth et al., 2016). Such a seemingly complex contextual framework necessarily requires some elucidations.

To begin with, POS has established itself in the past decades as a common theoretical framework for understanding the growth of social movement, anti-establishment and protest political actors. Scholars working within this framework put forward numerous different attempts at classifying the number of dependent variables explaining the rise of social action (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004; Giugni, 2009). POS, focused on the political and institutional opportunities for failure and success of social actors, is surely of value. A ‘broad’ structure of political opportunities, as opposed to a ‘issue-specific’ one focusing on specific policies or institutional arrangements affecting a certain constituency, can benefit the single case study of this paper by highlighting the following variables: the nature of existing cleavages in society; the formal institutional structure of the state; the information strategies of elites vis-à-vis their challengers; and power relations within the party system and/or alliance structures (Meyer & Minkoff, 2004; Schnyder, 2015, p. 693).

Such an angle provides us with a perspective that allows an understanding of the 5SM as a response to a series of structural issues such as economic cleavages, corruption, struggle of interests, convergence of main parties policies, and the economic crisis that have led the country to a political impasse to which established parties could not respond. Nonetheless, an approach that considers solely the aforementioned would neglect a

number of significant cultural factors contributing to the advent of challenger parties.

It is here that the Discursive Opportunity Structure can be of help. The latter refers to the “*aspects of public discourse that determine a message’s chances of diffusion in the public sphere*” (Koopmans & Olzak, 2004, p. 200). A message can be diffused in a top-down manner, but can also develop in the opposite bottom-up direction, responding and/or emerging from issues, habits and perceptions or attempting to influence them. In Italy for instance, terrorism, mismanagement, corruption and economic decline have over the past four decades favoured a widespread cynic attitude towards the government, which is reflected in an ongoing critique of the party system; the discursive construction of ‘*partitocrazia*’.⁴ Messages incorporating such discourse, which as it will be explained below has some populist connotations, have proven to disseminate well.

That said, both Berlusconi and the 5SM have largely benefited from the opportunities allowed by peculiar media landscapes. In fact, for a message to diffuse, channels of communication are necessary and over the past three decades, in Italy as elsewhere, the mass media played a key role. This is best explained by the Media Opportunity Structure focusing on the extent to which a given media landscape favours a particular actor. In this regard, Koopmans and Olzak (2004, p. 203) added two dependent variables to it: ‘visibility’ and ‘resonance’ in the public sphere. The former here refers to the extent to which media gatekeepers such as television channels and journalists provide coverage of given actors in their respective media. These actors can willingly increase the changes of diffusion of a message in a given constituency, as well as decide the angle from which to describe it. ‘Resonance’ is the extent to which such visibility is taken on

⁴ See footnote 1

by other public figures, who react to the action of the social movement publicly, thus bestowing importance on it.

A problematic state

As far as the political opportunity structure is concerned then, it is a common argument that the Italian political history of the last 40 years has constantly produced fertile ground for the populist contestation of mainstream parties (Tarchi, 2015). Bouillaud (2016), for instance, defines the populist core of the 5SM as a continuation of a longstanding discourse against the Italian party system that begins in the late 70s with the entrance into the post-cold war era. Structural aspects here are important, as terrorism, elite clashes and struggles of interests, mismanagement and corruption, economic decline and the recent crisis produced a peculiar perception of mistrust towards the state machinery. This has been reflected in a recurring populist critique of the party system, the discourse of '*partitocrazia*' (Bouillaud, 2016). The opposition towards the party system can be divided into three waves: a first one starting in the late 70s with the Radical Party; a second one during the early 90s represented by the Northern League, Berlusconi, the anti-mafia movement and the referendum committee; and a third one can be found in the 5SM.

This is not to say that prior to the 70s there has been no populism. In fact, only a few decades before, from 1946 to 1949, Giannini's party the 'Front of the Common Man' (*Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque*), was to become a national case, offering an anti-establishment discourse that gained surprising results. Furthermore, the country always showed a constant number of paradoxical features. Since its unification it has generated

opposing dualisms, a combination of vigour and stagnation, progressive and conservative actors resulting in several political crises. Surely, as a theatre for intrigues, clandestine operations, terrorism and conspiracies, Italy has been unmatched in post-war Europe (Partridge, 1998).

Conversely, post-war Italy presented the credentials of a strong democratic regime, such as strong constitutional norms, high level of participation, a dynamic civil society and a strong party system (Bull & Rhodes, 1997, p. 3). At the same time it was also characterized by a clientelist approach to business and politics, the perception of the presence of hidden exchanges, occult power, organized crime and consequently weak institutions that inspired low respect for themselves. Rhodes and Bull (1997, p. 4) suggested that Italy has two dimensions of power, a visible and formal one where the rule of law commands, and another one, hidden, often acting in an undemocratic way.

Some linked this to the existence of the strongest communist party in the western world and to the necessity to systematically exclude it from government during the cold-war (Partridge, 1998, p. 84). Others suggest a focus on economic, political and societal divergences between the northern and southern regions (Bull & Rhodes, 1997, p.4), while more historicist approaches go all the way down to ‘the original sin’ of the unification of the country originating in external pressures (Graziano, 2010, p. 13). Others point to the fact that at no point in Italian political history was the narrative of a dominant class able to become fully hegemonic and take on a national role. Instead, the political history was a constant struggle between four contrasting major narratives about an ‘Italian state and modernity’; the catholic, fascist, communist and liberal (Forlenza & Thomassen, 2016). Nonetheless, issues of length constrain the scope of the research only to factors closely

related to the case study. In this regard, the events of primary interest to us are those that saw the employment of the discourse of '*partitocrazia*' in the late 70s.

The first wave

As far as the first populist wave is concerned, it emerged during the political crisis of the so-called 'years of lead' (*anni di piombo*), which spanned 1968 to the early 80s. Here tensions between polarized left and right forces reached their peak and Italy underwent a deep political crisis in which forces on the left seemed to take over (Partridge, 1998, p. 130). This was accompanied by continuous terrorist attacks from both extreme right and left groups and led to massacres such as Piazza Fontana and Bologna station and an approximate 400 deaths over the 15-year period. It also led to the controversial killing of the DC (Christian Democrats) politician Aldo Moro, key figure in the dialogue between the DC and PCI (Italian Communist Party). Many believed that conservative forces behind the scene were opposing compromises with the communists by pursuing a "strategy of tension" (Bull, 2010, p. 101). What is certain, therefore, is that the Italian state had to adopt tough measures to deal with the situation.

The political crisis of those years, and the fact that the truth over most of the massacres has never emerged, reinforced to many the perception of the state as an antagonist. The feeling was firstly evident in the cultural reproductions, artwork and literature of the time. Quite telling for instance is the figure of the comedian Dario Fo. In some of his plays, '*Accidental Death of an Anarchist*' (1980) for example, there emerges a grotesque, satirical and ridiculing representation of the state machine that demonstrates the existence of a critical view of the state by many Italians. This seemingly unrelated

point holds some relevance as it is within this sub-culture of a political satire critical of the state that influential comedians, as well as a young Beppe Grillo, were formed.

Necessarily, the political crisis also reflected in a number of social actors dissatisfied with the current political situation. Among these there were numerous segments of the radical left that refused and opposed the politics of the PC, the terrorism, as well as the political line of the government. Similarly, a number of progressive catholic groups separated from the political line of the DC. However, there were other dissenting figures such as the early Italian Greens and the ‘Radical Party’ (RP) (I radicali) of Marco Pannella that are of even higher relevance to this research. Founded in 1955, the party distinguished itself with a satirical attitude towards the political establishment. In a rather unorthodox manner they were staging rallies and holding peaceful manifestations in squares, employing a ridiculing rhetoric, while their stance was anti-clerical: in favour of issues such as abortion, divorce, gay marriages and decriminalization of drugs, for instance.

The RP also gave relevance to the critique of the ‘*partitocrazia*’, a term that before was only used in a few liberal circles (Bouillard, 2016, p. 8). This definition referred to a lamentation of the clientelism and the advantages given by the mass parties to their supporters in administrative and economic life. The political system, composed of the mass parties, was treated as a unitary elite ruling in favour of its special interests as opposed to the overall interest of the Italian people. While not much attention was given to the construction of a ‘people’, the concept of ‘*partitocrazia*’ involved a polarization of society into the two blocs of Italians versus the established parties.

Rather than trying to maximize votes, the RP employed tactics already used by

the new left in the late sixties, and claimed to be a voice fostering grassroots social movements by bringing public attention to issues not addressed by traditional parties. To mark a distinction from the establishment, the leaders of the RP behaved in an unconventional way as populists will often do in the following decades (Bouillaud, 2016, p. 9). The party employed a number of unconventional techniques such as hunger strikes, and a direct language, full of provocations and street slangs. In so doing, they showed a degree of populism. In a way then, they anticipated the future populist actors. They also had considerable effects on the electorate and ultimately on Grillo, who took on some of their unorthodox style, as well as building on the critique of the '*partitocrazia*' (Bouillaud, 2016, p. 8).

In terms of political opportunities, the two political parties that marked the cold-war period, the Christian Democrats and the Communists, started losing grip preannouncing the shift towards a new historical conjuncture; the post-cold war era. The previous societal cleavages based on materialistic values were slowly giving way to the post-materialistic ones of the contemporary age (civil rights, pacifism, feminism and environmentalism), as testified by the emergence of the Radical Party (Bouillaud, 2016, p. 8). Furthermore, in a moment of political repression by the state institutions towards a number of anti-state actors, the PR was one of the few options that were allowed to emerge, and indeed it gained good support by a number of dissatisfied radical leftists as the only institutional option available.

In the 80s, despite the fact that the threat of communism was on the decline together with much of the social unrest that marked the 70s, the general perception of mistrust towards the state remained unchanged. Instead, what did change is the fact that

the ideological conflict faded, leaving room to interests-based conflicts matched by the rise of professional entrepreneur politicians such as Craxi.⁵ By the early 90s, the official ending of the Communist Party, as a consequence of the fall of the Berlin wall, had its repercussion on the other main party, the DC, whose purpose after the loss of the communist threat was harder to define (Cotta & Verzichelli, 2007, p. 49). All that was left to the political system was the systematic abuse of power through licit and illicit means and a systemic corruption. The situation had to explode, and it did so in great fashion with the massive scandals of ‘Tangentopoli’.

The latter was a nationwide judicial investigation over political corruption which had explosive results (Koff & Koff, 2000, p. 2). To give an idea of the gravity of the situation, the investigations involved around 5000 suspects and for a period of time more than half of the members of the parliament were under indictment. At a local level, an approximate 400 city councils were disbanded while it was calculated that the cost of the bribes was of 4 billion dollars per year (Koff & Koff, 2000, p. 2). In short, the illicit abuse of the state machinery and the inter-party struggle over interests met its physical limits (Bull & Rhodes, 1997, p. 6). Once the judges began exposing the corruption scandals of Tangentopoli, the existing parties collapsed into a massive political and institutional crisis (Bull & Rhodes, 1997, p. 6).

Conversely, the events of these key years led to a period of optimism among the ‘Italianists’. The ‘revolution of the judges’ (Della Porta & Vannucci, 2007, p. 830) motivated hopes about a ‘Second Republic’ (Koff & Koff, 2000) and a period of

⁵ Bettino Craxi, President of Italy from 1983 to 1987 and leader of the Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI), was a key political figure in the 80s. He is important here, not only as the PSI adopted a neoliberal agenda playing a key role in the slow dismantling of the cold-war Italian party system, but also because Craxi was a personal friend of Berlusconi and facilitated the construction of his media conglomerate in its early stages.

transition towards overcoming of the problems of the Italian anomalous democracy (Bull, 1997, p. 3). Hopeful prospects were also increased by the fact that Italian governance was affected by external pressures and expectations emanating from the European Union. The latter implied the necessity of undertaking several changes to the performance of the economy and it created hopes of getting over the status of a 'blocked democracy' (Della Sala, 1997, p. 14). However, this was not to prove the case and, instead, the crisis of legitimacy opened the way for a second wave of populist opposition to the '*Partitocrazia*'.

The second wave

The collapse of the existing party system created ample opportunities for movements and challenger parties to emerge. In this period emerged the Rete (branching out of anti-mafia movements in Palermo), the 'referendum movement' of Mario Segni, the Northern League (Lega Nord – NL), and Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI) that were all opposing the corruption of the '*partitocrazia*'. All of them represented a response towards internal problems, such as the connection between crime and the political class. However, the NL and FI reflected also the wider external changes, and in fact were bound to stay and influence Italian politics up to present days.

On one hand, the NL brought back a politics of territoriality that will be a recurring theme in the following decades of 'populist' opposition to globalization. The leader, Umberto Bossi, pretended to fight against the corruption of the Rome-based established parties and their links to the southern mafias. Building on a newly built identity based on the territorial belonging to the regions of Lombardia and Veneto, the

NL was asking for further autonomy of the northern region. The party also inaugurated an aggressive and insulting style with xenophobic narratives against southern Italians and non-European immigrants (Bouillaud, 2016). Thus, the changing cleavages brought about by the globalization, but also by a very weak party system, provided the NL opportunities for calling for further decentralization.

If the NL success can be seen as providing a response to new cleavages and the weaknesses of central institutions, Berlusconi's success was mainly dependent on his use of the media, another factor that will define politics in the post-cold war era (Berardi, 2014). Understanding Berlusconi's legacy is key to grasping the 'success' of the 5SM, as, from the 90s until now, not only did he influence electoral politics, but society, culture and television: therefore having a key role in the opportunity structure the 5SM was faced by.

In 1994, the media tycoon exploited the gap left by the crisis of legitimacy and made his entrance into politics. By that time, as will be expanded in the next section, his media conglomerate already resembled those of authoritarian regimes (Berardi, 2014, p. 184). Berlusconi accused the previous elites of corruption, suggesting himself, a successful businessman, as the only way out of a corrupted 'partitocracy' (Poli, 1998, p. 278). He used his experience as a businessman to assure Italians of his estrangement with the previous political class. His managerial know-how also instilled hopes of a prosperous future of economic modernization and wealth. By repeating the stories of his own personal victories and forwarding an appealing image of himself, he managed to direct to the Italian electorate a reassuring message of prosperity, suggesting that anyone could be like him. These features placed him outside the world of conventional politics,

with some defining him as the ‘Knight of antipolitics’ (Pasquino, 2007, p. 39). This created to an extent the rupture typical of populism, a rupture that however was mainly played out at the level of rhetoric and style as even the ascendancy of his media conglomerate was made possible through compromises with the then in-power socialist party of Craxi.

In sum, the key elements of populism in Berlusconi are that he portrayed himself as an outsider and a common Italian person. While the discursive construction of the enemies varied, ranging from the political elites to the Communists, the nodal point of his populism was in his identification with the common man, which, as will be expanded below, was accomplished with the help of the media. Common people had some skills that politicians did not have but Berlusconi, by depicting himself as an outsider and a football expert, supposedly had.

The third wave of populism

Berlusconi’s political and cultural dominance was however not to last forever. Ultimately his government was not able to deal with both internal and external structural issues, allowing new opportunities for challenger parties. Firstly, the country had issues with its economy. Despite the neoliberal rhetoric of Craxi and Berlusconi, the shift to economic liberalism never fully happened, with the result of becoming “*neither a liberal market economy nor a state coordinated economy, with elements of the both but without being either*” (Della Sala, 2004, p. 1043). In practice, from a political point of view Berlusconi’s dominance worsened the country’s democratic institutions instead of bringing the process of transition to an end (Edwards, 2005, p. 225). From an economic

point of view the two decades produced a rise in public debt and an industrial decline, apart from the fashionable ‘Made in Italy’ goods (Pianta, 2012).

Moreover, the two decades corresponded with a decrease in the quality of public services, easier tax evasion, a general impoverishment of the southern regions, and an increase in the numbers of youth in precarious jobs and, to a lesser extent, unemployment (Pianta, 2012, p. 3). For instance, from 2000 to 2009 Italy’s productivity decreased on average by 0.5 percent per year. Contrary to some neighboring countries, Italian industries did not invest in new technologies and production capacity, resulting in a loss of competitiveness (Pianta, 2012, p. 4). Wage cuts, precarious jobs and a rise of inequalities came about as a consequence. However, most of the deregulating labour reforms affected mainly the youth entering the job market.

Over time the reforms created a so-called grey market for labour. The diminished protection for legal, barely legal and illegal labour in the market developed to a point where younger generations entering it expected salaries to be low for long. Many, even before the crisis, were complaining about the 1000s-euro generation, as students coming out of education could not find any job better paid than that (Bouillaud, 2016, p. 4). Others, the so-called NEET (not in employment, not in education, not in training), did not even bother looking for jobs, staying instead at home under the supervision of the older generations. Importantly, it is this demographic of the population that comprised the bulk of the 5SM support in the near future (Ceccarini & Bordignon, 2016, p. 142). In addition, it shall be noted that Berlusconi did not manage to change the overall negative perception that Italians have towards the political institutions. Instead, studies undertaken during the years considered up to now, reported that the percentage of Italians believing that the

government and politicians “*don't care about what people like me think*” augmented from 68 percent in 1968 to 84 percent in 1997 (Phar, Putnam & Dalton, 2000, p.12).

These issues were to a great extent left unaddressed by the rest of the mainstream parties that instead increasingly converged towards similar social and economic stances (Delbello, 2013, p. 79). In this regard, the biggest communist party of the western world, the PCI, in a continuous decline since the late 70s, collapsed with the USSR, the Berlin wall and ultimately ‘*Tangentopoli*’. The implosion had great consequences on the left as it lost its theoretical framework and identity. The emerging confusion was reflected in the direction that the left took, which focused more in opposing the figure of Berlusconi rather than offering substantial alternatives, plans and policies (Delbello, 2013, p. 93; Zamponi, 2012, p. 417). Some members of the PCI, such as Ingroia, founded Communist Refoundation (*Rifondazione Comunista*). Others, such as D'Alema, abandoned the radical ideology and founded the Democratic Party of the Left (*Partito Democratico di Sinistra*) that became the major force of opposition to Berlusconi (Delbello, 2013, p. 95). Such a party adopted a moderate line alongside most European center-left parties and, in response to the 2008 economic crisis, supported the highly unpopular austerity measures. One can then see the extent to which all mainstream parties converged into a similar direction.

Henceforth, the political establishment was ill-equipped when the economic crisis of 2008 hit Italy. Berlusconi, despite his majority in parliament, was not able to deal with the economic crisis that instead evolved into a political crisis too (Pianta, 2012, p. 5). The latter was comparable in strength to ‘*Tangentopoli*’, however it originated partly outside. As a consequence, Berlusconi was soon forced to resign. The technocratic premier Mario

Monti was then installed with the approval of the opposition, the European Union and the banking and businesses elites. Austerity policies, supposed to be initiated by the Berlusconi government, were enforced under the technocratic leadership of Monti.

The latter further depressed the economy and manufacturing output plummeted 25 percent as a result (Di Mascio, Natalini, & Stolfi, 2013, p. 24). This necessarily had its societal costs: about a million jobs were lost, cuts were introduced to pensions, retirement ages rose, wage freezes imposed for public employees, services liberalized, a number of stable jobs became precarious, privatizations and cuts to the education, health services, local services, and transport all ensued (Di Mascio, Natalini, & Stolfi, 2013, p. 25). The crisis of legitimacy of the Italian political class was at its historical peak and the response had to come from outside the party system. Just like with '*Tangentopoli*', Italians felt betrayed. This time however the period of economic growth was over and for the most vulnerable strata of society the present conditions lead to serious issues of survival. Their trust in institutions, already historically 'strangely' low for a liberal democracy (Koff & Koff, 2000, p. 27), reached its historical minimum (Clara & Martenson, 2012, p. 12). Once again, people felt powerless in relation to what was happening in the realm of politics.

Structural issues such as mismanagement, internal struggles of interests, as well as an ongoing economic decline topped onto the global economic crisis put the Italian party system in a situation it could not deal with. The elites, already converging on social and economic policies, failed to deliver responses and were replaced by a technocratic government that in turn opened the party system to extremist and anti-establishment discourses that remained popular in the Italian society over nearly 40 years. Thus, the

political structure of opportunities together with the discursive structure of opportunities explain a good deal of why the 5SM emerged. Nonetheless, in terms of a more precise account of why specifically it was the 5SM that emerged, there still seems to be something missing. In this regard, many wondered why a historically contentious country such as Italy did not produce any mass movements as happened in Spain, Greece and the US but produced instead the peculiar actor of the 5SM (Zamponi, 2012). Italy in fact not only showcased a very active social movement environment through the two decades preceding the advent of the case study, but it was also one of the first western country to register mobilizations against austerity in 2008, when students took to the streets chanting “*we won’t pay for the crisis*” (Zamponi, 2012).

The media-related opportunity structure

Arguably, to fully understand the environment in which populist actors could emerge in Italy, one needs to add the changing media landscape. In fact, only with the addition of the media structure of opportunities can one fully grasp why it was Grillo who succeeded, instead of other radical left or right wing groups. As abovementioned, the economic decline mainly affected the younger generation, the most active part of the population online. Berlusconi, as well as the rest of the political establishment, did not keep pace with the new media technologies. Ironically, just as he managed to overcome laws and opposition to create his media conglomerate ‘Mediaset’, Berlusconi could not adapt to make the new more horizontal technologies match his interests. The enormous growth of the internet exposed the more media-savvy younger segments of the population to a new communicative sphere (Vaccari, 2015). This one was not only free from the control of

either 'Mediaset' or 'Rai', but it enhanced the user exposition to diverse viewpoints and potential autonomy from official narratives, as shown in the first chapter. Ultimately, it reduced the visibility of mainstream parties that ignored the web in favour of an increasing visibility, resonance and legitimacy of anti-establishment messages online. Chapter three will show how Grillo was the one that made the most of such shifts.

To best analyze the changing media landscape, one should then juxtapose the advent of the 'new media' in Italy with the previous decades of Berlusconi's media dominance in a development that will disclose key changing opportunities. The emergence of Berlusconi in the media landscape dates back to the late 70s when the legacy of the two major parties, the PCI and the DC, began to decline. Such erosion was also reflected in the world of media. The media environment of the cold war, characterized by a vertical management over information, was coming to an end as society was becoming more literate, rich and complex to accept the tutelage of either the DC's or the PCI's circuits of information. New communicative and intellectual circuits emerged and, as a consequence, the overall literacy of the Italian masses. Just like the society of industrial work was coming to an end, the era of state run channels of information was fading away (Berardi, 2014, p. 185).

In fact, it is within this period of turmoil that the media conglomerate of the young entrepreneur Berlusconi began to blossom. Berardi (2014, p. 186) associates such blossoming with the free radio movement that emerged in the late 70s. These were genuine attempts to break free of the control of major mass parties. However, the PCI and the DC did all they could to impede such free stations from maturing and instead the criminal-financial holdings soon acquired that same space for their private enterprises

(Berardi, 2014, p. 187). Just like the free radio movements of the late 70s, Berlusconi represented the corporate attempt to overcome the era of state run channels of information. This move was bound to deeply affect Italy's political landscape.

Berlusconi founded the first commercial television network in Italy, *Canale 5*, at the end of the 70s. Progressively, with the help of Craxi and his Socialist party, he was able to add *Italia1* and *Rete4* networks and create the conglomerate of Fininvest (subsequently renamed in *Mediaset*). Craxi was the prominent political figure of the 80s, and in his attempts to 'modernize' Italy pushing forward a neoliberal program could well use the help of the young entrepreneur Berlusconi. By the late 80s, despite several attempts by members of institutions to oppose the rise of Berlusconi, the monopoly of the state over the television system was given away to a duopoly, public and private, *Rai* versus *Fininvest*, that left no space for other competitors (Berardi, 2014, p. 188). It was not only a matter of ownerships however, and Berlusconi's advent came with massive cultural consequences too.

As the Catalan Journalist Puigverd has famously written "*The imago mundi of popular classes is now that of Telecinco*" (In Forlenza & Thomassen, 2016, p. 260). There is a whole language, symbols, images, dreams and desires that are at the core of television shows and the building of an audience. Through television, the culture, values, aspirations and discourses of the audience were changed, and Berlusconi came slowly to embody the image of the common Italian that his channels would implicitly advertise (Berardi, 2014). Berlusconi's *Mediaset* soon took over a cultural hegemonic role, which was ultimately exploited by Berlusconi's Forza Italia in the following two decades. His power from then on would be built on finance, media and politics.

Triggered by the opportunities offered by the crisis that followed ‘Tangetopoli’, the tycoon entered politics and, just like with the media environment, he radically changed the political world too. Berlusconi came to embody better than anybody else what scholars named ‘audience democracy’, where politics is conceived as a televised spectacle to which citizens are bystanders rather than participants (Vaccari, 2015, p. 26). Such conception refers to a common situation in western democracies, where the mass media take over the role of political parties in mobilizing votes and support, as well as providing the major forum for discussion and deliberation. In short, the mass media became the main agent of political socialization (Vaccari, 2015, p. 27). It follows that political parties focused increasingly more on appearing on the screen, so that the personality of single candidates started to acquire higher importance. Therefore, personality takes over party platforms while the voters are likely to have to choose between policy options that are pre-selected on the other side of the screen and not subject to a debate.

The aforementioned can surely be applied to Berlusconi, with the addition of the fact that he had no real competitor in terms of ownership, visibility and resonance with the media. Italy showcased a critically low level of media pluralism, in a way that some defined the situation as the most striking evidence of violations of media freedom in Europe (Valdambrini, 2011), or resembling authoritarian regimes (Berardi, 2014). *Mediaset* owned half of the national channels while the national channels run by the *Rai* tended to be sympathetic of the government in power, with therefore one channel, *La7*, considered as fully independent. In terms of visibility and resonance, none in Italy could compete with the tycoon.

Berlusconi could place into negative frames opposing discourses, reduce and augment his visibility at favourable times, change the focus of public debates (for instance when the many scandals and court cases appeared), cover issues of interest during electoral campaigns, and ultimately adopt the language style of advertisement and television into politics that would easily match with many of his populist statements. D'Agostino (2015, p. 227), for instance, analyzed how television was key in depicting the politician as an outsider. Berlusconi counter-posed the traditionally formal language of politics as opposed to his informal one coming from advertisements.

This was played upon the human and affective dimension, whereby Berlusconi was a person that could feel. This was delivered with a restricted variety of rhetorical figures, a rather simple and direct language and a reduced complexity of the syntax of sentences. Moreover, the accessibility of such rhetoric was augmented by the systematic employment of clichés and stereotypes (D'Agostino, 2015, p. 228). Ultimately, there was an hyperbolic character to many of his statements, an exaggeration, which reinforced the human dimension above mentioned, and it was evident in passion towards sports such as AC Milan, but also to values defined as human, such as family and friendship.

As abovementioned, the concentration of ownership, visibility and resonance was not matched by any other actor. In terms of media-related opportunity structure, the field was tightly closed. The fact however does not mean that Berlusconi was faced with no opposition. Quite the contrary, the politician had a number of enemies both within and outside the institutions. Firstly, the several conflicts of interests which marked his media dominance and political ascendancy could not but leave enemies within the institutions, as testified by the exceptionally high number of court cases that he faced. Secondly, the

two decades have also been characterized by a constantly high number of social mobilizations at the grassroots level (Diani & Fabbri, 2015, p. 225).

Examples here range from the Social Justice Movement that has been active in the country since the 1990s, the several Peace campaigns, the groups of opposition to major public works (*Grandi progetti*) (such as those ones against US military bases and the NO TAV opposing high speed trains in Val di Susa), and the several initiatives for public morality and against corruption (for instance the *Popolo Viola* or the Anti-mafia movements). The extent of opposition confirms that the discursive opportunities were still favourable to anti-establishment discourses. However, the constant level of protests and activism was not matched by the emergence of any relevant challengers within the party system. These various groups were often disconnected from each other, in a molecular cloud that could not find a common link.

The media structure of opportunity provides relevant insights in this direction. Faced by a media system with an all too obvious bias of power, the emerging movements looked to create autonomous spaces of communication away from the control of the state and capital. The early internet, with its logic of networking mentioned in Chapter 1, provided this space which therefore had, during the 90s and early 2000s, a strongly counter-cultural component (Deseriis, 2017). It is in this period, in Italy as elsewhere, that emerged the alternative service providers such as Indymedia, Autistici, Riseup, Aktivix and Inventati aimed at providing independent channels of internal communication (Gerbaudo, 2017b). The grassroots resistance challenging the dominant cultural and political system was thus well present and active on the medium of the internet.

The early internet, or Web 1.0, was however a tool for ‘experts’, if compared to the Web 2.0. Online users, whether politicized or not, were in fact educated and mainly young. These are between the groups least represented by Berlusconi and thus likely to be hostile to his legacy. Such perception of hostility, together with the dominance on the mass media, might be some of the reasons behind Berlusconi’s lack of interest in investing and experimenting in digital media (Vaccari, 2015, p. 33). It is certain that, while Mediaset was not present online, Italy was in an economic decline, Berlusconi increasingly more involved in court cases and scandals while the number of internet users continued to grow.

Web 2.0 was soon to acquire levels of mass diffusion, and therefore impacts on society at large. Despite the relatively lower level of internet penetration than its European neighbors, Italian users still accounted for a significant part of the electorate. From two million users in 1997, the numbers grew to five in 1999, 12 in 2002 and 17 in 2007. In 2013, this amounted to around 33.1 % of ‘strong’ users that access it on a daily basis (Istat, 2013). Moreover, the group is mainly composed of people under 35 years of age. Unexpectedly then, the media opportunity structure was soon to open up again.

Building on previous social movement networks, activist blogs, Facebook pages, official pages, web discussion rooms, and dedicated web TV channels, many could soon find alternative sources of information. Activists found an increasingly wider community that would comment on their political issues and activities, and the alternative sources of information online expanded. Grillo’s blog was a prime example of this, as will be explained below. Another example is the *‘Popolo Viola’* that started online in 2008 to protest against Berlusconi’s attempt to enact a piece of legislation granting him

immunity, but soon went offline too. This involved demonstrations such as, for instance, one in front a villa of Berlusconi involving clashes with the police. The political bias between the information received in traditional media and ‘new media’ started striking people, as will be clear in the analysis of Grillo’s V-day in the following chapter.

The relevance of the opening opportunities in terms of visibility and resonance was evident during the global economic crisis. As argued in Chapter 1, the suspicious attitude towards the world outside had become mainstream, facilitated by the opportunities of the changing media landscapes, and the use that political actors made of it within Italy’s specific social and economic situation. This reached a critical point when the whole political class had to comply with the measures of European governance and applied a regime of austerity that was however hard to legitimize to a public already extremely critical of the state. The reaction was a crisis of legitimacy and growth of grievances within the public.

The new communicative sphere, freed by the control of Berlusconi, furthered the diffusion of anti-establishment discourses and a great level of mistrust towards official narratives. The nexus between Berlusconi and the mass media was already crystal clear to many years before, however the burden of economic hardship made it unbearable. Pushed forward online and offline by social movements such as the ‘*Popolo Viola*’, the blog and the initiatives of Beppe Grillo, the whole political class, the traditional media, the financial and European elites were perceived so corrupt and unreliable that they needed to be removed completely.

If one considers the tradition of aversion towards the ‘*partitocrazia*’, then it is easy to believe internet users mistrust official versions in favour of alternative

information online; especially so if some of these alternative sources put forward a narrative of mistrust towards the political class and the traditional media. Berlusconi's media dominance could no longer hide or take attention away from such pressing issues. Berlusconi came to be identified as the mastermind behind the corrupted established political class from which he successfully depicted himself as distant 20 years before. Conversely, the low level of media pluralism backfired and his great usage of tabloid and populist language was no longer enough.

Conclusion

Here comes into play the case study of this paper. In fact, it was the comedian Beppe Grillo and the web guru Gianroberto Casaleggio that could respond better than anybody else to such a situation. In short they fully exploit the political, discursive and media structure of opportunity.

In terms of political opportunities, the crisis, the agreement of all mainstream parties towards austerity policies, as well as the continuous scandals of corruption and conflicts of interests within the political class left unaddressed a number of problems within society and clearly opened the party system to challenger actors. As will be analyzed in the following chapter, the *Movimento* aimed at providing a sort of common brand for local groups already active at the grassroots. Their idea is that these groups could then attempt to bring forward their struggles inside the national institutions. Individuals and pre-existing initiatives taken by both Grillo and others provided the ground on which the Five Star Movement was born (Bordignon and Ceccarelli, 2016, p. 134). Out of this cloud emerged the five founding issues recalled by the five stars of the

logo; public water, the environment, the growth of public transport, connectivity and development (Fabbri & Diani, 2015, p. 225). Therefore the political opportunity structure explains a good deal of its emergence.

That being said, Beppe Grillo, was in fact a well-known comedian even before the entrance into politics (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2013, p. 429). The comedian was formed within the peculiar cultural tradition of which Dario Fo can be considered the main 'exponent'. This peculiar line of political satire usually goes along with a grotesque, satirical and ridiculing representation of the state machine which often spills into the critique of '*partitocrazia*'. The latter discourse, present in public discourses over the last 40 years, took strength as a result of the economic crisis and the poor response of the party system. In terms of discursive opportunity structure, Grillo was then not only aware of the popularity of such discourse but he was intellectually forged by it.

Grillo was however able to tap into such opportunities that well because he was fully aware of the opportunity afforded by the media landscape. As will be further analyzed in the following chapter, the comedian in his career came to experience the importance of mass media and censorship, being banned from national television for some time. While, at first, the comedian did not like new technologies (ironically destroying a computer in a show in the 90s) his encounter with the web guru and entrepreneur Gianroberto Casaleggio slowly changed his mind (Turner, 2013, p. 180). The internet started acquiring political importance from 2005, after the foundation of the blog Beppegrillo.it, to slowly become the organizational base of his movement to be. Ultimately, the long partnership with Casaleggio allowed him to understand the affordances of the 'new media' better than anybody else in Italy. With the decreasing

trust towards the political establishment and the traditional media, the web gave trust, visibility and resonance to the 5SM. This aspect will however be fully explained in the following chapter.

In conclusion, this chapter identified the opportunity structure on which the 5SM emerged. It did so by taking an historical approach analyzing the three waves of 'populist' turmoil and the presence of a populist discourse of critique towards the '*partitocrazia*', the economic decline exacerbated by the crisis, the absence of an alternative from within the party system and lastly the changing media landscape on which Grillo capitalized. The latter holds great relevance and, given the increasing mediation of political communication, the paper also suggests its insertion within the 'structures of opportunities'.

Chapter 3: The emergence of the Five Star Movement

This final chapter will then demonstrate how the 5SM has capitalized on the opportunity structure analyzed in Chapter 2 and emerged as one of the major national political players. The task will be accomplished through the employment of primary sources, six interviews with members of the 5SM (one activist, one council mayor, two regional representatives, and a member of the European parliament), an analysis of the V-day rallies fully available online, as well as secondary sources. The chapter will conclude that the key in understanding the emergence of the peculiar actor of the 5SM lay in the analysis of the ‘new media’.

More specifically, Beppe Grillo and the 5SM fully exploited the affordances of the Web 2.0, making them resonate with the thin ideology of populism. Firstly, the internet was central in the ideology of cyber-populism and narrative construction of the Italian citizens as opposed to enemies of the established political and media elites. Secondly, Grillo greatly exploited the meta-function of web mentioned in Chapter 1 using the blog to construct an early reputation as a channel of counter-information as well as constituting the major tool of communication of the 5SM. Ultimately, the internet provided the 5SM with the footprints for the decentralized and open structure characterizing the organization of the *Movimento*. In the long term, together with a more pragmatic approach to politics, this last point was key for mobilizing a stable electorate.

Such arguments will be structured into three sections. The first section of this chapter will therefore explore how the 5SM depicts itself. The task includes what are the main tenets of its ideology, who are its enemies and its ‘people’ and how this is all

communicated. Such narrative, aimed at emphasizing a separation of the 5SM from the rest of the Italian party system, together with the use of social media, are important factors in explaining the success of the 5SM.

One should also consider how such a message is communicated on the ground, which will be analyzed in the second section focusing on the repertoire of mobilization of the 5SM. On one hand, such success is the result of over a decade of work by Grillo and Casaleggio, who understood the trend of declining trust in the establishment and the media and established their blog as a channel of counter-information. On the other, the 5SM presented some innovative features of mobilization on the ground that to some extent put into practice their ideology of online democracy. With the horizontal and decentralized structure borrowed from the online platform *meetups*, the 5SM promised anyone could enter the movement and the decision making process. The idea slowly picked up, empowering local groups which elected their own members to whom was given national coverage.

In the third section, I will then investigate how the *Movimento* performed in the national arena over time as well as the composition of its electorate, confirming how the movement consolidated into some more institutionalized actors that enjoy a stable support from both previous right and left wing voters.

The ideology of the Five Star Movement

To begin with, the thesis stated in the introduction how the ideological orientation of the *Movimento* has attracted wide curiosity. Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio, the web entrepreneur who passed away in 2016, co-founder of the 5SM and whose

'Casaleggio Associati' managed the blog of Grillo, put forward a rather radical ideology that mixes aspects of populism and cyber-libertarianism calling for direct democracy through the net (Deseriis, 2017, p. 1; Natale & Ballatore, 2014, p. 112). According to its charter, *"The Movimento 5 Stelle is not a political party, its objective being the realization of an effective exchange of opinions and democratic debate outside the associational and party bonds and without the mediation of directive of representative bodies, recognizing to the totality of internet users the role of government normally entrusted to a minority"* (Non-statuto M5S, Art. 5).

Thus, it is a movement that seeks to radically challenge representative democracies and established party systems. From such statement, one can also detect the centrality of the internet. Founded in 2009 to bring together the *"experiences of the blog, the meetups, the rallies, and a number of other popular initiatives"* (Non-statuto M5S, Art. 5), the five stars of the logo represent the five starting issues: safeguarding of water and environment, the growth of public transport, connectivity and development. Moreover, by statute the movement has no official physical location which has instead to be found online (Non-statuto M5S, Art. 4).

Such web-based vision has been mainly associated with Casaleggio. In fact, it was him that introduced Grillo to the wonders of the web in the early 2000s and managed his blog via his company *'Casaleggio Associati Srl'* (Florida & Vignati, 2014, p. 7). To fully grasp the ideological underpinning of the 5SM one should begin researching from Casaleggio's personal views. In this regard, the entrepreneur released a number of interviews mentioning the sources on which he built his worldview. While some of them are of less scientific relevance than the others, most of them are authors and scholars

coming from scientific disciplines, mainly physics. Some examples here are Johnson's (2001) "*Emergence. The connected lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software*", that analyzes the ability of organisms to create increasingly more complex and sophisticated mechanisms of self-organization and applied it to the web; Watts' (2004) "*Six Degrees. The Science of a Connected Age*", about network theory and sociology written by a researcher for Microsoft; or Rheingold's (2002) "*Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*", a media critic who researched into how the network augments and improves new forms of collective intelligence.

In short, they all shared a deterministic view of technology applied to social change (Florida & Vignati, 2014, p. 7). In other words, Casaleggio and ultimately the 5SM were influenced by cyber-libertarian discourses. As clarified in Chapter 1 however, cyber-libertarianism is far from being a single and well defined school of thought. Instead, it has been highlighted how it is composed of a capitalist strand conceiving information as a commodity, a communalist one that conceives information as a common good and an activist one that sees it as instrumental to achieve a public good (Deseriis, 2017, p. 3). Such diversity necessarily recurs into tensions, such as the recurring one of internet as the 'neoliberal electronic marketplace' as opposed to the 'agora' of direct democracy. The 5SM arguably reproduces all these tensions within its legacy (Natale & Ballatore, 2014).

Firstly, the claims of Grillo and Casaleggio resemble the utopianism of cyber-libertarianism. From the early days of the *Movimento* until today, the web is depicted by two founders as a mythical entity. It is seen as a transparent and coherent being with a disruptive agenda and its own laws which will be able to cure the ills of Italy and the rest

of the world, leading therefore towards a brighter future. It is a ‘supermedium’, as it will change political, social, informational and organizational processes (Natale & Ballatore, 2014, p. 113). A first consequence of the new medium would be to foster democracy by reducing corruption through its transparency. An example is when Grillo states that “*it would be great if this money could be monitored on the Web. [...] One doesn’t steal through the Web*”, which resulted in the 5SM parliamentarians having to publish their wages online (Casaleggio and Grillo in Natale & Ballatore, 2014, p. 114).

Moreover, just as cyber-utopianists are faithful to their self-organizing systems, so are the two founders in the possibility of doing away with representative democracy. Underplaying the role that new intermediaries (like themselves, the blog and/or big corporations) play, they have constantly argued that internet does not need nor want intermediaries (Natale & Ballatore, 2014, p. 115). Furthermore, the new technologies of communication with their horizontal networks will ultimately eradicate the need for representation and hierarchy (Florida & Vignati, 2014, p. 70). Another consequence would be the moralization of politics.

The stated goal of Grillo’s movement is in fact to achieve a direct democracy where people rule without intermediaries such as politicians and political parties, an objective that is described as achievable through means of information communication technology. As shown in Chapter 1, this objective equates citizens to internet users, while the rule of the people that is normally exercised through direct democracy translates into online democracy (or e-democracy). For instance Interviewee 1, a 5SM activist and web developer from Marche, cited Pierre Levy and the concept of collective intelligence. He argued that “*If we have an intelligence made of more minds, with diverse competences*

and specializations the result will surely be more efficient”: this will be a “*revolutionary alternative to the politics of leadership of today’s politics*”. While he admitted that they still had problems in implementing it in practice (at the time, in 2016, Rousseau had just been launched) he continued that the result will be “*like in the Greek polis where everyone could take part in the democratic process*” (Interview 1).⁶

For Grillo however, such a concept of online democracy does not simply equate to a conversation between atomized individuals sitting in front of their screens, replying or posting comments or proposals through the blog, the meetups, or their new platform of e-democracy Rousseau. In Grillo’s words, online democracy will also result in offline participation, with decentralized offline local groups of collaboration where citizens will have to contribute in person in order to change things. In the 5SM’s words, it is the common person that has the duty to re-appropriate their own power. Accordingly, the oppression of the economic, political, technocratic and media elites has taken away dignity, but the new media environment is providing an opportunity to citizens that are willing to participate. In this context the 5SM pretends to be the political expression of such an opportunity. Through the internet, the 5SM claims to regain the full control that globalization together with a corrupted caste of politician has taken away.

In such a worldview, where citizens would replace established parties’ representatives, it is easy to capture the dichotomous conception of society typical of the

⁶ Rousseau is the platform of e-democracy developed by the Casaleggio Associati shortly before Casaleggio’s death. The platform divides in ten areas some of which are not fully activated yet. Without dwelling into the technicalities, it suffices to know that the platform is intended to allow for voting in local, regional and national legislations and choosing candidates via majority voting. The platform also allows proposing one’s own legislation and to vote on expulsions even though the functionality of such new options are still matter of debate within the 5SM. There are also a number of criticisms, as the platform is not open source and Casaleggio Associati has exclusive access to all the databases of both transactions and registered members (Deseriis, 2017b).

populist ideology. On one side there are the evil enemies, the corrupted political, economic and media elites, while on the other there are the people whose power has been taken away. In fact, the easiest theme to identify in the political rhetoric of the 5SM is the critique of the castes, observable from the very first V-day to present day blog posts. As early as 2008 in fact Grillo was shouting that “*when we talk about unlawful people, we naturally think of unauthorized windscreen cleaners, car park attendants or prostitutes, while the real unlawful people are in our Parliament*” (V2-Day, 2008). Proposing the recurring critique of the ‘*partitocrazia*’, the 5SM argues that Italy is more of an oligarchy than a democracy, where the main established parties reduced the duty of governing to the protection of their own interests and privileges. Such parties, regardless of their political ideology, are unitary in their corruptness and represent the ‘caste’. These politicians are authoritarians, anti-democratic, power-obsessed, obsolete and live in their own separate privileged world.

Furthermore, the caste of politicians is portrayed to be served by another caste, that of the journalists that run the press and the national television channels (hereby the ‘traditional media’). Grillo and Casaleggio repeated constantly that the instalment of such hypocritical political class was possible only through tools that allowed for truth covering and lying. The removal of such evil elites can only happen through impartial channels of communications. Thus, on one hand, there are the evil elites, to which bankers and sometimes the European Union are associated, while on the other, there are the ‘citizens’ who have virtuous qualities but lost their sovereignty.

Such ‘people’ do not have the particular nationalistic or ethnic connotations of right wing populism, but rather are defined as citizens. Indeed, the 5SM attempts to

address as wide an area as possible, trying to tie in both right and left wing dissatisfied voters. Some in fact defined it as a ‘catch all anti-party party’ (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2016). As will be shown below, Grillo was especially attentive to address many of those unsatisfied demands emerging within Italian society already in the early days of the blog, which were then grouped against the main enemies. Given that these ‘people’ are described as pure, the 5SM also refused any mediation with the political parties as it would mean contamination. This differentiation of the 5SM from the established parties is thus pivotal in the discourses of the *Movimento* and it is performed in a number of ways.

For instance, the 5SM representatives elected in the institutions called themselves ‘citizens’, rather than politicians. As the five interviewees all stated, the representatives of the *Movimento* are supposed to be simply functionaries, in the hand of the citizens. The latter are the contractors of such functionaries, who can be turned over and expelled if they break the rules of the community. Thus, here is one of the key rules the 5SM of the ‘*rotazione delle cariche*’, whereby elected ‘citizens’ can only serve a maximum of two mandates.

Moreover, this is evident at the discursive level too. For instance, Arredondo’s discourse analysis (2014) showed how the internet was once again key in portraying such separation. Internet politics is an articulation of the master signifier of ‘the people’, in turn used to reiterate the distance from the establishment. For instance, the separation between the ‘people’ and the ‘elite’ can be seen in the juxtaposition of the web as opposed to traditional media. In attacking the political caste and its servants, the traditional media (or the ‘*fascismo d’informazione*’), there needs to be a tool that could

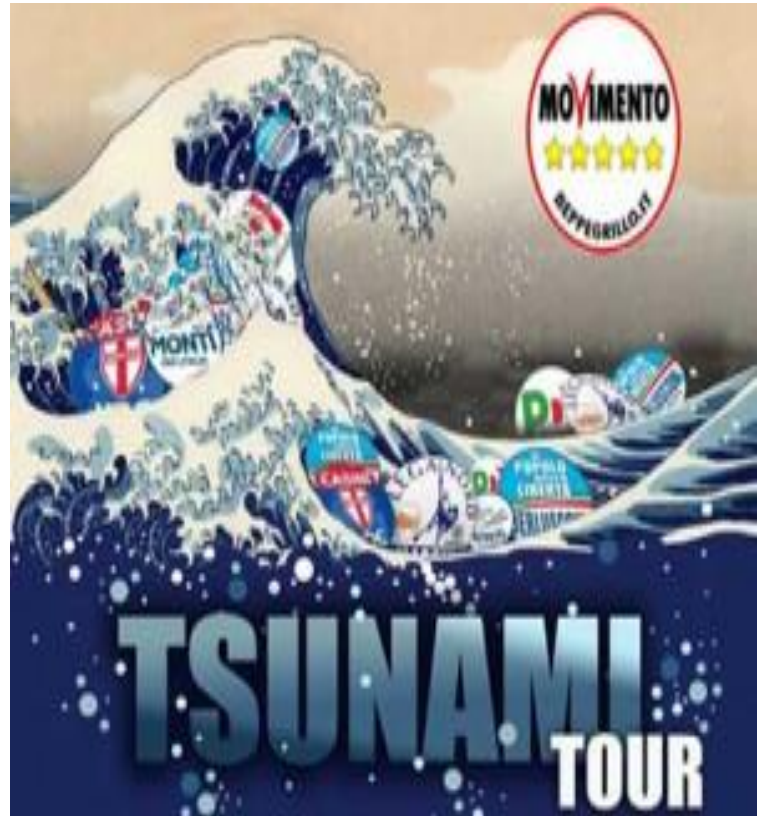
replace it with reliable information. For Grillo this is the role of the web and he states in clear terms: *“Our strongest weapon is making fun of them [..]. We got to fight this type of fascism, that you cannot see nor distinguish easily, the one that smiles and shows you chicks in bikini and makes fun of you. They are scared of the truth; but now there is internet [..]. We, molecules of the cyberspace, we started sharing ideas and problems, doing chats and forums together on my blog, that you made became the eight in world. We created the meet-up and we started doing things on the ground”* (V2-Day, 2008).

This is only an extract from the forty-minute opening of Grillo at the V2-day, but the rest of the event clearly shows the same theme.

Similarly, the opposition between the elite and the people also develops through the theme of old versus new. The traditional media are described as old, just like the MPs of the established parties mainly composed of over forty year old men. This is counter posed to the new media, and the young energies that 5SM would bring through. This is often brought to an extreme in referring to the *‘partitocrazia’* as a walking dead: *“The political parties are dead. Citizens need to detach themselves from the dead while they are still in time”*; *“Politics is long since dead. Only vultures remain, who divide up the body of Italy”* (PC19 & 28, In Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2013, p. 435). Accordingly, political parties will soon die and will be replaced with the web-based new style of politics of the 5SM.

The same opposition also echoes in the juxtaposition of passivity versus activity. Grillo is always careful to associate to the 5SM an image of activity and energy in most statements. The image in the next page provides a good example here. Taken from the national campaigns of 2013, Grillo evoked the metaphor of a tsunami washing away the

corrupted caste of politicians. The tsunamic wave gives the idea of power and activity as opposed to the passivity of the politicians and the established parties. This also applies to the media. For instance, in the V2 Day Grillo shouted that televised politics deprives people of agency as they are reduced and derided to *“be trapped in a circus cage for hours”* (Grillo V2-day).



According to the comedian,

television is ideal to create passive citizens that could tolerate the abuses of the ‘caste’.

As Interviewee 1 put it, *“we [activists] need to challenge the shaman of the television box, where everything it says is true”*.

As shown in Chapter 1, internet users have a relatively more active role in the selection of information. Grillo and Casaleggio are well aware of it, and they push it even further arguing that, since it favours political activity, it has a public role. This is another juxtaposition that Grillo often uses, contrasting the private versus public dimension (Arredondo, 2014). The tension here is within an alleged public role for the internet as opposed to the realm of televised politics, which is likely to push forward private needs. According to the claims of Grillo, televised politics is about personalization and

hedonism. It is for fame-seeking politicians to self-promote. The web is instead supposed to be the opposite by being a transparent tool where one cannot control the flow of information. While it will be shown that the 5SM's 'direct democracy' turned out to take place through the private platform of e-democracy 'Rousseau' owned by the 'Casaleggio Associati', the claim nonetheless remained a recurring theme.

Ultimately, but strictly connected to the above, is the related theme of reality versus distorted lies (Arredondo, 2014). For instance, this is clearly observable in the extract cited above: "*They are afraid of the truth, but now there is internet*". Arredondo (2014) demonstrated the presence of such a theme in an analysis of a number of blog posts dating up to 2014. The argument here is simple but important, "*The citizens who find information online do not watch TV and do not read newspapers. They live in a parallel dimension. They are informed, the others are misinformed by Power*" (Casaleggio & Grillo, 2011 p. 10). From the early start of the blog in 2005 till today, the language regarding this theme remains unchanged and the term "*fascismo d'informazione*" is constantly repeated in numerous posts, to refer to traditional media. The web is confidently defined as "*the medium that gets closest to the truth*" even though there are scams, hoaxes, and unreliable news (Casaleggio & Grillo, 2011, p. 88).

Arguably, the theme represents a conscious attempt of exploiting the meta-function of the web mentioned in Chapter 1. The argument is even clearer if one observes the statements of Grillo during the early days of his blog.

The significance of the blog

In fact, Grillo and Casaleggio started campaigning long before the foundation of the

movement. By 2005 they started building credibility in their blog online and established it as a channel of counter-information. Such actions need to be placed in the overall trend of declining trust towards established parties and traditional media. As argued in the previous chapters, one could expect internet users in Italy to be already suspicious of authorities and receptive of anti-establishment messages. Within such environment, Grillo's visibility and personal history had a peculiar position.

For decades, the comedian depicted himself as a victim of media and politics that excluded him from television. Grillo became famous in the late 80s in Italy, as a comedian and presenter. As early as 1986, however, he was censored by national TV, after polemical jokes towards the then in-power socialist party of Bettino Craxi. The comic managed to come back to the Rai only in 1993 with two successful monologues critical of banks, politicians and Italian lifestyle (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2016, p. 134).

By that moment however, Grillo dedicated himself mainly to live events in theatres, with only a few appearances on pay-tv channels such as *'Telepiù'*, mixing entertainment with issues of public interests and his shows took on an increasingly marked aspect of counter-information (Natale & Ballatore, 2014, p. 107). From critiques of the Italian elites, the comic opened to more international themes such as consumerism, globalization, financial speculation and ecology. On one famous occasion, criticizing the mismanagement of a number of Italian companies, Grillo predicted on stage the bankruptcy of *'Parmalat'*, which happened few weeks after. Whether more or less conscious, Grillo was building for himself a reputation as a source of counter-information. Meanwhile Casaleggio introduced Grillo to the potentialities of the web. By January 2005 the *'Casaleggio Associati'* launched the blog *'Beppegrillo.it'*. This coupled

a numbers of tours of the comedian named with the same URL of the website. One could argue that his shows turned into campaigns here (Natale & Ballatore, 2014, p. 108).

The blog had a post per day showcasing a variety of multimedia content, videos, interviews, satirical mashups, and political communiques. The blog, publicized by the live shows, soon came to be the most visited in Italy. Moreover, the comedian launched various single-issue campaigns on the platform. These go from a number of referenda to environmental issues, abolition of public financing of parties and media, to attempts to make MPs with criminal record ineligible again (Natale & Ballatore, 2014, p. 108).

The interviews highlighted the importance of establishing the blog as a channel of ‘counter-information’. In this regard, Interviewee 4, a freshly elected European parliamentarian, stated that the initial approach to Grillo’s ideas was through the blog. The parliamentarian liked the blog as it give him the *“effetto report, with a post per day with a relatively in depth analysis on issues of common interest. You would look at them, get surprised, get pissed off, and then realize you have nothing to do to fix this”* (Interview 4). By ‘report effect’ is precisely meant the feeling of surprise when someone finds evidence that goes against mainstream narrative.

From the above extract there emerges another element of the early campaigning strategy of Grillo. By *“common interest”*, Interviewee 4 implicitly shows how the choice

of content of the blog aimed to address unsatisfied demands within Italian society. Grillo in fact always proved to be attentive to the socio-economic issues of younger generations. As mentioned in Chapter Two, since the 1980s all the way to the 2008 crisis, the Italian economic growth was very slow and at times even negative (Pianta, 2012, p. 3). This fact affected mainly new workers entering the

market with an increase of youths in precarious jobs and, to a lesser extent, unemployment, a decrease in the quality of public services, easier tax evasion, and a general impoverishment of the southern regions. Indeed, the ‘*Casaleggio Associati*’ collected a number of these testimonies on his blog and published them in ‘*Schiavi moderni*’ (*Modern slaves*) (Bouillaud, 2016).

These themes could then be directly employed in electoral campaigns. The image above is the slogan for a regional election in Lombardia and it states: “*Don’t know who to vote for? Ask about the future of your son*”.

In addition, the blog was attentive to other key but unaddressed problems such as mafia and environmental issues. The blog not only reviewed Saviano’s best seller ‘*Gomorra*’ (2006) on the contemporary mafia in Campania, but posted often about the connections between the mafia and the state as well as addressing related issues such as the recycling of toxic waste, and opposition to the ‘*grandi opere*’ (major infrastructure works) such as the NO TAV movement in Northern Italy (Diani & Fabbri, 2015, p. 223).

Non sai chi **Votare?
Chiedilo al futuro di tuo figlio**



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Il tuo futuro puoi deciderlo tu.**

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In brief, the blog touched on issues close to most grassroots organizations in the country. All such posts contributed to the “report effect” mentioned by Interviewee 4 and therefore one can see how at this early stage Grillo managed to acquire a public status as an independent source of counter-information.

The relevance of the element of counter-information appears even more clearly in the words of the less institutionalized activist. Interviewee 1, an activist from central Italy, claimed that they were “*spreading a culture of dissent*”. Alongside the above reported, Interviewee 1 passionately argued that “*We are in a ‘war’ against established media*”. Interviewee 5 stated that Grillo’s figure, personality and web savviness were necessary to contrast the communication wall of the establishment. To surmount such a wall one needs capital and the ability to reach wide audiences, this “*is what Grillo did for the movement, he is no more than an instrument for the movement*” (Interview 3).

Beppe Grillo thus rode the wave of the change of media landscape. The argument appealed to in the first chapter, that people mistrust institutions and institutionalized media in favour of such ‘new media’ (Aupers, 2012; Quandt, 2012; Van Zoonen, 2012), demonstrates its empirical relevance. In the complex and increasingly more fragmented societies, driven by individualism and increasing autonomy, a centralized media would naturally struggle to reach and represent the need of each part of society. This is increasingly true for younger generations. Besides, the economic system augments inequality and the social exclusion augments the mistrust and the common fear of hidden agendas and ulterior motives (Quandt, 2012, p. 17). In this sense then the ‘new media’ create an environment from which populist actors can benefit.

While the above trend is visible at the systemic level of ‘hypercomplex western

societies' (Quandt, 2012, p. 14), this is arguably more intense in Italy. Not only did the country have a level of media pluralism lower than any other western country, but it also coupled with the economic crisis and recurring crises that from the 70s onwards developed in a long critique of the party system. The 'creative audience' of Web 2.0 was faced by a national media landscape in stark contrast with its mode of communication. These factors resulted in a complete lack of trust towards the political system. Indeed, in a climate of generalized mistrust, the establishment of reliability assumes great importance. The comic and Casaleggio understood such changes better than anybody else in Italy and took the fullest advantage.

Besides, Grillo coupled such online activism with offline activism too, with the so-called V-day rallies. For instance, in 2008, Grillo launched his V2-day in Turin which was broadcasted in a number of other squares in Italy. The official goal here was to collect signatures to call for the abolishment of the '*Legge Gasparri*', culpable of favouring the media empire of Berlusconi, as well as for the abolishment of the '*albo dei giornalisti*' and for the ending of state subsidies to newspapers. In practice however, the events are further attempts to link all the unsatisfied demands. They symbolize the birth of Grillo as the political mobilizer that we know today.

For the event, the comic invited a number of individuals targeting the very diverse areas that will compose the electorate of the 5SM. These included a number of 5SM activists from the local meetup groups, Luigi De Magistris (former prosecutor and politician, popular figure known for his struggle against mafia in politics), an activist from 'No dal Molin' (movement against the enlargement of NATO military base in Vicenza), Adriano Celentano (pop-singer), Natalino Balasso (comedian), Boschini

(Coordinator of the project "Comuni Virtuosi"), a NO-TAV activist (movement against high-speed trains line in Aosta), Bazzoni (worker), Poldo Tartaglia (Professor at Polytechnic University of Turin), Paul Connet (Chemistry professor from New York), Vassalle (Lawyer), Roberto Fico (meet up of Napoli), Beppe Scienza (Professor of mathematics at University of Turin), Martinelli (journalist), Palazzetti (engineer), Marco Travaglio (investigative journalist, writer and popular figure), Maria Fida Moro (daughter of Aldo Moro, Prime Minister assassinated in 1978).

The public figures somehow linked to a legalistic area, such as De Magistris, Travaglio, the daughter of Aldo Moro, the lawyers, as well as the constant personal stories and jokes about his own life, give an idea of transparency and opposition to illegality. The professors and the authoritative figures arguably give credibility to the counter-information aspect of the event, the exponents of various grassroots organizations symbolized humbleness, link to the base as well as dissent and action. The irreverent style and jokes of Grillo, together with the intervention of respected celebrities such as Celentano, locate the discourse into a branch of Italian popular culture, moving it further from the technical realm of politics and closer to the personal emotive sphere. Ultimately, it was Grillo who brought everything together, linking all the demands emerged on the stage. The web, as already analyzed above, was the '*point de caption*', where all these issues converged (Arredondo, 2014). All of this was conducive to the major message of the event: the construction of a clear break with the established political environment.

The use of social media

Furthermore, all the above was communicated mainly via the media of internet, firstly on Grillo's blog, then on social media as well as with offline rallies and activists' mobilization. Only after 2013 did Grillo allow 5SM members to appear and release interviews to member of the press and national television.

Chapter 1 has argued that social media gives the illusion that participation is open and accessible to everyone. With a simple 'like' one can show support and became symbolically part of the cause. Regardless of whether it is a single issue campaign, a social movement or a political party with a strict control of the content shared, social media provide this idea of an easy, free and direct involvement, with regular updates and information (Bartlett, 2014). The directedness and refusal of mediation of populism has the potential to benefit from such communicative architecture of the new media.

The 5SM can easily demonstrate the validity of this argument. In Italy Grillo was the first politician to embrace social media as a primary medium of communication. In fact, the comedian is still a regular tweeter as well as the most followed politically related figure on Facebook. Conversely, politicians from the established parties made very poor use of social media. By November 2012, Grillo had 700, 556 followers on Facebook, while the second most followed was the leftist Nichi Vendola with 236,436 and Bersani, the leader of the Democratic Party, was the third with only 146,088 (Bartlett et al, 2013, pp. 29-34). This provided the comedian a higher online visibility and resonance than any other politicians. At this stage, one can comment that the meta-function of web, together with the visibility allowed by Web 2.0, accounted for most of the 5SM success.

However, after their defeat in the national elections of 2013 both the Northern League and the Democratic Party had to renovate and elected two new, young and media-

savvy leaders; Matteo Salvini and Matteo Renzi. The two are not only highly visible on social media but also benefit from positive coverage on national television, therefore playing with a clear advantage in terms of visibility. Renzi, employing a people-centered style of communication, even took over the primacy on Twitter. Salvini too is highly active on both Facebook and Twitter. The new leader revolutionized the populist Northern League, shifting from the previous regionalist focus to an agenda more in line with other contemporary right wing populists in Europe concerned by immigration, liberal elites and the European Union. Furthermore, he often appeals to the meta-function of the web too, thanks to which he claims to overcome the lies of the establishment.

Thus, apart an initial lack of competition, the 5SM was soon to be faced with a saturated media environment. Nonetheless, despite an apparent decline following the 2013 elections, the 5SM continued to consolidate (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2016). Therefore, the use of social media and the blog cannot solely explain the constancy in the political support of the 5SM and there must be other factors at play.

The organization of the Movimento

From the analysis of the modes of communication employed by the 5SM I will now move to discuss how the support was mobilized on the ground, which was effected via a novel and highly decentralized structure which once again borrows its form from the internet. During the V-day rallies, Grillo started advocating activist action at the local level through the online platforms' *meetups*. The structure that emerged will be one of the major agents of the political 'success' of the 5SM as, in an attempt to put the preached direct democracy into practice, it did empower its activists.

Meetups is a simple platform that allows an online space to plan initiatives and meetings offline. Thanks to the early communicative work of Grillo and the few activists, the *Movimento* started expanding to local areas through meetings launched on the platform. The lobbying work of Grillo and the early activists often managed to intercept and intersect with already mature local protest groups, happy at acquiring a national voice. This slowly expanded and, in 2015 for instance, there were around 3000 Five Star Meetups with 300,000 members. Each group would discuss and bring forward their autonomous initiatives without any interference from the head of the 5SM. Grillo then relaunched the successful ones via internet.

Soon, some groups elected candidates within their own localities. It is interesting that the realities of local meetups are different from each other, as they developed around the achievement of single local issues in a country with a very diverse political culture. The few requirements stipulated in the ‘non-statute’ were to be a resident in the area of interest, not having been part of political parties and having a clean criminal record (Grillo, 2009). In this early phase the organization had elements of horizontality, openness and decentralization. The blog, and therefore Grillo and Casaleggio, provided the center of a radically decentralized organization.

The looseness of the structure had important impacts. All the interviewees for instance claimed to be enticed to the *Movimento* because of its alleged horizontality, openness and direct democracy. Interviewee 3, a regional councillor, for example was convinced of the empowering side of the web and attempted to demonstrate such argument with his own story. He stated that “[I] *Never been into politics. I followed Grillo for a long time and then the fact that it has been already 15-16 years that an*

oligarchy has been installed in Italy made take action. I understood that it was a masked regime similar to dictatorship. So I started fighting for environmental issues, despite not being academic, I took up culture, learnt and studied online and offline". Interviewee 3 had a slightly different profile than the average 5SM's voter. The man was in his sixties with no formal education, and he started researching gas stocking procedures and its risks online after the approval of one under his city. He became one of the most respected figures of the *Movimento* in the Marche, as he stood up against the gas stocking corporation, winning local election, and managing to put the project on hold.

In his case the web provided knowledge that he managed to make work, while the 5SM was just a tool for such struggle. "*Grillo put his face and fame, knowledge, square rallies, satire, he catalyzed indignation in the 5 Stars, creating a consensus around it. He went all over the place for this, making an incredible communicative action. We need to thank him for that. The project is nothing else than a means. As a consequence you can find any type of people inside*" (Interview 3). Similarly, Interviewee 5 stated that, before joining the movement, she undertook years of environmental activism. In both cases, the *Movimento* was a tool to place their issue into a more structured frame that could represent them at a regional and national level. The looseness and lack of interference from the head of the organization were key in ensuring their support. The other interviewees too suggested a sense of empowerment as key to their support. In the case of Interviewee 2, there were no previous local activist groups that joined in his local meetup. In this case a group of acquaintances with no political experience started meeting, it slowly enlarged and in 2016 it won the council of the small town in the Pesaro province. The interviewees were attracted by the participatory side of it, the fact that it "*leaves the*

door open to everyone. When you find something that doesn't work, you just say; look, it doesn't work" (Interview 1). Interviewee 4 too like the idea of the meetups: *"I proposed this workshop on the environment, people were receptive and from there it went on"* (Interview 4).

Arguably, in this structure we can see the application of the ideas of cyber-populism. The web provided a model of organization that was then adapted, or at least attempted to be, into the reality of a social movement. In addition to the connection of loosely decentralized meetup groups that emerged outside the institutions, the 5SM applied the cyber-libertarian belief that digital information should be easily shareable, editable and actionable, pushing citizens to take political action into their own hands.

Ultimately, one can find the notion embedded in the open source mode of governance that 'a network can govern itself' as the structure and the local decisions are open to inputs by the base of their members and activists. In this regard Interview 1 argued that at a theoretical level this is an attempt of actualizing the concept of collective intelligence, where the collaboration, collective efforts and competitions of many individual brings about the possibility of a new politics. As a consequence, Grillo often reiterated that the members of the *Movimento* take key decisions collectively. This is pushed even further when the comedian argues that the 5SM willingly does not take a priori positions on issues such as immigration and membership of the European Union as they have to be decided from below. In this way the 5SM avoids having a clear political platform in the manner of traditional parties, and manage to keep together an ideologically diverse electorate.

In short, the 5SM can be said to be in favour of both ‘direct’ and ‘participative’ democracy. While often overlooked, these strains do exist and are visible in the practices at local level (Floridaia & Vignati, 2013, p. 5). Moreover, they are comparable to the structures employed by contemporary social movement such as ‘Occupy’, the ‘Indignados’ and the pirate parties in Northern Europe. However, in addition to such level of horizontality, there is also a contradictory strong element of verticality that does not appear in the narrative of Grillo, but cannot be overlooked in academic practices.

Firstly, there is no virtual mechanism for party members to challenge the power of Grillo. As mentioned above, Beppe Grillo owns the logo and has the power to exclude anyone from it. Despite the fact that he claimed not to be willing to run for presidency, calling himself a guarantor, he intervened more than once expelling members from the movement. While on some occasions this might have proven beneficial by providing unity, there is an undisputed lack of checks and balances. For instance, the attempted expulsions of the mayor of Parma, Pizzarotti, and the recent one of Marika Cassimatis for internal undisclosed reasons have raised numerous concerns even within the *Movimento*. Cassimatis even ended up suing the 5SM. This brings to the fore a first critique: the lack of internal democracy.

This leads to a second important criticism, the overall lack of transparency, which ironically is another major theme in the 5SM discourse. In this regard, the management and the communication have always been in the hands of ‘Casaleggio Associati Srl’, that is officially a profit-based e-commerce company that has at least generated revenue from advertisements on the website. While this was arguably understandable as those revenues helped kick-start a movement that was refusing public funding, it is worrying that the

relationship of the company with the 5SM has not been made fully clear to date.

Likewise, the long waited platform of e-democracy ‘Rousseau’ is managed by the president of the ‘Casaleggio Associati’; Davide Casaleggio (the son of the founder Gianroberto, who died in April 2016). Despite employing much of the early internet discourses and the focus on information, what strikes experts is the fact that the platform is not open-source (Deseriis, 2017b). While it is legally a separated entity, ‘Rousseau’ also shares the same address as the Casaleggio Associati. Moreover, Davide Casaleggio appears at e-commerce conferences and seems to be interested in practices of consumer surveillance to determine consumers’ web behaviors (Politi & Roberts, 2017, Sep 17). His position in the 5SM is not clear, leaving many suspicious. Some argued therefore that there are three conceptions of democracy at stake with the 5SM, a direct, participative and a ‘plebiscitarian’ (Floridia & Vignati, 2013, p. 5). As far as this research is concerned, there exists both a horizontal and a vertical element.

The institutional journey and the swinging electorate

The actions of the 5SM as well as the changing composition of the electorate confirm the above. Firstly, it should be noted that it took some time before a relevant base of support shared such ideas. Numbers confirm the alleged fast growth in popularity, but this was restricted to specific localities. When the 5SM won an incredible 25.5 percent of the Italian electorate in the national election of 2013, Interviewee 4 believed that 2/3 of the vote was mainly driven by the protest vote, without knowing the fundamentals of the 5SM. After the elections in fact the *Movimento* lost momentum, the electorate of the vote of protest dissipated, and opponents were eager to declare the end of the 5SM (Bordignon

& Ceccarini, 2016). This is a period in which the ability of 5SM to adapt was tested and the movement became what it is today; a political actor that is a constant work in progress (Interview 4) characterized by a '*trial and failure approach*' (interview 2); somehow less of Grillo's personal party, and a serious challenger for the forthcoming national elections.

After the election of 2013 the '*Movimento*'s radical stances towards the establishment necessarily gave way to internal problems rather than advancing real changes. The early 'Code of conduct', despite being relatively unstructured, established that 5SM parliamentarians could not appear on national television and could make no alliances with established parties. Here issues of expulsions and internal democracy were daily routine and from 163 the representatives went down to 127. Many have denounced the 5SM failure and authoritarian presence within the party, overriding the autonomy of the MPs. The inexperience of the newly elected 'citizens' as well as a challenging young new competitor, Matteo Renzi, added to the perception of defeat. Furthermore, support in the opinion polls also reduced and in the European election of that year Renzi and the PD obtained a surprising 40%.

Thus, Grillo introduced a number of changes and the movement entered into more pragmatic period in terms of its relationships with the political institutions (Diamanti, 2014). The ban on appearing on TV and on giving interviews was removed and Grillo stated the need for a more comprehensive representative structure; thus in September 2014 he formed the Directorate of the 5SM. Recalling the Directorate of the French revolution, Grillo decided to form a political body, composed of 5 'citizens' (as 5SM's parliamentarians call themselves) elected online through the newly launched platform

Rousseau. The five ‘citizens’; Di Battista, Di Maio, Fico, Ruocco and Sibilgia were the new leading figures of the movement and in charge of giving it a political line while Grillo could step back in the position of ‘guarantor’.

This is an important event as it accelerated a process of ‘normalization’ without transforming all of the peculiar characteristics of the 5SM (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2016, p. 138; Diamanti, 2014). Despite the fact that the candidates for the directorate were chosen from above and their online election only took a day, they took on an increasing public relevance, especially Di Maio and Di Battista. Opinions polls and data from social media show that soon they surpassed Grillo in popularity within their supporters, who also do not consider Grillo as a potential candidate (Diamanti, 2016). The fictitious (as he fully stepped back in 2016) retirement of Grillo shifted attention away from the accusations of lack of democracy, without however fixing them. Nonetheless, these changes seemed to have proven fruitful. In the regional elections of 2015, the 5SM polled 16.6%, a result that, despite being significantly lower than its previous achievement, was as a sign of consolidation.

The composition of the electorate:

	2013	2015*
ALL	25.6	27.1
<i>GENDER</i>		
Males	28.0	32.8
Females	22.9	20.8
<i>AGE CATEGORY</i>		
18–29	31.6	34.1
30–44	36.2	35.8
45–54	30.6	28.6
55–64	25.3	27.8
65 and over	9.0	11.7
<i>LEVEL OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT</i>		
Low	15.5	15.4
Medium	28.3	28.2
High	25.9	29.9
<i>OCCUPATIONAL CATEGORY</i>		
Manual workers	38.4	33.4
Clerks, teachers, technicians, functionaries	27.2	30.3
Artisans, small-business people, entrepreneurs	44.3	38.8
Self-employed professionals	32.4	36.0
Students	27.8	36.0
Housewives/househusbands	24.4	22.7
Unemployed	40.0	34.8
Pensioners	11.8	15.3
<i>GEOPOLITICAL AREA</i>		
North West	23.1**	20.3
North East	24.8**	19.2
'Red Belt'	25.7**	19.9
South Central	28.4**	32.1
South and Islands	26.8**	36.8

*The profile has been built on the basis of data drawn from three surveys carried out in September, October and November 2015 and involving a total of about 3,000 cases.

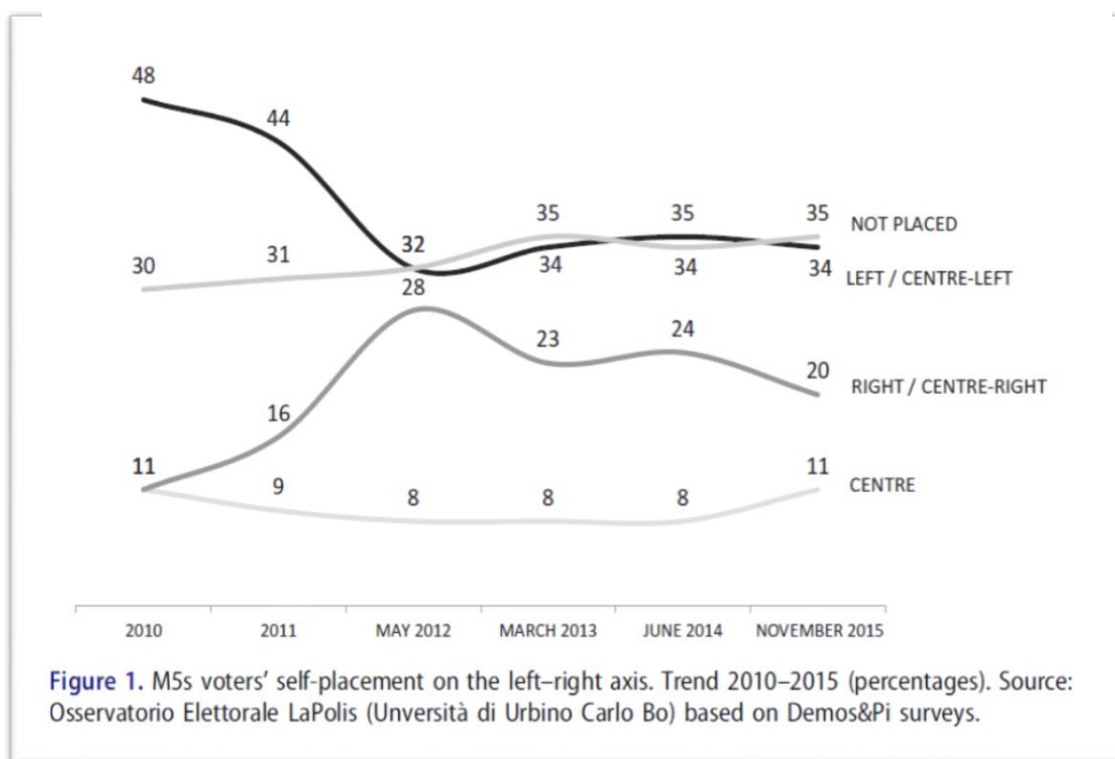
**Our elaboration of Ministry of the Interior data.

Source: Osservatorio Elettorale LaPolis (Università di Urbino Carlo Bo) based on Demos&Pi surveys.

te:

In line with what Interviewee 5 argued, now the *Movimento* enjoys a solid base at the local level of supporters that engage with the legacy of the 5SM Because of these

The ideological composition of the electorate:



changes, Diamanti argues that the movement showed structural elements of a political party too, therefore defining it as ‘movement party’ (2014). The above argument is reinforced by data on the electorate composition.

For instance, the stats above show that up to 2013, support was mainly from males and from northern regions, and the red belt of Tuscany, Emilia Romagna and the Marche, and the central southern regions such as Umbria and Abruzzi. In 2015, those same regions had a lower percentage of 5SM supporters, which instead increased in southern regions. While in terms of gender the electorate remained stable, the geographical spread of support changed significantly between 2013 and 2015.

The data should be considered together with the ideological composition of the same electorate taken from the graph below (In Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2016, p. 142).

In 2010, in fact, 48 % of the voters were supposedly dissatisfied left wing voters, while 30% did not place themselves within any political category and 10 % were coming from the right or center/right. By 2012, the amount of 5SM’s sympathizers coming from a right wing background seemed to have increased and by November 2015, the centre-right and right wing voters represented a third of the total voters. At the same time, the presence of ‘leftist’ and centre-left voters ‘decreased’ to 34%, while those that did not place themselves in any political spectrum accounted for 35% (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2016, p. 142).

One can then argue that the first wave of support was composed of dissatisfied leftists, as most of it came from the regions that are traditional leftist. In turn, such votes can be conceptualized as of protest and in fact they were lost soon after the election (Diamanti, 2014; interview 4). Interviewee 4 believed that “*in that 25 percent [of the*

2013 election] of the Italian electorate, a nucleus of 12 to 15 percent understood the themes of the movement such as environment or reddito di cittadinanza while the others had little to do with the 5SM. They just wanted to break with old politics, basically saying that, rather than those politicians, I vote for you”.

Therefore, the 5SM has claimed since its inception to be post-ideological, positioned neither on the left nor on the right. However, by 2015 these claims were in line with the empirical data mentioned above. While at first the discourse of a clear break with the establishment was key in the electoral success, one also needs to consider the way 5SM grew locally, with its open, decentralized and to an extent horizontal structure. The openness and loose structure empowered activists at the local level which in the long term was key to establish support. While many analyses of the 5SM focus on its vertical aspects, indeed a characteristic of the 5SM, these by themselves do not explain why the *Movimento* had the success that it had.

Conclusion

The third chapter looked at the ideology and discourses, the repertoire of mobilization, as well as tracing the development of the electorate of the 5SM over time and its behavior in the institutions. It emerged that the ‘new media’ was a key ingredient to their electoral success. The ideology adapted techno libertarian discourses to a populist ideology, and the web became key in constructing the ‘people’ and the enemies. It was also key for mobilization. The blog *beppegrillo.it* was established in 2005 and soon was considered a channel of counter-information as opposed to the established televisions. It also provided the format for an open, participative and horizontal model of local politics, based on the

platform meetup.

In fact, at the start of the movement one could argue that anti-elitist and people-centered themes have played a key role. Up to 2013, the 5SM was widely considered a protest movement, as more than half of their votes were a 'protest' vote. In this period the dissatisfaction towards the political and economic system favored the populist message of rupture. After the election however, the *Movimento*'s support surprisingly kept increasing. This was mainly because the decentralized structure of mobilization through the meetup platforms provided an open space for people to take part in politics without the mediation of party's institutions. Locals were all of a sudden inside the institutions, without much control at the local level coming from the core of the 5SM. This was coupled with the launch of the platform Rousseau, which promised local politics channels to contribute to the decision making process of the higher level of regional and national institutions. Thus, the internet provided the movement with an important format tool of political mobilization.

Conclusion and Discussion

In conclusion, the thesis argued that the emergence of the Five Star Movement is closely linked to the fact that the political actor fully exploited the opportunities of Web 2.0, making it resonate with the ideology of populism. Such opportunities have classified into three levels. Firstly, Web 2.0 favors a suspicious way of thinking that pushes forward the detachment of people from the establishment. People tend to increasingly believe in themselves more than grand narratives; for many the information that they can self-retrieve through the internet has become a more trustworthy source of information than the traditional ones (Van Zoonen, 2012). Thus regardless of fake news, hoaxes and bots, a good part of the public considers the internet more reliable than previous media of communication, albeit in an often uncritical way. This translates into the political realm with a distancing of the people from the political establishment and plays in favor of populist messages that are based on polarized views of society. Secondly, it might provide a rather closer type of communication with the citizens, with the potential of favouring populist styles of communication. This was key, mainly at the start of the movement, when the low level of media pluralism in Italy did not allow for other political actors to emerge. Thirdly, the web provided new ways of connecting with the people and mobilizing them.

To avoid technological deterministic approaches, the case study has been put into its social, economic and political context. Departing from this standpoint, the analysis revealed that the changing media landscape is not the sole cause of this detachment, but

one should keep in mind that the transformations of the media unfolds in conjunction with other critical social, economic and political changes. Such historical conjuncture has undoubtedly provided opportunities for populist actors such as the Five Star Movement.

In this regard the thesis deployed the concepts of Political, Discourse and Media Opportunity Structure. The analysis exposed that corruption and structural crises have constantly reproduced, over the last 40 years, the populist critique of the party system known as '*partitocrazia*'. When the financial crisis hit Italy, the already somehow favourable political and discursive opportunities widened. At the same time, such space was enlarged by a changing media landscape in short creating a political, discursive and media structure of opportunity favourable to anti-establishment actors. The web however played the key role in providing new ways of connecting with the electorate and penalizing those politicians that are not active on social media. In this regard then, political communication accounts are important to fully comprehend the reasons behind the emergence of actors such as the case under investigation in this thesis.

Ultimately, the Five Star Movement developed into a hybrid political actor where its structure mixes features of both social movements and established political parties. While it contains features of the 'party franchise' model (Carty, 2004), as the logo is property of Beppe Grillo, it continued to have that light organizational structure typical of social movements, at least at a local level. Another important point is that the 5SM lacks a clear political line on key social and economic issues. While this absence might be problematic in terms of programmatic coherence and capacity to govern, up to now it has worked in the 5SM's favour. Firstly, it allowed the 5SM not to divide and antagonize the diverse electorate. In fact the 5SM includes members that make statements from both a

right wing position, such as critical of immigration, refugees and the EU, and a leftist position in favor of civil rights and critical of neoliberal capitalism which has led some to label it as a catch-all, anti-party party (Diamanti, 2014).

Nonetheless, the *Movimento* certainly does not lack ideas and creativity. For instance, the logo of the 5SM by itself does not define a political program of the same type as traditional parties, but it is an aggregation of a number of demands unaddressed by mainstream parties. These range from denouncing the blatant corruption, to the demands for more federalism and localization of economic structures, to the critique of globalization and an attention to environmental issues such as the opposition to the major infrastructural works and the high-speed train lines in northern Italy. The 5SM also includes a focus on connectivity, public transport and a good deal of attention to those groups of the electorate that traditionally are marginalized and alienated from mainstream politics, for instance the youth in precarious jobs. No other parties in current Italian politics have covered such issues with such a resolve. Instead, both the traditional left and right wing parties in the country have tended to converge towards the same economic and social plans while faced with numerous scandals. The most easily observable result is the fact that their party membership is in decline, showing a growing detachment from the populace in a trend that is common to the whole western world.

Arguably, it can be said that it is the absence of a program that provides a new way of interaction with the social context as, according to the 5SM, such construction of a program is in the hands of the member of the *Movimento*. This supposedly bottom-up process needs the web to facilitate and promote itself. Whether one can disagree with the above statements, it is a matter of fact that with the help of Casaleggio, Grillo has been

successful in channeling the unsatisfied demands of the ‘people’ through a utopian vision of the internet whereby the suffering of such ‘people’ and their claims to self-determination and sovereignty are associated with the new technologies. This is what Gerbaudo (2014) calls ‘cyber-populism’.

Drawing back on the questions raised in Chapter 1 regarding whether the contemporary individualism facilitated by the use of the internet could match the unitary ideology of populism, the case study clearly suggests that it can, following in this way Gerbaudo’s argument (2014). More specifically, the unity of the ‘people’ of populism is to be found in the absence of a program, in an empty space left open to be filled with initiatives brought forward by member of the movement. The focus is therefore upon the action of policymaking, over the functioning of a participative and direct democracy. Questioning the extent to which such absence of a political line and the focus on the democratic procedure can be effective can be issue of further research.

Furthermore, not only is the 5SM the first actor of this kind to reach such results, but it exposes the ambivalence of such opportunities which can be conceived as both as empowering (Gerbaudo, 2014) and dangerous (Morozov, 2017). To be precise, the case study exemplifies an even larger debate over the ambivalence of the internet considered as a democratic and independent space as opposed to an area ruled by vertical forms of control. The idea of the 5SM of decentralizing political actions with the use of online platforms of e-democracy, such as ‘Rousseau’, can have benefits, cut costs and speed up processes of democratic politics at the local level. Such platforms nurture hopes for innovative forms of direct democracy. However, activists cannot afford to accept claims of direct democracy uncritically. Morozov (2016), for instance, warns of potential

dangers of associating cyber-libertarianism with populism. Before embracing such utopian view of the web, there should at least be a widespread social awareness of the importance of data which should be considered as public good. This is far from being a fact today.

‘Rousseau’ is a great example of such ambivalence. The platform is far from being open source and it has been critiqued of a transparency issues, being managed by few experts of ‘Casaleggio Associati’. Thus, the issue of ownership is at the core of the 5SM where vertical aspects clash with horizontal ones. Many observers argue as it stands today the balance tends to weight on the side of Grillo, as in many instances his power has seemed nearly absolute with no apparent mechanisms to leverage it. This could however change, as the 5SM has shown in instances where the base challenged decisions put forward by the leadership, as in the case related to migration issues. The fear in this regard is that the absence of a program, together with the presence of the strong leadership could transform the 5SM into Grillo’s personal party.

On a second note, the 5SM can also add to the wider debate on populism. As McCormick (2017) and others suggested (Negri, 2017), the concept of populism is far from being an unmitigated good, but it cannot just be dismissed and demonized because of its potential dangers. This thesis can arguably support this argument. Despite warnings about the potential possibility of authoritarian inflections within the movement, any accurate analysis cannot reduce the 5SM to a sole study of the leadership of Grillo nor simply label it as a protest or as an irrational outburst. It is outside the scope of this thesis to evaluate the extent to which the 5SM was a positive or negative response to the contemporary crisis of democracy. What is sure however, is that the movement attempted

to articulate a response to the contemporary period.

Ultimately, this falls closer to Kriesi's argument (2014, p. 376), who suggests that populist actors, far from being irrational outbursts, might eventually end up transforming their respective party system alongside ways that resemble the new conflicts of contemporary society. Certainly, the emergence of the 5SM symbolizes the ongoing crisis of western democracies while populist movements are, for now, likely to benefit from the potential for political mobilization that is integral to web-based modes of communication.

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Appendix A

Interviews:

Five semi-structured interviews were recorded in October 2016:

Interview 1; A 38-year-old male, a 5SM activist from Loreto, Marche, in Central Italy.

Interview 2; A 45-year-old male, newly elected 5SM Mayor in a small town council in The Marche, Central Italy.

Interview 3; A 62-year-old male, a regional counsellor in Ancona, Marche.

Interview 4; A 42- year-old 5SM male, representative at the European Parliament. From Emilia Romagna.

Interview 5; A 35-years-old female, regional counsellor in Ancona

Semi-structured interview template:

This is the basic template interview guide, which I adapted for each interview to suite the interviewee resulting in semi-structured interviews. I had an idea of where I wanted to get to. Interviewees then had to choose the roads and speak for most parts. I let them speak, listened to their narratives and only at times directed their conversation towards issues of interests. I often incorporated additional questions such as:

“What do you mean by... ?” “Can you tell me more about ... ?” “Then what happened?”

Can you tell me a bit about yourself? You can include things like what was your profession before getting into politics or what is your profession if you are just an activists or a volunteer.

Do you have a family?

When was the first time you heard about Beppe Grillo and the 5SM?

When did you decide to join and how? What do you do for it?

Who are these people that vote for you?

How do you think they feel about the situation? How do you?

I read an article arguing that people that vote for you share a feeling of disgust and indignation towards the ruling class. What do you think?

Representing a general malaise towards politics in general, how do you translate it in political action, how do you reconcile such antagonism with proactive action?

People seem to vote you because you are a citizen like us, with no previous political experience. Once elected then, how do you learn how to move?

What is the political school of the 5SM?

Do you use Rousseau?

How do you define the political economy of the movement?

So you state to be against this financial Europe, but would you in favor of a Europe politically more united?

Is there any political actor similar to you in Europe?