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# **Net-authoritarianism? How web ideologies reinforce political hierarchies in the Italian 5**

## **Star Movement**

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### **Abstract**

This article responds to current critiques about the myths of digital democracy drawing on the case study of the Italian Movimento 5 Stelle/5 Star Movement (5SM) lead by comedian-turned-politician Beppe Grillo. We argue that the political success of the 5SM was largely dependent on a process of technological fetishism of the Net as an autonomous political agent. We also contend that this process has enabled the party leaders to build an ideology of the movement and represent the 5SM as a grassroots movement based on horizontal networks, participatory democracy, and characterized by the absence of leadership. Conversely, we claim that the digital rhetoric of horizontality, lack of leadership and spontaneity of the party is used to mask, facilitate and reinforce the authority of Beppe Grillo as political leader, thus forging a new type of authoritarianism that is supported and legitimated through the everyday construction of digital discourse.

### **Keywords**

net-authoritarianism

web ideologies

Italian politics

5 Star Movement

Beppe Grillo

Gianroberto Casaleggio

digital utopianism

technological fetishism

## **Introduction**

The relationship between political discourses and technological advancements has defined the historical development of the Internet. During the mid-1990s – as Internet links and networks were being strengthened and shared, and the first ‘online communities’ were being formed – different scholars were quick to come to conclusions on the so called revolutionary and transformative impacts of the Internet. Negroponte (1995) wrote about a radical cultural change and the moving away from the politics of the nation state. Rheingold (1994) discussed the emergence of new forms of social life, the virtual communities, which were [to be] self-governed and horizontal in essence. Toffler and Toffler (1995) believed that the Internet was creating a third way, a new civilization, which was based on information highways and which clashed with older forms of politics, and political engagement. Castells (1996) instead contended that the world was witnessing the rise of a network society, based on autonomous information and communication networks that was different from older forms of society. All these works saw the Internet as a transformative and even revolutionary force and believed that the new technologies had a radical impact on creating new forms of social and cultural organization, with positive and democratic consequences for political practice.

With the burst of the dot.com bubble at the beginning of the 2000s, venture capitalists lost confidence in dot.com businesses and the ‘hype’ over the so called revolutionary qualities of the Internet slightly decreased (Mosco 2004: 3–5), and in social and communication research we have witnessed the rise of more critical and nuanced understandings on the social impacts of Internet technologies (Woolgar 2002). However, as Mosco (2004) argued, technological

hypes often function in cycles, and this is certainly true if we consider the history of the Internet. By 2005, when the term Web 2.0 became widespread – mostly through the discourses promoted by the O'Reilly Media Group (2005) – the ideological discourse on the new democratic and revolutionary qualities of the Internet re-established itself with surprising force. Benkler (2006) argued that the world was witnessing a moment of opportunity and change as well as the rise of a new, networked economy, based on co-production and participation. Tapscott and Williams (2006) revived the concept of *prosumer* coined by Toffler (1980) over twenty years before. They argued that the new web technologies enabled the making of a new type of social organization, which was based on the disintegration of old hierarchies and power relations. A few years later, Shirky (2008) claimed that new web platforms were radically transforming the ways social groups organized themselves and were re-defining the ways in which people and collectives worked. In the following years, with the explosion of protest movements across the world, technological understandings have been entrenched with techno-optimistic analyses of how the new web was allegedly transforming social organization and political life (Castells 2009).

Within current communication and social research, one feels the urgency to deconstruct these techno-optimistic understandings about the democratic potentials of Internet technologies and to reflect critically on the myths of digital democracy (Mosco 2004; Hindman 2008), their meanings and their impact on political processes (Morozov 2011; Curran et al. 2012). This article responds to such urgency, and argues that a pivotal question of our time is to analyse the construction of web ideologies, and to reflect critically on how these ideologies can influence everyday political practices by legitimizing authoritarian and hierarchical forms of political organization.

In this article we draw on the case study of Beppe Grillo and Casaleggio's 5 Star Movement (5SM) in Italy, and we analyse and critically deconstruct the technological rhetoric

of Grillo and Casaleggio's party/movement. In this article we show that the cyber-libertarian discourse of the 5SM was translated into political practices that, far from being horizontal and participatory, legitimized authoritarianism, populism and leadership.<sup>1</sup> Our research focuses in particular on the 2012–2013 period that preceded and followed the electoral success of the 5SM. It combines a discourse analysis of the media content produced by the 5SM with an historical analysis of Italy's political practices and events. Moreover, our research also draws on reflections emerged from an in-depth interview with Giuliano Santoro, author of the book *Un Grillo Qualunque* 'An ordinary cricket'<sup>2</sup> (2012), one of the most profound analyses of the 5SM from its origins to its 2013 electoral triumph. While the technological discourse of the 5SM inspires a growing scholarly literature (Natale and Ballatore 2014; Dal Lago 2014; Tréré and Barranquero 2013), we think that what is currently missing in the public debate is an exploration of how the web ideologies promoted by the 5SM translate into and eventually legitimize top-down, authoritarian political practices that invite reflection upon democratic processes, accountability and the role of old and new media.

In the first section of this article we briefly describe and contextualize the emergence and the development of the 5SM, starting from the mainstream background of Beppe Grillo and all the way to the electoral triumph of the 5SM in the Italian 2013 national political elections. In the second section, we provide a critical analysis and deconstruction of the web ideologies that sustain the technological discourse of Grillo's and Casaleggio's party-movement. In the third section, we examine how these web ideologies are translated into political practices and how they legitimize top-down, anti-democratic and authoritarian politics.

### **Beppe Grillo and the 5SM: A brief overview**

## *The construction of Beppe Grillo as political leader: From mainstream media to digital conversion*

Before entering politics Grillo was a well-known Italian actor and comedian who became famous with his shows at the end of the 1970s. He was especially famous for his performances as a stand-up comedian, in which he blended political satire with social and environmental campaigns, consumer rights and other topics. He also participated in television shows like *Te la do io l'America/Here's America for You* (Trapani, 1981) and *Te lo do io il Brasile/Here's Brazil for You* (Trapani, 1984), where he commented and made jokes about the lifestyle and culture of United States and Brazil. During these shows, Grillo commented pictures of his journeys to the United States and to Brazil, making abundant use of racist and cultural stereotypes about women, Jews and black (often called 'negroes') and Arab people, as well as exploiting every possible cliché about minorities and subcultures. Grillo also starred in television advertisements, and appeared in several movies (Santoro 2012; Scanzi 2008). In 1986, while he was performing on the variety show *Fantastico/Fantastic 7*, he cracked a joke about the Italian Socialist Party in power at the time (he called them 'thieves') and was therefore banned from public television. After seven years of absence from television, Grillo returned with his *Beppe Grillo* show broadcast by the state television RAI in 1993, and this was his last appearance on Italian mainstream television (Scanzi 2008), but he was featured on the French channel Canal+ and on the Swiss TSI. One of the most interesting aspects of Beppe Grillo's biography as a political leader can be found in the fact that his political persona was largely constructed through media lenses, and that Grillo was a profound connoisseur of the mechanisms of television to capture the audience's attention. Following an established and problematic career within mainstream media, however, he started to radically criticize the media in favour of the Net,<sup>3</sup> always written with a

capital initial (Mello 2013; Santoro 2012) and constructed his political persona and political plan on the basis of this dichotomy.

Here it is important to understand that the digital conversion of Beppe Grillo and the related development of his political discourse was the result of a slow process of transformation, and of the encounter with his right-hand man Gianroberto Casaleggio. Gianroberto Casaleggio is one the most influential Italian experts on web technologies, social networks and electronic marketing (Orsatti 2010). He started his career in Olivetti, one of the most important Italian tech companies, in the 1990s and then became Chief Executive Officer of the Webeegg company. In 2004 he founded the Casaleggio Associati company that created and manages all the communication activities of Beppe Grillo, including the management of the blog, the books and the DVDs of Grillo's shows. Casaleggio is not only a businessman and profound connoisseur of online marketing strategies, he is also the author of several books, videos and newspaper articles where he professes his unconditional faith in the Internet and its power to revolutionize society, politics and economics. Through books such as *Web dixit* (2003), *Web ergo sum* (2004) and online videos like *Prometheus – The Media Revolution*, and *Gaia – The Future of Politics*,<sup>4</sup> Casaleggio portrayed a future where tech corporations rule the world, and parties, politics, ideologies and religions disappear, leaving space for the emergence of a perfect form of direct democracy enabled by the Net. With his strong cyber-utopian discourse, marketing skills and technological pragmatism, Casaleggio was able to convince Grillo of the potential of the Net as an effective platform for his campaigns (Biorcio and Natale 2013; Orsatti 2010).

During the 1990s Grillo was a well-known luddite and criticized the increased pervasiveness of new technologies within the different dimensions of politics and everyday life. A key example of this can be found in the fact that in the year 2000, when he was on tour with his stand-up show 'Time Out', he used to end the show every evening by destroying a

computer with a giant hammer and invited the audience to join him.<sup>5</sup> The encounter with Casaleggio completely changed Grillo's attitude towards online media. He met him backstage at his *Black Out* show and he described him as a 'crazy man. Crazy of a new craziness, in which everything changes for the better thanks to the Net' (Casaleggio 2004: 7). In 2005, Grillo launched his own blog [www.beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it), created and managed by Casaleggio's Milan-based company Casaleggio Associati, which specializes in web marketing. It was through the blog that Beppe Grillo started his to build his political campaign as well as the foundations for the 5SM. The blog combined elements of political critique against the 'old' and 'monolithic' forms of representative democracy, with calls for grassroots action and participation. On 22 November 2005, a page (which was self-financed through fundraising on the blog) appeared on the *International Herald Tribune* denouncing various members of the Italian parliament who had been convicted of a wide array of crimes (Grillo 2006). The blog was very successful from the start. In the same year it was launched, *Time* magazine nominated Grillo as one of its European Heroes of the year in the media realm (Geary 2005). Three years later in 2008 *The Observer* ranked the blog ninth among the most influential blogs in the world (Aldred et al. 2008).

Since the very origins of his political campaign, Grillo combined online campaigning strategies with an intense schedule of offline tour activities, which progressively became more political and able to captivate a growing number of people. Relying on his blog, Grillo first invited his followers to organize themselves through the [beppegrillo.meetup.com](http://beppegrillo.meetup.com) platform and then called on his supporters to take to the streets – actually, to the *piazze/squares* – of Italy on 8 September 2007 for the so called V-Day, where 'V' stood for the Italian expression *Vaffanculo/fuck you all* directed at Italian politicians. On that day, the main square of Bologna was filled with Grillo's supporters who proposed the creation of a nationwide popular law initiative stipulating that: no Italian citizen found guilty at any one of the three



levels of justice of the Italian system could run for Parliament; no Italian citizen could be elected to Parliament for more than two terms; the electoral system should be modified to allow preferential voting. The V-Day was a success and gathered anything between 300,000–500,000 people (according to conservative estimates) and a million people (according to the blog itself), with 350,000 signatures collected. During the V-Day, Grillo strongly criticized the electoral law then in force (passed by a Berlusconi government in 2005) that, based on fixed (closed) lists of candidates, did not allow citizens to choose their own representatives.<sup>6</sup> He went on stating that in contrast to this situation a ‘new rebirth’ (Grillo 2008) would begin from the local elections, where various lists of civic candidates called *Friends of Beppe Grillo* were being formed. Such events amounted to the proper birth of the 5SM.

### **The rise and political triumph of the 5SM**

Following the 2007 V-Day, Grillo continued his strategy of combining political campaigns through the blog and the organization of meet-ups and of a second V-Day on 25 April 2008, where the main theme was ‘freedom of the press’, and proponents collected signatures for a referendum to end public subsidies for newspapers and periodicals. The integration of online campaigning and offline activities enabled Grillo and his emerging movement to campaign on local issues, and to construct the base for the movement’s first electoral bids. In the years 2008 and 2009, the first members of the civic lists were elected in local councils.

The official logo of the Movimento (movement) was introduced in October 2009. It included five stars, representing the pivotal issues of the party-movement mission: the safeguard of (1) public *water* and (2) the *environment*; the growth of, (3) *public transport* and (4) *connectivity*, and (5) *development*. In autumn 2010, Grillo supporters met in Cesena for a musical/political event named ‘Five Star Woodstock’ where the movement’s manifesto was presented. Between 2010 and 2013 the political influence of 5SM grew exponentially. In

2008, a few pro-Grillo supporters ran in municipal elections in eight cities of Italy obtaining 2.43 per cent of the total vote. In 2010, at the regional elections, the 5SM ran in five regions and obtained over half a million votes, with peaks in two regions: Emilia-Romagna and Piemonte. At the local elections in 2011, Grillo fielded candidates in 75 municipalities, reaping 9.5 per cent of the vote in Bologna.

The 2012 local elections marked a turning point in Italian politics. After Berlusconi's resignation as PM in 2011, and with some mainstream Italian parties facing investigations for corruption (IDV and Lega Nord), the 5SM was able to 'capitalize on the window of opportunity offered by the economic crisis and the social discontent about the new government's austerity measures' (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013: 5). Hence, during the 2012 municipal elections, in the 43 municipalities with more than 15,000 inhabitants where it was present, the movement's support rose from less than 4% to more than 10%, polling between 8% and 12% in several Italian cities from the north – and reaching 14% of votes in Genoa, Grillo's hometown and Liguria's regional capital. Moreover, in 2012 the movement was able to elect its majors in four municipalities, all in the northern area: Mira and Sarego in Veneto and Comacchio and Parma in Emilia-Romagna. In the following months, the 5SM was third amongst coalitions and first among individual parties in the Sicilian Regional Elections held on 28 October 2012, showing that, while its strength lay in the urban areas of the industrial north, it was able to compete and reap consensus in the south too. In the summer of 2012 the 5SM was considered by different polls as the second or third most popular party in Italy. For the first time in Italy, the 5SM candidates for the 2013 national political elections were chosen by party members through an online primary, held between 3 and 6 December 2012.

On 22 February 2013, a large crowd attended the final rally of Grillo's electoral campaign in the symbolic Piazza San Giovanni in Rome. In the 2013 Italian general elections, the 5SM reached 25.55% of the vote in the Chamber of Deputies, and 9.67% of overseas voters, for a

total of 8,784,499 votes. Grillo's party was thus the second most voted list after the Democratic Party (PD) that obtained 25.42% of the votes in Italy and 29.9% abroad, accounting for 8,932,615 votes. In the Senate, the 5SM gained 23.79% in Italy and 10% abroad, for a total of 7,375,412 votes, again second only to the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party), which obtained 8,674,893 votes. It was an extraordinary result for the 5SM that won 25.6% of the vote for the Chamber of Deputies, more than any other single party, although both the centre-left and the centre-right coalitions reaped more votes as coalitions.

As the above facts have shown, and as others have argued (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013; Corbetta and Gualmini 2013; Natale and Ballatore 2014; Pepe and Di Gennaro 2009) the rapid success of the 5SM was largely dependent on a new form of political campaigning that combined the use of Web 2.0 technologies with offline activities and public demonstrations. It is for this reason that, as Natale and Ballatore (2014) have shown, it is impossible to understand the rapid growth in political influence of the 5SM without looking at the way in which Grillo and Casaleggio's political campaign was based on a profound technological utopianism, which heralded the emancipatory and politically liberatory potentials of new technologies.

However, we will show that there is a main pitfall in Natale and Ballatore's understanding of the structure and politics of the 5SM. Natale and Ballatore (2014) argued that the 5SM resembled contemporary grassroots social movements such as *Occupy* or the *Indignados* (Natale and Ballatore 2014: 109–10). On the contrary, we intend to demonstrate that this is far from being true. We will argue that cyber-utopianism enabled Grillo and Casaleggio to construct a presumed 'movement ideology' based on the understanding that they were leading a grassroots social movement defined by horizontal networks, participatory democracy and a new understanding of political engagement and participation. In fact we will show how the

techno-utopianism of Grillo and Casaleggio provided the 'Net' with political agency, and how this process of technological fetishism served to legitimize a top-down, anti-democratic and authoritarian forms of politics. Therefore we will argue that Natale and Ballatore's work fails to explore the complex interconnection between technological discourses and technological fetishism, and to assess how technologies are invested with a particular agency of their own.

### **Techno-utopianism and web ideologies in the 5SM: Supersession, blogging revolution and transparency**

Technological utopianism has a long history as the relationship between new technologies and utopian discourses has been a key factor in the development of western thought. As Segal (2005) has argued, the understanding that technologies can become tools for social liberation and freedom is a discourse found in a variety of works in social theory, from the work of Tommaso Campanella to nineteenth-century thinkers like Saint-Simon, Comte, Owen, Fourier, and of course Marx and Engels (2005: 2). These works all reflect the peculiarly western understanding that science and technology can solve some of society's problems, especially with reference to social and political organization, and can take humanity closer to the utopian idea of a 'perfect society' developed in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1995). If we consider the history of technological utopianism and its interconnection with the development of western thought, we cannot be surprised by the fact that such understandings have also been applied to the development of computer-mediated communication and Internet technologies. This is particularly evident if we consider the development of cyber-libertarian ideologies in San Francisco. As Turner (2006) has shown by examining the growth of the Whole Earth network in San Francisco, between 1968 and 1998 technologists were profoundly influenced by counter-cultural discourses of computers as tools for personal and social liberation. As some have argued (Castells 2001), these cyber-libertarian ideologies

have played a fundamental role in the historical development of the Internet and in the creation of the World Wide Web.

The understanding that cyber-libertarianism and techno-utopianism defined the history of the Internet and the development of web technologies is at the very heart of much of contemporary critique in communication and social research. Mosco's (2004) groundbreaking book on the digital sublime has demonstrated how western fascination with the newness of technologies has enabled us to construct mythical understandings of how digital media is supposedly magical, socially transformative and democratically empowering (Mosco 2004). As Natale and Ballatore (2014) have shown, this emphasis on novelty has defined the political discourses of Grillo and the 5SM, a novelty often constructed through the techno-utopian belief in the ideology of supersession. Supersession is the notion according to which each new medium *supersedes*, i.e. 'vanquishes or subsumes its predecessors' (Gitelman and Pingree 2003: 13), an idea that media historians have seen at work during various waves of ages of media reflections on emerging technologies. According to this idea, the book is doomed to be replaced by the computers just like the phonograph was destined to be supplanted by the introduction and the adoption of the radio. According to techno-utopian cyber-libertarians, each new technological innovation inevitably supersedes its predecessor.

In the 2011 political manifesto titled, 'Siamo in guerra. Per una nuova politica'/'We are at war. For a new politics', written by Grillo and Casaleggio, the logic of supersession is clear. This manifesto represents one of the most striking examples of the 'electronic utopianism' (Dal Lago 2014) of the Grillo/Casaleggio duo. In the manifesto, the voice of Casaleggio resonates stronger than Grillo's, arguing that in the age of the Net 'newspapers are vanishing, then it will be the turn of televisions, then books. In ten or twenty years, they will be all considered as extinct species' (2011: 3). Grillo and Casaleggio thus announce the inevitable death of the press, and the end/replacement of mainstream media – particularly television – by

digital media and by the power of interconnected multitudes of citizen journalists. As their manifesto states, the Net is ‘a supermedium that absorbs, and therefore eliminates, all the others [...] In a relatively short time – a decade, maybe two – nothing will be as before. All the [present] media will disappear’ (2011: 7). The ideology of supersession has largely influenced the political practice of the 5SM. The second V-Day of 2008 was entirely devoted to obtain enough signatures in order for a referendum to abolish Italy’s national professional register of journalists, and to eliminate State-funded contributions to the publishing industry. Grillo and Casaleggio’s political discourse has constructed the figure of the journalist as a ‘servant’ (of power), ‘wet tongue’ and ‘shit’. In a blog post dated 9 July 2010, Grillo (2010) exemplifies his vision of journalism and of the ‘blogging revolution’. He writes:

The newspapers should not be confused with true information. Newspapers and true information are totally incompatible. Where the former exists, the latter is nowhere to be found. In the past few years, the only true information has been spread by the bloggers, the Web and the counter-information sites [...]. Newspapers have been rendered obsolete by the Web, just as the telegraph rendered the Pony Express obsolete so many years ago [...]. The citizens are the only ones spreading any information at all. The journalist’s register must be abolished. All of us are journalists.

This is one of the clearest illustrations of how the notion of technological supersession goes hand in hand with another web ideology endorsed by Grillo: the superiority of bloggers and citizen journalists, who, according to him, are the only ones to provide *real* information. For Grillo, journalists do not make sense in the new digital world, because user-generated content produced by a multitude of citizens-journalists is the only information worth reading. ‘All of

us are journalists' strengthens the idea that, because there are no intermediaries, citizen journalism is always superior to other forms of traditional journalism.

One interesting aspect that emerges from Grillo and Casaleggio technological discourse is that they draw on the techno-optimism implicit to much of contemporary understandings of Web 2.0 technologies. In particular they praise the role of the so-called *prosumer* (Toffler 1980; Tapscott and Williams 2006). As Grillo and Casaleggio write: 'all the information will converge on the Net and everyone could become *prosumer* (in English in the original), i.e. at the same time producer and consumer of information' (2011: 17). For Grillo and Casaleggio, multitudes of prosumer citizen journalists will replace journalists by uploading and sharing their user-generated content. The fact that everyone online can potentially be a creator of content is automatically equated with empowerment, and the fact that anyone can produce and share information, is automatically enough for Grillo and his techno-guru to turn everyone into a professional journalist, thus making the same idea of journalism obsolete. Furthermore, Grillo and Casaleggio completely gloss over the fact that bloggers and citizen journalists also post and comment their articles according to their subjective perceptions of reality and following their political agendas, and can thus suffer from biases, prejudices and fallacies just as any other journalist. These ideologies are then paired with another technological myth, *transparency*, i.e.

The assumption that each new medium actually mediates less; that it successfully 'frees' information from the constraints of previously inadequate or 'unnatural' media forms that represented reality less perfectly. (Gitelman and Pingree 2003: 13)

In their manifesto, the two authors state that 'in the Net, transparency is an obligation, you cannot lie' (2011: pos. 1142). This is because, according to Grillo and Casaleggio (2011), in

the Net collective intelligence will always prevail, and the one who is providing false information will immediately lose credibility.

Also Natale and Ballatore (2014) argue that the techno-utopianism of Grillo and the 5SM was constructed on the belief that new media will replace old media. However, Natale and Ballatore (2014) focus on a generalized understanding of techno-utopian discourses, by drawing on the notion of digital sublime (Mosco 2004). In so doing, they fail to explore thoroughly the complex relationship between the digital sublime and the techno-utopianism intrinsic to the field of digital politics and the study of social movements, especially with reference to the concept of ‘network’.

### **Techno-utopianism and the *Ideology of the Movement*: How digital discourse can legitimize authoritarianism**

#### ***The construction of the net and the ideology of the movement***

‘One is worth one’ is one of the most famous mottos of the 5SM, i.e. everyone has equal weight inside the 5SM. One of the strongest ideologies sustaining the political discourse of the 5SM is that for the Net ‘the concept of leader is a curse. There are only spokespersons for the citizens’ demands’ (2011: pos. 146). Therefore, not only do ‘political leaders make no sense’ in the digital era, but ‘whoever defines himself as a leader should undergo mandatory medical treatment’ (2011: pos. 146). Grillo and Casaleggio’s technological discourse depicts the Net as a utopian techno-political space where all persons will be able to decide in relation to the political choices they are involved in, because every citizen will be part of a collective intelligence. Casaleggio makes this point clearer in a recent interview:

Direct democracy, enabled by the Net, is not only relative to popular consultations, but also to a new centrality of the citizen within society. The political and social



organizations of today will be destructured, and some will disappear. Representative democracy, through [parliamentary] mandate, will lose its meaning. It is first and foremost a cultural revolution, and then technological; for this reason, often, it is not understood or it is banalized. (D'Anna 2013)

As Dal Lago has underlined (2014: 60), in Casaleggio's vision, the Net is not simply a tool that can improve democracy, but it is *democracy* itself. In order to understand the technoutopianism of Grillo and Casaleggio and to appreciate properly the relationship between digital and political discourse, we believe it is of paramount importance to examine the social movements' literature of the last decades and to reflect critically on the notion of 'network'.

Research on digital activism flourished at the beginning of the 2000s (Meikle 2002; McCaughey and Ayers 2003; Atton 2004); however, the last ten years have seen a proliferation of different approaches on digital activism, which have tried to make sense of the relationship between new web technologies and the rise of mass mobilizations (Castells 2009, 2012; Hands 2011; Earl and Kimport 2011; Lievrouw 2011; Gerbaudo 2012; Juris 2012). The notion of 'network' has acquired a fundamental importance within the wide variety of literature produced on the topic in the last decade.

In researching the movements of the late 1990s Castells (1996) argued that we need to understand the role of Internet technologies by recognizing how they impacted the creation of new forms of political imagination and belonging, where the *network* became a privileged and more flexible mode of social organization. Similarly, the autonomous Italian Marxist tradition (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2009; Virno 2004) introduced concepts such as 'multitude' and 'swarms' to argue that we were witness to the rise of a new form of networked struggle, which did not rely on discipline, but on creativity, communication and self-organized cooperation (2000: 83). Other examples can be found in Webster (2001) or in the one by Juris

(2008) on the global justice movements. These works on social movements and new web technologies argued that the logic of networks, which was triggered and facilitated by Internet technologies, was radically transforming political participation, and fostering grassroots forms of political engagement based on horizontalism, participatory democracy, and the deconstruction of hierarchies.

One crucial and interesting aspect of these works in the field of social movements is that, by combining an analysis on technological developments with an analysis of changing patterns in forms of social organization, they often came to the conclusion that the 'network' became a new 'autonomous' political agent, which was replacing 'old' forms of political engagement and participation (Castells 2009) and which was defined by the collective intelligence of the 'swarm' (Hardt and Negri 2009).

These understandings, we argue, have largely influenced the political discourse of the 5SM. As has become evident from our analysis of Grillo and Casaleggio's discourses, the overall ideology of the 5SM is that of the Internet conceived as 'autonomous technology' (Winner 1977). The concept of autonomous technology (Winner 1977) sees technology as a force that transcends history, and it is not shaped by social, political and cultural forces, but is just 'out there', waiting to be discovered. Hence Grillo's and Casaleggio's next move. Decontextualizing the Net and stripping Internet technologies from their social, economical and political context, the comedian and the techno-guru interpret the Internet as an autonomous force that transcends history. According to Grillo and Casaleggio, the Net functions not within constraints and conflicts generated by social relations and practices between human beings and institutions, but according its own, transcendent set of rules. Moreover, the two leaders present the Net as the end of all exploitation, as a bringer of social change, as a new, horizontal, positive, liberating and emancipatory force that will revolutionize politics and everyday life. Here the rhetoric of the autonomous technology

(Winner 1977) meets the rhetoric of inevitability (Nardi and O'Day 1999: 17) that characterizes technological development and progress as inexorable. As the two politicians write, 'The re-positioning of information on the Net is irreversible: a drop that carves the stone, a continuous outpouring, as that of grain of sands of an hourglass' (2011: pos. 146).

Therefore, by positing the Net as an autonomous political agent, which they present as able to transcend and replace 'old' political hierarchies and inequalities, the leaders of the 5SM put in place a process of technological fetishism, which enables them to construct the Net as a political agent. By claiming that the 'The Net is on our side' (2011: 6), Grillo and Casaleggio managed to construct an ideology of the movement, and to present the 5SM as a grassroots movement based on horizontal networks, participatory democracy and no obvious leaders. They were able to present themselves as a movement, despite the fact that, as many have shown (Del Lago 2013; Mello 2013; Santoro 2012), the 5SM is defined by hierarchical, authoritarian and anti-democratic political practices. The most interesting aspect here is that these practices are often legitimized through digital discourse, and through the processes of technological fetishism.

### **Net-authoritarianism: Technological fetishism and its impact on political practice**

As the above part has shown the techno-utopian discourses of the 5SM enabled Grillo and Casaleggio to fetishize 'the Net' as an autonomous political agent. Harvey argues that the process of technological fetishism is defined by the habit of humans to invest objects with 'self-contained', mysterious and even magical powers, and to believe that these objects are able to move and shape the world (2003: 3). Harvey's indebtedness to Marx's (1977) concept of commodity fetishism is clear. The basic understanding is that humans are constantly involved in the production of specific objects, systems and technologies but that capitalism detaches (alienates) humans from these processes of production, and thus makes them believe

that the market, commodities or technological objects are autonomous agents, endowed with their own intelligence, and able to define the world.

Within anthropology these human processes of fetishism have been thoroughly explored. Moreover, anthropologists have argued that, although fetishism is an entirely human process that says much about the way in which different cultures construct their values and meanings (Hornborg 1992, 2001; Graeber 2007), 'technological fetishism' is often at the very heart of Westernized notions of modernity and progress (Hornborg 1992; Pfaffenberger 1988). In this framework, the 'machine' (Hornborg 1992) is invested with an agency of its own and affects social realities in complex ways.

The understanding of the process of technological fetishism, we believe, is essential to the analysis of the 5SM. This is because it enables us to move beyond a mere deconstruction of the techno-utopian discourses promoted by Grillo and Casaleggio and to evaluate critically their impact on everyday political practice. Here, it is important to understand that, as Harvey (2003) has argued, technological fetishism cannot be considered a 'drive' in itself, as this conception would itself be fetishist; however, technological fetishism does mediate and redirect the actions of social agents and it does have real effects on social relationships and shared beliefs (Harvey 2003: 10). According to Jodi Dean (2009: 38), technological fetishism in politics transforms relationships in significant ways because it enables subjects to construct the Internet/Net as an acting subject in its own right without assuming responsibility themselves. In the context of the 5SM, the constant reference to the Net as an acting and democratic subject, which was promoted through the 'ideology of the movement', has enabled Grillo and Casaleggio simultaneously to construct the belief that they were leading a democratic movement, whilst legitimizing top-down and authoritarian forms of political practice.

Beppe Grillo's role as leader is clearly stated within the so-called 'non statute', the official ruling document of the movement. Grillo announced the non-statute with a blog post on December 2009 (Grillo 2009) in enthusiastically shrill tones. The comedian reiterated in the post the revolutionary significance that this document embodied, replicating usual formulas as 'one is worth one', 'the mass becomes intelligent and self-governs itself', and making a strong declaration at the end of the post: 'Fuck [political] parties, there will be no headquarters [...], those headquarters with four old men inside with chairs and their spokesperson talking, there will be nothing like that!'

However, if we carefully examine the 5SM non-statute, we can see that it represents a powerful ruling act to the point that it can be considered a 'legal deed of property, because it gives Grillo – and him only – the material, symbolic, and political control of a movement that coincides with his blog (Dal Lago 2014: 84). Article 1 defines the 5SM as a platform that originates, has its epicentre and coincides with the blog [www.beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it). It is clear that the old 'traditional' party headquarters criticized by Grillo have not disappeared, but have rather been replaced entirely by the blog, the only legitimate headquarters of the 5SM, owned by Grillo and carefully managed by the Casaleggio Associati firm. Article 3 further affirms that 'the name of the 5 Star Movement is linked to a trademark owned by Beppe Grillo, the only holder of the rights to use it'.<sup>7</sup> Grillo is therefore the only owner of the blog, and consequently of the party, and possesses the authority to expel any member of the 5SM for whatever reason he deems appropriate.

During the last years, on many occasions Grillo has exerted the power to exclude or expel several members of the party at his own will. In March 2012, Valentino Tavolazzi, councillor of the Ferrara municipality, was removed because he had planned a convention in Rimini in order to discuss issues related to the organization of the movement. A few months later, in December 2012, Giovanni Favia, a regional councillor of the Emilia-Romagna region, was

expelled after his ‘off the air’ conversation with a journalist was broadcast on national televisions. During that informal off the air talk, Favia complained about the lack of democracy within the 5SM, arguing that decisions were totally in the hands of the duo Grillo-Casaleggio. During the last years, Grillo has evicted several local councillors of the party in ten Italian regions, Emilia-Romagna being the most rebellious region with at least ten municipal and regional councillors expelled (Pierattini 2014). The list of removals could continue, but it goes beyond the scope of the present article; what we want to point out here is that the ideology of horizontality epitomized by the ‘one is worth one’ expression, linked to the alleged magical power of online networks automatically to supersede the need for a leader, is but a façade – a façade that hides, facilitates and eventually legitimizes top-down strategies of tight control by Grillo and Casaleggio.

The beating heart of the 5MS, the [www.beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it) blog, has also been at the centre of several controversies, conflicts and struggles. First of all, we cannot ignore the almost self-evident critique that a man who enjoys an amazing media success, who has created the party, and who owns the blog can scarcely have the same exact impact as do the myriad of citizens whose comments get lost in an incessant flow of digital forgetfulness. While the posts by Grillo and Casaleggio always obtain the highest degree of visibility and relevance on the platform, the other comments on the blog are nothing more than irrelevant contributions, part of an incessantly circulating stream of information. In this respect, Dean’s reflections on the fantasy of abundance in communicative capitalism are enlightening:

Content is irrelevant. Who sent it is irrelevant. Who receives it is irrelevant. That it need be responded to is irrelevant. The only thing that is relevant is circulation, the addition to the pool. Any particular contribution remains secondary to the fact of circulation. (Dean 2005: 58)

In addition to the issue of public visibility, we must be aware of the fact that the mechanisms of content selection and information filtering behind the blog are far from being transparent. In a blog dated 16 March 2013, Grillo (2013a) wrote a post where he attacked the Italian Senators members of his party who, in a secret ballot, voted to elect Piero Grasso as president of the Italian Senate, instead of a blank vote as the majority of 5SM's parliamentarians had decided. Launched before 11:00 p.m. on Saturday 16 March, the post had already been commented by more than 7500 people on Sunday 17 at 2:00 p.m. Many comments were critical, e.g. pseudonym Ferdinand Bardamu who praised the 5SM senators who had the courage to rebel and criticize the 'authoritarian turn' of the party. The post by Bardamu gained more than 250 preferences, but his post, as several others (2250), was removed a few hours later (Strada 2013). This is just one of the many examples of blog censorship practices that commentators and journalists have highlighted during the last years, to the point that various websites and Facebook pages have now been created in order to monitor and expose the mechanisms of systematic censorship and eradication of dissidence within the 5SM online platform.<sup>8</sup> On 24 March 2013, Grillo (2013b) stated in a blog post that the many expressions of divergence and contrast within his blog were nothing more than orchestrated hordes of trolls and fake profiles that regularly infested the platform: he termed those comments 'squirts of digital shit'.

In conclusion to this part therefore, it seems evident that the technological fetishism of the Net as an autonomous political agent has enabled Grillo and Casaleggio to conceal their authoritarian practices, especially with reference to the construction of Grillo as leader and to the management of the blog, and hence the political culture of the 'movement' in general. This, we believe, is a powerful example of the problematic effects of techno-utopianism on social organization and democracy.

## **Conclusion: Unmasking false movement ideologies**

From our analysis, it appears clear that the digital rhetoric of horizontality, lack of leadership and spontaneity of the party is used to mask, facilitate and eventually legitimize centralized and authoritarian practices. The loudly celebratory, emancipatory and utopian technological discourse/rhetoric of the 5SM operates as an obfuscating mechanism that hides professional marketing strategies and hierarchical political processes.

We would like to point out that our article's purpose was not only the deconstruction of contemporary web ideologies, and the exploration of the ways through which technological discourse is used to legitimize political strategies of social control. Through the critical examination that we have proposed we wish to draw the attention of analysts, journalists and scholars to the dangers of equating practices such as the one of the 5SM with those of movements as the Spanish Indignados<sup>9</sup> or the Occupy Wall Street protest.<sup>10</sup> This point emerged lucidly in the in-depth interview we carried out with Giuliano Santoro, who repeatedly pointed out the fact that the 5SM filled a void that Italian social movements had proven unable to occupy. While in May 2011 the *Indignados* movement emerged in Spain, flooding the squares in a continuous and spontaneous feedback between the streets and several online platforms (Candón Mena 2013), Grillo, speaking from his position of leader, invited everyone to focus on the polls instead. The demonstrations held by the Italian 5MS are not the product of spontaneous, horizontal multitudes joining together to protest, but rather, amount to hetero-directed, controlled and piloted forms of contention. Even if we do not advocate a neat, oversimplifying division between *spontaneous* and *hierarchical* movements, with our article we hope to stimulate future analyses of emerging movements to apply a constant epistemic vigilance, in order to unmask the role of technological discourse in shaping and constructing false movement ideologies.



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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the original Italian are ours.

<sup>2</sup> ‘An Ordinary Cricket. The 5SM, and Digital Populism in the Crisis of Italian Parties’. The title plays on the meaning of the movement’s leader surname ‘Grillo’, which is the equivalent of ‘cricket’ in Italian.

<sup>3</sup> In the political discourse of the 5SM, the notion of ‘Net’ is often used to refer to a political agent that is defined by the merging of technologies and social networks, whilst the ‘Web’ is usually used to refer to the technology. However, at times the two definitions overlap.

<sup>4</sup> According to Wu Ming (2011).

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jdHN4edCqA>. Accessed 6 February 2014.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.camera.it/parlam/leggi/05270l.htm>. Accessed 6 February 2014.

<sup>7</sup> The non-statute is available here: <https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/materiali-bg/Regolamento-Movimento-5-Stelle.pdf>. Accessed 6 February 2014.

<sup>8</sup> See in particular: <http://nocensura.eusoft.net/>; <https://www.facebook.com/nocensura2014>. Accessed 6 February 2014.

For the record, Ferdinand Bardamu is the (not particularly likeable) protagonist of Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s 1932 novel *Journey to the End of the Night* (*Voyage au bout de la nuit*).

<sup>9</sup> The most read newspaper in Spain, *El País*, was also a victim of the techno-fascination exerted by the 5SM:

[http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2013/05/25/actualidad/1369496053\\_171788.html](http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2013/05/25/actualidad/1369496053_171788.html). Accessed 11 February 2014.

<sup>10</sup> On this point, see also the reflections developed by Wu Ming (2013), <http://www.wumingfoundation.com/english/wumingblog/?p=1950>. Accessed 2 February

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