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Studying the Nexus between Collective Action Dynamics and the Web 2.0: A Continuous Learning Experience. A Reply to Comments

(doi: 10.2383/75771)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, settembre-dicembre 2013

Ente di afferenza:

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Studying the Nexus between Collective Action Dynamics and the Web 2.0

A Continuous Learning Experience. A Reply to Comments

by Elena Pavan

doi: 10.2383/75771

I would like to begin this response by thanking Bernie Hogan, Nicholas W. Jankowski, Brian D. Loader and Eugenia Siapera for their useful and insightful comments. A person could count on his/her fingers the number of times it is possible to ponder over her work confronting with such a panel of experts. Occasions like this one are to be welcomed as valuable learning experiences during which new knowledge can be acquired, our arguments can be better specified and we can critically reflect on the limits of our research.

Together, these four comments outline the contours of a much-needed research agenda to face the challenges that derive from three inherent features of socio-technical processes: their *diversity*, generated by the simultaneous involvement of social and technical agencies; their *dynamics*, stemming from the continuous evolution and change of both social actors and technologies; and their *complexity*, as relations established amongst and between social actors and technologies are countless and deploy recursively across the boundary between the online and offline spaces. In a context in which methodologies are still very fluid and a plurality of research efforts are carried on independently one from another, guidelines to build a common competence and shared research practices are urgently needed. Let me then try to summarize these guidelines, so that they can become a collective resource for a more rigorous and fine-grained research of contemporary socio-technical practices.

First, in order to account for the inherent dynamic feature of collective participation processes, which is now exaggerated by the mediation of information and

communication technologies, we should design and implement our research efforts as truly longitudinal. Indeed, it is only through a longitudinal approach that we will be able to detect and intellect the underlying continuity of collective efforts, which is too often hidden by the rapid flow of messages circulating online but which remains one of the main fundamental structuring processes to collective participation [see Della Porta and Diani 2006].

Second, in order to render and systematically address the feature of diversity, our inquiries not only should deploy across different technological platforms but they should also explicitly account for the diverse motivations that drive the actual uses of these platforms as well as for the diverse political contexts within which socio-technical collective efforts are pursued. Indeed, as Ward and Gibson effectively point out, political action today is pursued within a multifaceted opportunity structure, which is simultaneously “systemic and technological” [2009, 35] and it is the interplay of political and technological elements, rather than their disjointed effects, that affects the likelihood of collective efforts emergence and consolidation within the public sphere.

A systematic account of socio-technical diversity entails also an explicit acknowledgement of the diverse (active) roles that technology can play within collective action processes. On the one hand, communication technologies can be tools that empower political actors at various degrees, depending on how and how much their *material agency* is exploited [Leonardi 2012]. On the other hand, they are actual organizations whose choices on how to publicly display information (for example, on their interfaces) influence the actual deployment of online discourses [Elmer 2012] and whose data access policy affect our possibility to map and analyse collective practices online.

Third, the *complexity* that characterizes collective action today should be explored through the combination of different research methods, in particular to address the recursive definition of participatory dynamics across the online/offline boundary. Robert Ackland, in what constitutes one of the most recent efforts to systematically summarize concepts and methods of “Web social science” [Ackland 2013], reminds us that we can approach online processes through all sorts of qualitative and quantitative instruments that are proper of social science – from online ethnography to online surveying to online experiments passing through qualitative and quantitative content analysis, just to mention a few. As it happens for “offline” social research, these methods are not mutually exclusive but, rather, they provide complementary tools, which should be combined and results derived read in conjunction.

Thus, data generated by the application of (multiple) online and offline methods should be oriented towards the progressive generation of large-scale databas-

es, which will gather information on the diverse entities populating the hybrid social space as well as on the communications which structure collective efforts. Such databases should be shared to foster the development of common knowledge and research practices as well as to build the bridges that are necessary to understand the different articulations and variations of collective actions between mediation and physical realizations.

This is certainly a very dense research agenda and it could not be otherwise. Thus, its validity goes well beyond the study of collective action dynamics and it could easily be thought as an overall set of benchmarks to be applied in the study of all sorts of social and political processes which today are renewed, revamped and transformed by the active intervention of information and communication technologies. Despite its overall validity, though, when it comes to the investigation of collective political efforts, further challenges emerge.

On the one hand, because social movements and other forms of collective action do not exist a priori like a *unicum* but, rather, “assume the form of solidarity networks” [Melucci 1996, 4]; and, on the other hand, as Bernie Hogan pointed out “(social media) insert themselves, curate information and shift discourses from being something that *can be described as a network*, to being *something that is a network a priori*” (emphasis added), we might be tempted to classify and analyze any forms of *collective activity* pursued online in terms of *collective action*. However, to be fair, collective action is a specific and peculiar subset of “collective activities [aimed at] demanding and/or providing collective goods” [Baldassarri, 2009, 321]. In fact, as Tilly and Tarrow argued [2007, 5], *political collective action* is just a small part of all forms of collective action we encounter in our everyday life (e.g. neighbourhood, voluntary associations and even football teams).

Strictly speaking, collective actions are “coordinating efforts on behalf of shared interests and programs” [*ibidem*]: it is the presence of a shared cognitive framework (gathering common interests and translated into action programs) is what actually differentiates collective action *stricto sensu* from other forms of networked convergence allowed and/or facilitated by networked technologies. Thus, as Melucci pointed out, collective action results from the intertwinement of different structural processes, as “movements are not entities that move with the unity of goals attributed to them by ideologues. [...] Processes of mobilization, organizational forms, models of leadership, ideologies, and forms of communications – these are all meaningful levels of analysis for the reconstruction from the within of action systems that constitute the collective actor” [1996, 4]. Hence, when used as a guide for investigating collective political participation, the above mentioned research benchmarks to investigate socio-technical diversity, dynamics and complexity need to be applied with specific ref-

erence to all these different and yet interrelated structural processes, since they are all interested (each in its own way) by the mediation of information and communication technologies [Diani 2000].

This is why, in my opinion, a thorough research on the nexus between collective action and social media can and should be carried on making few steps at the time. We are certainly working under the pressure of everyday evidence, which is showing us that self expression or, to use Castell's words, "mass self-communication" [2011; 2012] often becomes a "civic narcissism" [Papacharissi 2009] with democratizing effects on the articulation of the public agenda. Also, as noted by Howard and colleagues [2011], online conversations across different platforms can have a stimulating effect on offline expressions of dissent. Despite this evidence, though, we still remain uncertain about the answer to some general questions: what does it really happen within these online networks so that they become true networks of dissent? How do acts of self-mass communication connect people, organizations, events and useful information so to become real "sources of social power?" How are increased conversational volumes developed so that they lead to offline mobilizations? In only a couple of years, many research efforts were produced and certainly contributed to shed new light on both online participation structures and even on the link that exists between new forms of participation and more conventional (offline) forms of contention. However, we have not fully succeeded yet in uncovering what online discursive dynamics have to say in terms of 'movements' organizational processes, leadership models, ideologies and forms of communication, to recall Melucci. Hence, unfolding online communication flows and their contribution to structural dimensions of collective action still remains a prerequisite to the assessment of how and how much these entwine with offline repertoires of contention.

In the attempt to contribute to fill in this gap, my proposal was twofold. On the one hand, despite the pressure of evidence that online dynamics *do play* a role in contemporary contentious politics, we still need to *conceptualize* the nexus between online and offline (networks) in a way that not only legitimizes online collective action dynamics but that allows also to go beyond, once and for all, what Bernie Hogan calls a "false dichotomy." The idea of socio-technical systems of collective action was therefore recalled to properly "contextualize" online networks as integral (and legitimate) parts of collective action dynamics. On the other hand, once that online networks were conceptualized as integral parts of hybrid collective action socio-technical systems, I argued that it is important to investigate what happens "up in the cloud" before moving to tackle the most ambitious task in the research agenda, i.e., the interplay or, better, the progressive merge of online and offline spaces of collective political participation. Analyses of online dynamics were carried on in what certainly

constitutes only a 'small scale and slow pace' attempt to begin investigating online communicative flows from the point of view of structural dimensions underpinning collective action.

Two years after these preliminary observations, there is certainly the need to "speed up the pace and expand the reach" to achieve an actual balance between the respect of general research benchmarks for investigating contemporary socio-technical dynamics and more specific research needs that characterize the study of collective action processes. In this context, researching the nexus between collective action and internet/social media should be conceived as continuous process that inherits the very characteristics of the phenomena it looks at: it is complex, for all the reasons we have discussed so far; it is diverse, as it leaves room for different questions to be posed and for different perspectives and approaches to be tested; and, more importantly, it is dynamic, as it proceeds rapidly as we all learn to be more critical and systematic in relation to the realities we examine.

What started back in 2011 as a "small scale and slow pace" exploration of online dynamics consolidates today in within a more articulated research program that looks longitudinally, across different platforms and through multiple qualitative and quantitative methods at different instances of collective efforts deploying at different levels (transnational, national and local) both online and offline.¹ But more importantly, a "small scale and slow pace" exploration gives us today the chance to converge on a set of guidelines that can help us conducting our activities and that poses the bases of a common platform of knowledge, research practices and methodologies to be developed and improved day by day through continuous and mutual learning experiences like the one deploying along the pages of this debate.

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¹ For more information, see <http://www.reactionproject.info>

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Abstract: Starting from the four comments, I here outline the overall contours of a much-needed research agenda to face the challenges that derive from three inherent features of sociotechnical processes: their *diversity*, generated by the simultaneous involvement of social and technical agencies; their *dynamics*, stemming from the continuous evolution and change of both social actors and technologies; and their *complexity*, as relations established amongst and between social actors and technologies deploy recursively across the online/offline boundary. Thus, I argue that this overall research programme should be tuned specifically to meet the peculiarities of collective action phenomena.

Keywords: Sociotechnical systems, research agenda, collective action networks, online communication networks, organizational dynamics.

Elena Pavan is post-doc research fellow in Sociology at Trento University. She has worked on multistakeholder processes within the United Nation and, in particular, on the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). Her most recent research interests pertain to the relationships between collective action and social media. Her network analysis of the IGF has been published in 2012 with Lexington Publication.