Inside the "People of the Wheelbarrows": participation between online and offline dimension in the post-quake social movement

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The L'Aquila earthquake and the "People of the Wheelbarrows"

April 6th 2009, 3.32AM, local time. A 6.3Mw magnitude earthquake struck in L'Aquila, a small Italian city (around 75,000 inhabitants) capital of the mountainous Abruzzo region, located approximately 85 km northeast of Rome. The epicenter was located in the Abruzzo capital and the first earth tremor was followed by two large and serious aftershocks on April 7 (Mw=5.6) and April 9 (Mw=5.4). It represented Italy's worst earthquake in 30 years and the deadliest since the 1980 Irpinia earthquake.

Earthquakes have long marked the history of this place, because part of the city is located on an ancient lake that amplifies seismic waves. L'Aquila in February 1703 was already almost obliterated by the biggest earthquake Italy has experienced with devastation across much of central Italy. That quake killed around 5,000 people and destroyed much of its medieval historic center, which was then rebuilt in the Baroque style. The April 2009 quake was thus not the first to strike the central Italian city: seismic activity is relatively common in the Italian peninsula, but the intensity of the quake in L'Aquila's case is rare.

In the most recent earthquake, more than 300 inhabitants of L'Aquila were killed - including five Romanian citizens, two Czechs, two Palestinians, one Greek, one French, one Ukrainian and one Israeli - thousands were injured and around 65,000 lost their homes. Around 40,000 people who were made homeless found accommodation in tent camps build by Italian Civil Protection at the periphery of the city to shelter earthquake victims and approximately 10,000 were forced to abandon the city itself and were housed in hotels on the coast. Others sought shelter with friends and relatives throughout Italy.

The tremor caused significant damage also to more than 10,000 buildings in the city of L'Aquila and in the surrounding villages, destroying a large part of the medieval city as well as many essential infrastructure networks. Several buildings collapsed and serious damage occurred to essential and modern facilities, commercial, industrial and residential buildings, multi-stores, apartment complexes, transportation facilities, lifelines and utilities. Industrial and commercial structures sustained damage, leading to business interruption and other financial losses. A particular feature of this earthquake was the significant damage to historic and vintage buildings.

Immediately after the earthquake, downtown L'Aquila was declared "zona rossa" ("red zone") and police forces and numerous barricades permitted access to only a small portion of the historic city center, the traditional social and economic hearth of L'Aquila. Most alleys and squares were closed off, impeding entrance to citizens and the downtown's inhabitants.

One year later, the situation had not substantially changed: most part of the city center was still under military control and the access was denied to the citizens. But in February 2009 something happened: mainstream media reported a telephone call tap between two businessmen, Francesco Maria De Vito Piscicelli, technical director of Rome-based society "Opere pubbliche e Ambiente Spa", and his brother-in-law, Pierfrancesco Gagliardi. One of them, thinking about the opportunity to profit from the rebuilding process, said he was laughing in his bed when he heard the news regarding the L'Aquila quake.

Below, the transcription of the conversation between the two entrepreneurs:

"At the Ferratella[2], stay on this earthquake thing because we have to start full throttle, there's not an earthquake everyday". "I know" (laughing). "God forbid, poor people". "That's right". "This morning I was laughing in the bed at 3.30am"[3].

This recording was reported by different newspapers and several online platforms. A few days after the recording had been made public, a group of Aquilani started to reclaim the city centre and to confront the police who blocked the accesses to the off limit zone. On Sunday 21st February 2010, the annihilated downtown became the stage of the first citizen protest called "Protesta delle 1,000 chiavi" ("1,000 keys protest"), a symbolic initiative involving the citizens living inside the historical downtown, protesting against the impossibility of accessing their own houses. They hung their house keys on the barriers that blocked the access to the red zone. The protest had emerged thanks to the word of mouth generated on the Facebook[4] group "Quelli che a L'Aquila alle 3:32 non ridevano"[5] ("Those who were in L'Aquila at 3.32 were not laughing")

Hundreds of people took to the streets to protest, showing posters with slogans such as "Io non ridevo" ("I was not laughing") or "Riprendiamoci la nostra città" ("Let's take back our town") or "Le macerie sono nostre" ("The debris belong to us"). The citizens forced open one of the 'red zone' blocades and broke in to the Piazza Palazzo, the City Hall square they had not been allowed to see for more than 10 months. Like most part of the city center, the square was still full of stones, rubble and dirt.
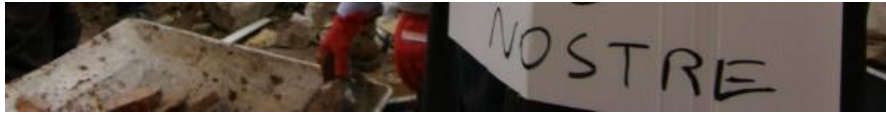
Figure 1: Photo from a Sunday "scarriolata"

A week after this first initiative, about 6,000 citizens decided to meet again to conduct another day of protest, to urge the beginning of the reconstruction process, and to recall the media attention on the L'Aquila case. They took with them several wheelbarrows, shovels and buckets to remove the debris from the devastated downtown and to show that, despite all mainstream media emphasis on the "miracolo Aquilano" ("the L'Aquila miracle" as depicted by Berlusconi's media strategists), most of the rubble had not been removed from the center.

They built a human chain, passing buckets from hand to hand, claiming to be an active part of the reconstruction. Amateur photographers took shots of the event and video makers also recorded the protest: material was then posted and spread on several online platforms (Facebook, Flickr[6], Photobucket[7], Picasa[8], Twitter[9]), in particular on the most famous online video sharing repository, Youtube[10] (Farinosi and Treré, 2010; Micalizzi, 2010).

That same afternoon, on the popular Facebook social network site, the group "Coordinamento Carriole Aquilane[11] ("Aquilan wheelbarrows coordination") was founded by a young university student, Federico D'Orazio. The main aims of the group were the following:

to involve citizens in decision processes regarding L'Aquila reconstruction, saying "No!" to top-down strategies;

to promote transparency in the management of the disaster funds;

to reopen the red zone;

to sensitize public opinion about the issue of the debris removal and the consequent historical center reconstruction.

Those residents-turned-activists were motivated by a thirst for re-establishing personal ties and re-creating lost public spaces (Padovani, 2010). However, they were labeled by mainstream media as "Il Popolo delle carriole", "The People of the wheelbarrows". They decided to meet on every Sunday to clean the red zone and to establish a permanent assembly ("Presidio Permanente Cittadino"[12] now known as "Presidio Permanente L'Aquila Piazza Duomo"). The Assembly met on each Wednesday and Sunday evening at 6:00 p.m. in the main square (Piazza Duomo) to discuss and confront ideas, perspectives, and actions to follow.

Social movements & ICTs: a brief overview

Before performing an analysis of the movement of the wheelbarrows, let us first clear up what we mean when we talk of social movements. Sydney Tarrow, in one of his most cited works (1998), defines social movements as "collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities".

According to Della Porta and Diani (2006), social movements are "informal networks, based upon shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilize about conflictual issues, through the frequent use of various forms of protest". Manuel Castells' (2004) umbrella definition of social movements is that of "purposive collective actions whose outcome, in victory as in defeat, transforms the values and institutions of society".

Even if definitions vary, they basically overlap in viewing movements as informal networks made up of both groups and individuals involved in conflictual relations, but sharing a collective identity (even if collective identity according to some scholars is not a necessary condition: see McDonald, 2002, 2006; Lasén and Martínez de Albeniz, 2008).

In the last decade, a growing literature in social movements and alternative media research has dealt with the relationships between social movements, alternative media and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), with particular emphasis on the Internet. ICTs are affecting social movements' mobilizing structures, opportunity structures and framing processes (Garrett, 2006; Loader, 2008). ICT according to Castells (2007: 249), "offers an extraordinary medium for social movements and rebellious individuals to build their autonomy and confront the institutions of society in their own terms and around their own projects" and "the Internet provides the essential platform for debate, their means of acting on people's mind, and ultimately serves as their most potent political weapon".

The Internet is said to greatly facilitate mobilization and participation in traditional forms of protest, such as national street demonstrations and also to give these protests a more transnational character by diffusing communication and mobilization efforts rapidly and effectively (Bennett, 2003, Cammaerts and Van Audenhove, 2005; Della Porta and Mosca, 2005, Kahn and Kellner, 2004).

In recent years the global diffusion of modern communication networks, the proliferation of human practices using these networks, the development of new digital media that support social relationships, and the increasing use of new tools of self-publication on the Internet (such as Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, Wordpress) have provided activists and movements with more possibilities to spread information, organize and coordinate online. Social-networking sites, video-sharing sites, wikis, blogs, vlogs, mashups, podcasts and folksonomies and the applications of the so-called "Web 2.0" -a term coined by Tim O'Reilly in 2004 in a meeting between O'Reilly Media and MediaLive International - have increased and facilitated interactivity, information sharing, interoperability, participation and collaboration on the World Wide Web (Surowiecki, 2004; Jenkins, 2006; Shirky, 2008).

As Kavada (2009: 130), has underlined, "with their emphasis on collaboration and interactivity, Web 2.0 technologies fit well with the current framework of theorizing the internet and transnational collective action" and "Web 2.0 can be thought to reinforce this capacity for 'networked protest' as, compared to the more one-way broadcasting model of web pages, it allows coordination and the lateral distribution of content". The potential of Web 2.0 - or so-called social software - for social movements have been the object of a growing numbers of publications (Neumayer and Raffl, 2008; Goldstein, 2007; Chowdhury, 2008).

Regarding the Italian context, the Beppe Grillo's blog and the role of the blogosphere for the organization of the "vaffanculo day" have been analyzed by Pepe and Di Gennaro (2009), while Mello (2010) has looked at the role played by the Internet, especially by the Facebook social network site in the birth and the coordination of the Italian anti-Berlusconi Popolo viola movement ("Purple people"). The use of a multiplicity of online platforms has also been at the center of a study on the student movement "Onda anomala" ("Anomalous Wave") emerged at the end of 2008 (Treré, 2010).

In this research, we want to focus on two aspects emerging from the literature that we find valuable for our own case study:

The first aspect is the continuous interplay between the online and the offline dimensions, as shown in the works of Bennett (2005), Kavada (2005) and Gillan (2006). Bennett has noted that "The most important theoretical move we can make in trying to understand the movement is to move beyond the distinction between on- and offline relationships" (2005:217).

Castells (2007) has pointed out that the space of the new social movements in the digital age is at the same time constituted by the space of flows and the space of places. Social movements continuously operate through shifting and blending the online and the offline world, and it is precisely in this combination that they organize, mobilize and protest. In the L'Aquila case the interplay and continuity between the online and offline dimensions is particularly strong and represents a unique case in the Italian scenario.

The second aspect regards online activity: social movements and activists tend to spread on different platforms (Kavada, 2009; Treré, 2010) 'official' Internet sites, blogs, social network sites, wikis, etc. So as Kavada (2009) has underlined an important step in understanding the affordances of Web 2.0 for collective action would be the exploration of the tensions and complementarities between the variety of platforms.

Keeping in mind these important points, in this article we decided to investigate the role played by the Internet in the coordination of the People of Wheelbarrows movement with the aim to of answering the following research question: how is the movement's participative aspects articulated between the online/offline dimensions? In particular, we decided to investigate the role that the Web played in the coordination of the movement and the online platforms that movement's participants exploited. In addition, we focused on the ways in which movement's meetings and events have been organized and reported.

Methodology

In order to understand how the "People of the Wheelbarrows" movement structures itself in the interplay between the online and the offline dimension and to investigate how civic engagement and participation are structured online, we decided to deploy a multi-method approach. As highlighted by Klandermans and Staggenborg: "A major advantage of social movement research has been the use of multiple methods [...] triangulation of methods ultimately produces stronger theories than multiple replications and permutations of the same method" (2002: 315-6).

Combining semi-structured interviews, through a qualitative-quantitative analysis of the official People of the Wheelbarrows Facebook group as well as online/offline ethnography, we investigated how the movement has used the social platforms to organize the protest in the interplay between the online and the offline dimensions. The combination of different research approaches has proved to be a useful method in order to get as general and complete a picture of the movement's communication processes as possible.

Our empirical analysis started with the identification of some of the most active individuals including Giusi Pitari, academic professor at L'Aquila University and active blogger, Federico D'Orazio, a university student and blogger, Anna Pacifica Colasacco, local retailer and blogger and Luca Cococcetta, a young videomaker.

As a first step, we carried out twelve semi-structured interviews with activists. One of advantages of semi-structured interviewing is that it allows *scrutiny of meaning*: how activists regard their participation and how they understand and make sense of their social world. This is fundamental to understanding social movements from the point of view of participants (Blee and Taylor, 2002).

The discourse produced from the interviews was analyzed from a qualitative point of view in order to identify the most frequent topics and to detect some explanatory categories. One of the most addressed topics of discussion mentioned by the interviews has been the massive use of the official Facebook group "Coordinamento Carriole Aquilane", so we decided to carry out an analysis of this group.

To complete the picture, we also decided to perform offline ethnography by spending five Sundays with the people of the wheelbarrows, taking part in their traditional "scarriolata" (an Italian neologism used by the group's activists, with the idiomatic meaning of "to go down to the square with a wheelbarrow") in the red zone and to a town meeting (organized in the form of the SOST -which we will explain later- in a big tent located at the centre of Duomo square).

Results

Findings from the interviews

From the interviews we carried out it emerged that the People of the Wheelbarrows have used a variety of online platforms - in particular blogs, online journals, social network sites - to inform themselves, post online material (photos, videos, texts) spread messages and coordinate themselves. This is in line with one of the points we addressed before: the tendency of contemporary networked movements to spread on a wide range of online platforms.

The movement's activists also wrote articles for local newspapers ("Il Capoluogo"), national newspapers ("Il Fatto quotidiano") and participated in national TV programs on the national RAI networks ("Porta a porta" on Rai 1 and "Anno Zero" on Rai 3). That means that there is, as we highlighted before, a variety of crossovers with other media: the movement's participants wrote on different online and offline platforms and took part in famous national TV programs (that does not mean that they were always able to speak or to provide their point of view. For instance, there have been several problems related to the framing of the movement that the "Porta a Porta" TV show ran about the Wheelbarrow People).

Content analysis of the interviews revealed that the most used platform has been the Facebook social networking site. At a first stage, immediately after the tragedy, it was used to spread information about the situation of people that were rescued or died under the debris. It was used to immediately communicate from individual profiles to networks of friends that people had been found and rescued or that they had died or were still missing.

"So, in the first days… to me Facebook was the only information channel to get information about the persons who did not answer to the phone and were disappeared, it was the only place where you could get to know that a person had been rescued from the debris, or the contrary and so in that particular situation it was really useful because a friend of mine would say 'Marco is alive and well, spread it' and everyone would put on their wall that Marco was well and so I believe that in that moment it has been of incredible utility, I will never have an intensive use like that of Facebook" Luca, videomaker and activist[13].

At a more advanced stage, in a devastated city where the center has been erased and where the relations among local citizens had been seriously compromised and where many inhabitants had been displaced somewhere on the coast or on different places, Facebook served first as a way to find friends and reconnect with them. As one activist recalls it:

"The Web was important because obviously the L'Aquila squares do not exist anymore, there are no physical spaces to meet and the multimedia square, the virtual square became Facebook, the blogs and forums where citizens and committees exchange ideas and give appointments" Francesco, journalist and activist.

This reconnecting process emerges clearly from Federico's words:

"I looked for them, and we have been looking for each other, because the people that participate at a certain moment started to search for each other because of the perception, the idea to be isolated, of being the only ones that would want to do something.. but alone it makes no sense to do it." Federico, blogger and activist.

Second, Facebook played a fundamental role in helping the construction of the Wheelbarrows movement by joining people who felt the need to reconstruct the social links and networks that have been compromised by the physical destruction of the city center. As Giusi puts it:

"Everything happened online, because all the people who are now in the assemblies, somehow had all these Facebook profiles so we created a 'tomtom'" Giusi, blogger and activist.

As Alessio underlines:

"With Facebook we absolutely created the movement. We exploited the social network to make people conscious of their being political citizens and take responsibility in respect to the power system, so the first time there was a break in

the historical center it was thanks to a Facebook group" Alessio, activist of the "3e32" nonprofit citizen network.

In Luca's words Facebook:

"Became a place where through the events, the pages and the friendships assemblies and meetings or whatever were advertised and above all the places where we advertised our work… without Facebook fewer persons would have seen it" Luca, videomaker and activist.

Facebook has also somehow worked as an amplifier of the personal participants' blogs which have also been heavily used. The message was first posted on the a blog and then the link to the same message was shared on the Facebook platform and spread to the subscribers of the group to increase its visibility. On Facebook, individual profiles and groups have been used in conjunction with the People of the Wheelbarrows group to coordinate and spread the information.

Blogger Anna explains her communication routine:

"You know what I do? When I write a post, usually I write three times per week, because I can't make it, then in the moment I publish the post I put it immediately on Facebook. On Facebook lots of people retake it and share it. The classic domino effect" Anna, blogger and activist.

Similar patterns emerge from Federico's words:

"My blog is Stazione MIR and I created a Facebook group called "The friends of Stazione MIR" (..) and I re-post the post, I put the link inside this group (…) So, in sum, it is the only way to try to multiply" Federico, blogger and activist.

However the offline dimension which emerged from the interviews is important: the square and the assemblies are seen as the places where the people of the movement can engage in face to face exchanges, can see, talk, touch each other and build 'real' and stronger relationships. Though the importance of the Internet for the organization of the movement is seen as fundamental, the necessity of physical encounters is underlined and regarded as the most important moment where the active engagement of citizenship finds its peak and its full realization, where the participation is fully realized. They most important moment in this is represented by the assembly, as the peak of the participative process. The Sunday "scarriolate" are seen as a moment where citizen participation is realized in the streets, with the people re-appropriating their town and sharing moments of sociability working and eating together.

According to Alessio:

"The Sunday scarriolate are the effect, the action that lies under the citizens' participation, the political discourse regarding the scarriolata is that the people, whoever goes there and makes the work doesn't want to delegate this work to a top-down organism and decide what it has to be done and it does it, but the citizens want to decide what to do and do it, this is participation".

For him:

"The highest political momentum is the Sunday assembly, where we see ourselves face to face, talk about the issues that interest us, decide the actions we have to undertake and distribute the tasks" Alessio, activist part of the "3e32" nonprofit citizen network."

The importance of the offline gatherings is particularly evident in this excerpt where Federico stresses that:

"To know that actually some people want to do that, it then pushes you to aggregate you, but to join with people face to face, not anymore on the Internet... Internet was a tool and a powerful tool, but it is fundamental to meet every Wednesday in the assembly.. when I saw we were 6,000 in the first Sunday meeting of the wheelbarrows I was so happy, I actually realized how powerful we were. The tom tom everyone added on Facebook from their pages and from our

blogs is important, but it has to be followed by offline action." Federico, blogger and activist.

Blogger Anna has also clear ideas about the fundamental role of the assembly:

"On Facebook there is much debate about the issue of the assembly, about the things to do here and there, instead I believe that the assembly is supreme. The people have to go there if they want to say the things" Anna, blogger and activist.

The strong connection and interplay between the offline and the online dimensions was a fundamental aspect highlighted by participants. The protest flowed from the Wheelbarrows group on Facebook, to the Sunday "scarriolata" on L'Aquila streets, to the events reported online on the anno1.org Internet site and to the streets again. This continuous online/ offline intertwining is exemplified in the words of Luca:

"The thing maybe started from the Internet, the first sparks started from there, with some messages on Facebook, like "ok let's see us tomorrow in Piazza Duomo", all of us, we go back together to Piazza Duomo, then again a participation was created also on the spot, because there is a willingness for human contact and with some really good situations, from the assemblies to the scarriolate, to the breakfast all together in the square...Things like that never happened before like going there to have a typical breakfast together in Piazza Duomo and I, more than before, find myself talking to people that I don't know in Piazza Duomo, like a sort of open forum, so you go there and find yourself talking and sharing things with everyone, I've met so many people in the last months" Luca, videomaker and activist.

Francesco also points to the inextricable link between the square and the Facebook:

"But now we are coming back to the Piazza Duomo, where we have biweekly assemblies and people made appointments on Facebook but then they catch up in the square, and it's very important because the Web is so important but only if there's another feedback, another level where people can talk…" Francesco, journalist and activist.

The importance of the People of the Wheelbarrows Facebook group emerged clearly from the analysis of the interviews and therefore we decided to analyse its role in the organization of the movement.

The analysis of the Facebook group

Our first move was to subscribe to the official People of the Wheelbarrows Facebook group and begin with a relatively unfocused watching period that it is essential in order to closely observe particular phenomena (Delamont, 2002). In this regard, it should be remembered that there is only one movement group, in contrast to other social movement cases – for example, other Italian cases such as the "Purple People" movement or the "Anomalous Wave" student movement- in which multiple online groups were created (because there are no official leaders and the movement's borders are fluid with loose ties, so that anyone can set up a group. In the L'Aquila case we speculate that the local and focused character of the movement has hindered the creation of other online coordination groups).

Subscribing to the official movement page allowed us to be up to date concerning the events and the initiatives promoted by group's members and in addition, to have an initial idea of what was happening. This, among other things, enabled us to become aware of the events in which we then took part.

We decided to take into consideration three months of group's activity: from 28th February, day in which the group was founded, to 31st May 2010.

Facebook, more than other platforms, lends itself as an instrument for horizontal forms of participation, non-hierarchical and spontaneous. It gives the opportunity to organize, advertise and disseminate future events (like the Sunday "scarriolate"

or the meetings on Wednesdays), and even permit the Aquilani who after the earthquake had been "exiled" and forced to live in hotels on the coast to be informed about future initiatives.

But Facebook has in this respect at least two problematic aspects: the first one is that group membership is not binding and the number of users who organize around a valuable message are few; the second is that very often, the spontaneity and ease of adherence to groups leads to overestimation of the real size of a movement (Capelli and Fiocchi, 2009). As we can see from the three months of group's activity , there are different levels of membership and participation (Farinosi, 2010).

There were some people who constituted the central core of the group and seemed to be more connected than the rest of members. It is thus possible to distinguish three participation levels:

> *Primary*: of 3318 members only a few were those who actively interact, providing new information, discussing, writing comments, uploading content like photos or videos and sharing links to news in behalf of the other subscribers of the group. They contribute to the effective enrichment of the group and make it a lively and vibrant place;
>
> *Secondary*: there are a larger number of people that mostly read the information written by others, but contribute occasionally, leaving a comment or a contribute to the discussion or - as happens in most cases - just clicking the "like" button;
>
> *Passive*: this characterizes the largest assembly of members, that "consume" the content of the group without any type of active involvement and - in some cases - they are enrolled in the group just to express their adhesion and support to the cause of the People of the Wheelbarrows and/or to receive the emails from the movement and to be up to date on all the latest happenings, events, meetups and demonstrations.

The analysis of the active part of "Coordinamento Carriole Aquilane" shows that there are few people very active that post a lot of comments, links and collaborate in active ways to the life of the group, while many people are not so involved and have posted just one or few more comments during the three months analyzed. This great imbalance in participation is typical of all social media platforms.

Closely related to the discourse of participation is that of leadership. Actually, inside the group of the People of the Wheelbarrows we noticed that there are people more active than others, people who take the initiative both offline and online, but it is incorrect to talk about real leadership. As he wrote in the first post on the board Federico, the activist who created the Facebook group:

"In this group there will be no head people. I just kicked off the group, now all work as they wish, as before! (...) It's valid as a general rule: whoever wants to be appointed as an administrator, just ask and it will be done. The other administrators already appointed should help me do it, I won't be always at the computer to control the evolution. I suppose that we will have many members, and none should be neglected. Our movement is and will remain horizontal. No podium." Federico, 28th February 2010.

Also another member, Lorenzo, wrote in a Facebook post:

"We must get used to the fact that the old policy of individual leaders is lost. It's time to create something new. I would call it "collective conscious", critical and participatory. It is creating on its own and nobody can stop it!" Lorenzo .

We also decided to content-analyze the posts, links and discussions of the Facebook group of the People of the Wheelbarrows in order to understand the nature of the use of this social platform. The definition of the categories arose

inductively and was based on an understanding which emerged through interaction with the data available. This means that we approached the data analysis without any preset list of categories and analyzed the information to identify analytic units that theoretically matched the phenomena portrayed in the data set. As Marvasti points out, this approach offers "convenience […] in simplifying and reducing large amounts of data into organized segment" (Marvasti, 2004:91). This method is very flexible and provides a systematic way of synthesizing a wide range of data (Given, 2008).

From the content analysis of the content written by the members of the Facebook group it emerged that it is possible to cluster the texts into five different sub-groupings, or macro-categories. The most frequent issue which emerged from the analysis of the posts is that of "organization". The People of the Wheelbarrows frequently used the Facebook board to organize town meetings, events and Sunday scarriolate and to upload and share photo or video reports of them. From 28th February, day in which the group was founded, to 31st May 2010 they arranged 18 Facebook events. The strong organizational dimension emerged also from the analysis of the most common and frequent words in messages written by members. As we can see from the figure below the most recurrent words are: "L'Aquila", "piazza" (which in Italian means "square"), "Domenica" ("Sunday"), "Carriole" ("Wheelbarrows"), "macerie" ("debris").

Figure 2: "Word clouds" from posts written by the members of the Facebook group

The second relevant issue which emerged from the texts written by the members of the group is that of "proposals and initiatives". Very often people used the public board to leave a proposal and suggestions for future initiatives and to receive comments by other members.

"Guys: proposal...what about organizing something to remember all together the

April 6 anniversary signed by the People of the Wheelbarrows?" Luca.

"So St. Peter's Square next Sunday?? I'm recruiting laborers..." Eutizio.

"How about a meeting during the week to finalize the process of collecting and selection for the forthcoming shovelling? Last Sunday the work behind the pile of rubble seemed a bit 'messy'. With a little organization we might prevent many small problems and allow more rubble to flow out of the mountain." Stefano.

"Why don't we provide campers and caravans (those that we bought after the earthquake and that we have not sold out) to house the volunteers who come from outside and that would give us a hand?" Anna.

The third issue that emerged from the texts is that of "adhesions and encouragements". Belonging to this category messages left by people who want to collaborate actively in the group, and in particular contribute to Sunday scarriolate. Often, people living in other Italian cities, sometimes very distant from L'Aquila gave their contributions, for example leaving words of encouragement to move forward in removing debris from the bottom.

"Hello guys I am a boy from Chieti. I am organizing a group of people to come to L'Aquila in order to rescue from the rubble. To whom can I request information? Anyway I made a group on facebook and it's called: "Let's help Aquilani to free the city from the rubble of the April 6" I am the founder and organizer! I'm waiting for someone to tell me who do I contact for information. Thanks for everything" Andrea.

"I came from Bergamo to the Presidium of Memory and Saturday night I shared with you the pain and reminiscence. And I shared the desire of truth and justice and love for your city that I breathed on Sunday morning when I fought with you in order to enter in the Old Town, and I passed the pails. Your desire to revive Aquila must be an example to me and to all Italians. Thanks to exist and fight and a big hug. I hope to return!" Adriana.

"Never give up! People of Abruzzo will reborn gently or badly, don't let them fool you... The truth is still dark and hidden ... The firemen of Florence are close to you." Camillo.

"On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday I'm full of inner strength and I have enough courage to put my head into the mouth of a lion. On Thursdays I begin to feel fatigue, mood descends several steps. On Friday I feel burdened by an alienating sense of inner emptiness. On Saturday hopelessness surprises me quite fragile. On Sunday ... on Sunday in the square with you I reborn!" Eleonora.

In the fourth place there is the macro-category of promotion. This represents a kind of horizontal variation of the main theme that characterizes the movement of the People of Wheelbarrows. Some members exploit the board of the Facebook group to promote collateral initiatives, however, based on the same territory or, sometimes, to advertise websites or other groups with similar interests. One of the most important event pushed is the presentation of the official video of "Recomenza Domà", organized in Duomo square on 21st April 2010. "Recomenza Domà" is the remake in local dialect of a hit sung by the greatest Italian singers to raise funds for later reconstruction of the city.

But there were also people who promoted films or websites.

"Join the Iovadoinvacanzainabruzzo group that aims to create interest in the Abruzzo, a region largely untouched and unknown, except for the recent sad events. If you are from Abruzzo, if you have friends from Abruzzo, if you like simple people, if you have fondness for the problems they have, if you like the nature, the food, if you have been, if you never gone, subscribe to the group and help us talk about tourist Abruzzo sending pictures and thoughts! If you want to see the website please go to www.iovadoinvacanzainabruzzo.com and help us directly from the site: we need sites that put our logo on the homepage, we need pictures of places of Abruzzo, we need descriptions of trips and excursions in Abruzzo. Meanwhile, thanks for reading. Hello from Amelia" Amelia.

"Colpa Nostra Docu-Film - With Law-Gags "Colpa Nostra" does not exist ... Sign the petition at http://nobavaglio.adds.it/ ...At Senate majority seeks to impose a law on telephone tapping that would undermine key aspects of costitutional system. The freedom of expression and the right of citizens to be informed are at risk." Eutizio .

The last macrocategory that we have identified is related with the criticism. Most of the time critical concerns political majority, decisions taken from above, the lack of transparency of mainstream media.

"People of the Facebook group "I disagree from wheelbarrows" was able to say that in Piazza IX Martyrs the rubble were brought in by the People of the Wheelbarrow just to make a show on Sunday. Legally speaking, is this not slander? I sincerely feel offended, made a fool of, but especially angry. Now we not only have to look away from "who speak without acts" but also from other citizens" Stefano.

"Berlusconi claims that with Bertolaso he wanted to remove the rubble. He assumes no responsibility for anything. He just needed the theater for the G8 meeting! Please find all the newspapers, the news of these days, it is yet another lie. I invited "Il Centro", a newspaper of Pescara and citizens to ask for debris removal as soon as possible, because in this case they could rebuild right here. But I remember that Berlusconi has always been against the building of the new town. The man who denies this should not be taken seriously" Lorenzo.

"As usual, they have shown 3 minutes on the 7th channel then I have not seen anything on other channels. Hang in there!..... aaaaa they did show event pro Bertolaso and interviewed a couple of people. They said "Make Bertolaso a saint now"- absolute madness!..... so bastards...but who are these people that are against the coordination of People of Wheelbarrows'"????????????????????????????" Camillo.

In order to complete the picture, as final analysis, we examined the links that have been shared with the other members on the board of the Facebook group. We studied each single link to see what social platforms they have used most intensively to upload content online, what kind of digital content (texts, photos or videos) they have been more likely to share and to what other Internet resources they have linked.

During the analysis period the People of the Wheelbarrows shared 420 links, most of them during the month of March 2010 (269 links in March; 92 in April and 59 in May). Of these 420 links, 107 relate to articles published in newspapers online. Among the most cited newspapers appear at the top journals almost exclusively local, like for example cityrumors.it , ilcapoluogo.it and abruzzo24ore.tv.

Other type of content shared a lot (84 links) are posts written on personal blogs, especially from stazionemir[14], giusipitari[15], collettivo99[16], miskappa[17]. 71 shared links are about movies and videos, especially those relating to Sunday scarriolate and town meetings. A remarkable 47 videos came from YouTube. In second place there are some videos with reports uploaded on the website of the 3e32 citizen network. 46 links were related to sharing of photos. In this case the most used platform was the Facebook itself, followed by Flickr. 28 links concerned the promotion of events, organized not only from the Wheelbarrows movement but also by other group members. Most of the remaining links were about the discussion and sharing of notes written on the personal Facebook profiles or the desire to give visibility and promote sites, fan page on Facebook or other groups.

Any given Sunday

"*On any given Sunday you're gonna win or you're gonna lose. The point is: can you win or lose like a man?*" From Any Given Sunday, movie by Oliver Stone

"*Any given Sunday we are here shoveling, we are with our wheelbarrows*"

A citizen from L'Aquila taking part in the Sunday scarriolate

Like every Sunday, Sunday 18th April 2010 was no exception: the People of the Wheelbarrows organized a "scarriolata" in the red zone. As usual, a few days before they created the event page on Facebook and invited all the members of the group to join with their own wheelbarrows. In order to remove the debris from Piazzetta IX Martiri and Piazzetta del Sol, e the gathering was arranged at 10:00 a.m. in Piazza Duomo[18]. They went there in a small rally and started to shovel and remove the rubble in the two squares. There was a real team work, where each citizen gave his/her contribution: they made a human chain, passing pails from hand to hand to remove the debris.

When the squares had been cleaned, they moved to Piazza Palazzo and Piazza San Pietro for a small "tour" in the most damaged area of the old city center. At the end of the Sunday scarriolata they met in the big tent in Duomo square where some associations and citizens donated their books in order to create a small free access public library. After this little ceremony, people of Wheelbarrows started the offline town meeting that was based on the S-OST technique, a way of working based on self-organization and on the ability for people who participate to make proposals. It was first tried in Florence, and mixed elements from the OST (Open Space Technology), created by Harrison Owen and elements from E-TM (Electronic Town meeting) system. Citizens from L'Aquila decided to deploy this technique and to adapt it to the local context and needs, to answer Aquilani's requests to take part in the reconstruction process of the city and to recreate spaces of open dialogue after the catastrophe.

S-OST was organized at different levels:

> Creation of different tables for discussion: the groups are created randomly, mixing people at the moment of subscription;

> Plenary assembly: this is the moment when the outline of the work is explained and basic rules are illustrated;

> Tables for discussion: every participant was given a copy of "L'Aquila anno 1 - Spazi Aperti per una agenda Aquilana" (L'Aquila first year - Open Spaces for an agenda Aquilana) in which one can find priorities, projects and everything that has been expressed on the www.anno1.org website and on the post-its located on the board of the Duomo Square's tent. This document served as a base for reflections, hypothesis and proposals adding to those at the tables. Discussion tables were self-managed by participants with the help of coordinators and work according to the law of two feet: "If at any time you find yourself in any situation where you are neither learning nor contributing, use your two feet and go someplace else";

> Proposals synthesis: during the lunch break, a document is produced with all the proposals coming from the different discussion tables;

> Final assembly: the final document which recovers all the proposals is presented and everyone is invited to join one or more proposals in which he/she wants to be involved.

Then, groups start to work on the chosen proposal. S-OST was articulated into three main phases:

> Disjunction - openness to different points of view. Organization of events as occasions to multiply ideas;

> Comparison among different points of view;

> Conjunction: the whole amount of different points of view was reassembled into a coherent and shared project.

The topics addressed during the town meeting can be grouped into the three following macro-areas:

· reconstruction of the urban context;

· reconstruction of the social fabric;

· reconstruction of the economic fabric.

At the end of the town meeting, the people of the Wheelbarrows drafted a report of what happened during the assembly and uploaded the document online on the anno1.org website. In addition to the report they also uploaded the videos of the activities on Youtube. In this way the content could be seen and commented upon by those who did not have the possibility to attend the event, as well as to be shared online between Facebook members.

The interplay and the intertwining between these online and offline practices highlights the existence of a circular dimension of the protest that involves multiple online/offline platforms in a sort of never-ending cycle that goes from the Internet to the square and then again to the Net.

Conclusion and reflections for further research

From the results emerged from our analysis, it is possible to highlight some key points:

First of all, we can stress the great importance that the local dimension has played in this case study. While most of the studies on social movements have underlined the importance that ICTs play in strengthening the movement's transnational dimension by allowing distant activists to communicate and share resources, our case study shows that ICTs can also play an important role in extra-ordinary situations which are ingrained into the very local dimension of a certain community. We can speculate that the emergence of the movement of the Wheelbarrows would not have been possible or would have been really difficult without the help of social media platforms.

Concerning the articulation of the online and offline dimensions, we want to underline that there is a continuous interplay between these two dimensions: the event is launched on Facebook and on the activists' personal blogs, then it is carried out in the squares where the scarriolata is performed and the meetings organized. Then it is reported online, on the anno1.org Internet site, on the Flickr photosharing platform, on the YouTube videosharing hub, on Facebook again and on the individual blogs. Online practices on different platforms are intertwined with offline ones in what we previously called the protest cycle.

The other point descends directly from the previous: as we have seen we can define the People of the Wheelbarrows as a cross-media movement because it simultaneously makes use of a variety of online platforms: Internet sites, blogs, social network platforms, photo and video portals.

We have also observed a great imbalance in online participation, a considerable disproportion between the few active members and the huge group of non-active members (which is typical of all social media platforms). This also points to the problem of what has been called fast activism (Eaton, 2010): as it simply takes less time and effort to participate online, people tend to participate through a mouse click and thus estimates regarding online engagement tend to overestimate the participation dimension. In some cases, participation is reduced to the 'zero' level of subscribing to the group: what we called before (with what could be regarded as a sort of oxymoron) passive participation. Most of the group's members just engaged in this kind of participation: they wanted to be part of something, to be regarded as members of a collectivity, but their role in the movement was fulfilled in the simple act of subscribing.

Further research is needed to investigate the connections between the anno1.org Internet site and the Wheelbarrows movement. Moreover, a longer period of ethnographic immersion would be necessary to deepen the understanding of the movement's inner participation dynamics. We would also suggest performing a visual analysis of photo and video content uploaded on the Facebook group that

would provide a more fine-grained vision of the already analyzed dimensions.

The paper has been conceived and discussed entirely by both the authors. However, paragraphs 1,3,5, 7 have been written by Manuela Farinosi while paragraphs 2,4,6 have been written by Emiliano Treré

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[3] "Balducci e i suoi amici, la cricca degli appalti. Ville, escort, assunzioni e auto di lusso", La Repubblica, 11 febbraio 2010, http://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2010/02/11/news/il_grande_regno_dell_emergenza_il_perso 2254417 (our translation)

[4] http://www.facebook.com/

[5] http://www.facebook.com/?ref=logo#!/group.php?gid=302288078330&ref=ts

[6] http://www.flickr.com/

[7] http://photobucket.com/

[8] http://picasaweb.google.com/home

[9] http://www.twitter.com/

[10] http://www.youtube.com

[11] http://www.facebook.com/?ref=logo#!/group.php?gid=333399523599&ref=ts

[12] http://www.facebook.com/?ref=logo#!/group.php?gid=111151435564713&ref=ts

[13] Note: all the excerpts from now on will be our translations from the interviews we carried out in Italian. At times, the translation is idiomatic.

[14] http://stazionemir.wordpress.com/

[15] http://giusipitari.blogspot.com/

[16] http://www.collettivo99.org/

[17] http://miskappa.blogspot.com/

[18] http://www.facebook.com/?ref=logo#!/event.php?eid=109421242428684&index=1