

Chapter 8

Avant-garde Digital Movement or “Digital Sublime” Rhetoric?

The *Movimento 5 Stelle* and the 2013 Italian Parliamentary Elections

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*“Are you a grillino? Do you enjoy streaming?”
Italian comedian Maurizio Crozza impersonating a puzzled
Giorgio Napolitano, President of the Italian Republic,
April 2013.*

Abstract With 25.5 % of voices obtained at the 2013 parliamentary elections in Italy, the *MoVimento 5 Stelle* (M5S or Five Star Movement) has become a central actor of Italian politics. The Movement relies to a large extent on a vision of Internet-driven and -based direct democracy; as such, social media have been the main organizational tools behind its rise of the past few years. At the same time, it is argued that the power of networking, the allegedly egalitarian approach to public debate, and the horizontality of relations typical of social media are not, in fact, the backbone of the Movement, but a primarily discursive device destined to hide the importance of much more “traditional” political instruments of hierarchical authority and opaque management of financial flows, and to legitimize the amateurism of the movement along with its anti-political drive. This chapter provides a portrait of the digital and social “vision” posited by the Movement—its practical, organizational consequences alongside its narrative(s). It aims at showing how the different components of this vision all contribute to the M5S’s status of new force to be reckoned with in the Italian political space—not always, and maybe not primarily, for the reasons the Movement itself provides.

Keywords Movement • Italy • Politics • Elections • Social media • Horizontality • Web • Organization • Direct democracy • Rhetoric

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It was somewhat foreseen, anticipated, and by some, hoped for or deeply feared. But what was certainly unexpected was its order of magnitude. The *MoVimento 5 Stelle* (M5S or Five Star Movement)'s sweep of a spectacular 25.5 % at the recent Italian parliamentary elections of February 24th and 25th, 2013, was doubtlessly even more of a tsunami¹ than the two leading minds behind the Movement, Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio, had envisaged. With an electoral result that made it Italy's most voted party in the Chamber of Deputies and an equal "third force" alongside the traditional left- and right-wing coalitions—the crucial actor in the formation of alliances and coalitions that would eventually lead to a government—the M5S has established itself as the newest, most sought-after fieldwork of Italian sociologists, political scientists and journalists. All of them have attempted to dissect this unprecedented phenomenon, as puzzling as it is rife with problematic consequences and open questions for the close future of Italian politics.

As a long-term Italian expatriate in France and in the United States and a scholar of Internet governance—but somewhat of an "invested outsider" to Italian politics—I am both thrilled and doubtful as I start writing this essay on M5S. Yet, the fact of not having experienced "in the flesh" the Italian electoral campaign of early 2013 likely allows me to develop an external point of view on the manifold "instant studies" on the Movement. There has been a proliferation of such studies in the past few months, and these provide many interesting entry points of reflection into the topic, with a diversity that clearly reflects the variety of interpretations and viewpoints about M5S—not only among its analysts, but among politicians themselves.

One of the main "disorienting forces" deployed by the Movement is, without a doubt, the central role it attributes to the Internet and to digital, social media tools; the quote that opens this chapter is a particularly on-target parody and illustration of the difficulty, by the traditional political establishment, to grasp these mechanisms and the discourses surrounding them. In this quote, the famous Italian comedian Maurizio Crozza, impersonating President Giorgio Napolitano, ironically highlights one of the stand-out features of a true *grillino*²: insisting that every political procedure that deserves to be known by citizens should be broadcast live and then archived on the Internet, through video streaming technology. During the March 2013 political consultations aimed at forming a government—a somewhat desperate attempt by the left, despite the "hung parliament" situation that had followed the elections—the M5S imposed live video streaming to every event of this type that concerned representatives of the Movement, much to the other parties' dismay and disarray. These, too, broadcast live for the whole country—and the world—to see.

The Movement relies to a large extent on a vision of Internet-driven and -based direct democracy, and social media have been the main organizational tools behind

¹ Tellingly, Beppe Grillo chose to name "Tsunami Tour" his itinerant political campaign in Italian squares, in the spring of 2013. See his eponymous blog post http://www.beppegrillo.it/2013/01/tsunami_tour.html.

² In a way that followers of the Movement consider demeaning, because of the *reductio ad personam* it implies, the press often labels the M5S as *grillini* ("Grillo's people").

its rise of the past few years. At the same time, interesting arguments are being made about the extent to which networked, egalitarian approaches, and the horizontality of relations typical of social media are not, in fact, the backbone of the Movement, but a primarily discursive device destined to hide the importance of much more “traditional” political instruments of hierarchical authority and opaque management of financial flows, and to legitimize the amateurism of the movement along with its anti-political drive. This chapter provides a portrait of the digital and social “vision” posited by the Movement—its practical, organizational consequences alongside its narrative(s)—hoping to show how the different components of this vision all contribute to the M5S’s status of new force to be reckoned with in the Italian political space—not always, and maybe not primarily, for the reasons the Movement itself provides.

8.1 M5S, The New Actor in Italian Politics

The *MoVimento 5 Stelle* is doubtlessly *the* new actor on the Italian political scene—the history of which has already, repeatedly shown its originality and peculiar balances in the past—and as such, it has been attracting international and national attention, in particular at the European level. Led by former comedian Beppe Grillo, the Movement has established itself as one of three forces of equal weight in the Italian parliament at the recent elections of February 2013. It has secured over 160 seats in the two Chambers combined, following a process of “direct nomination” of candidates on the Web, and surpassed even the most optimistic anticipations by the Movement’s leaders. A clear signal of the M5S’s steady rise in the Italian political landscape had taken place in the regional and municipal elections of 2012, making it known that the Movement was successfully proceeding to fill a spot left empty by traditional politics, shaking the foundations of the deeply-entrenched Italian party system and channelling those voices who oppose austerity measures as a remedy for the future’s uncertainty.

In the wake of the 2013 electoral results, the M5S has quickly been hailed as one of the most successful examples to date of a movement “grown from the Web” that is able to parallel and even surpass the endeavours of traditional political parties. Even the Net-sceptic Evgeny Morozov has remarked: “There’s no shortage of examples of citizen[s] being asked for advice on how to govern or being involved in some minor decision-making but I’m not aware of similar examples when it comes to elections. I suspect the Pirates Parties in Sweden and Germany may have experimented with similar methods, even if not on such a scale” (Morozov 2013). Throughout its rise, the M5S has indeed made the Internet and Web 2.0 applications, social media in particular, one of its main organisational resources as well as one of the core, underlying elements of its vision of what politics is and should be, and its conception of democracy. The central role—in practice and in narrative—of digital information and communication technologies is paralleled by the M5S

communities' engagement in a number of in-person collective activities, including meet-ups and "protest days".

As the leader of the Movement, Beppe Grillo is a controversial figure. On one hand, he claims for himself an "inspirational" role, dedicated to rallying bottom-up participation and acting as a spokesman of the Movement's consensus—gathered through his widely-visited *Blog*,³ that I will come back to later in the chapter. On the other hand, the total practical and financial control that he and the firm of his associate, Gianroberto Casaleggio, exert over the strategic choices of the Movement and the material platform around which it gathers has been deemed as inconsistent with his alleged leadership profile of "peer among peers". Questions have also been raised on the transparency of the *Blog*'s management choices, which would not mirror the transparency requested and fostered by the M5S as a political model.

Grillo's profile is, indeed, very atypical for an Italian political leader, inasmuch as he is neither a "politician by profession" nor an outsider coming from the professions that have, in the past, proposed their services to Italian politics on a temporary basis—from university professors to judges and businessmen. His past as a comedian has fine-tuned his perception of the love-hate relationship between media and politics, and his capacity to use it; he leverages, through these media—prominently, so-called "new media", the Internet first and foremost—the dissatisfaction and lack of trust in the traditional political establishment which has been constantly increasing, in particular during the past few years, further fuelled by the economic crisis. He is, according to Fabio Bordignon and Luigi Ceccarini, "a political entrepreneur who mobilises resources, activating the potential 'protest energy' widespread in a considerable section of public opinion" (2013: 2).

The extent to which the alleged "inspiration" provided by Grillo hides, in fact, a relatively rigid and traditional hierarchy is a matter of on-going scrutiny, alongside the "one is worth one" M5S motto, which implies the centrality of direct consultation, absence of left/right identification, and hailing of professional skills as opposed to "political" skills. Evgeny Morozov points out that "the reasons why we need hierarchies and leaders don't always have to do with communication costs. [The Internet] reduces communication costs. But leaders and hierarchies are needed to produce charisma and to [...] sound cohesive and credible when negotiating with other parties, then the Internet hasn't changed anything: charisma and discipline don't emerge from bytes. [...] Someone has to counter the [hostile] blog comments—they don't just go away on their own" (Morozov 2013). However, deliberate attempts, driven by populist and technocratic dreams of leaving politics behind, to escape negative attributes of politics—ideology, bargaining, prevarication and hypocrisy—may only make things worse. For whatever flaws of the current political system, the only alternative in that case may be the replacement of politics with either "managerialism" or populist totalitarianism, as argued by Bernard Crick well before the Movement and the Internet itself (Crick 1962).

³ Blog di Beppe Grillo, <http://www.beppegrillo.it/>

8.2 The Web as an Organizational Home

A former “digital luddist”—he used to break a computer into pieces at the end of each of his shows in the early 2000s⁴—Grillo has found a home for his Movement in the World Wide Web. His Blog, *beppegrillo.it*, created in 2005, is the central rallying point around which the political initiatives of the Movement develop. The blog enjoyed immediate success, with *Forbes*, *TIME* and *The Observer* enthusiastically reporting about it in the years immediately following its creation, hailing the platform as one of the world’s most influential blogs⁵ and its creator as a Web Celeb⁶ and a European Hero.⁷

Simultaneously to his blog’s spectacular rise in notoriety, Beppe Grillo was touring Italy “in the flesh”, recruiting supporters and followers among his fans, making his identities as a stage man and a blogger more and more intertwined. The *beppegrillo.meetup.com* platform was created as a parallel, somewhat independent tool of rallying and organization for the community. His shows were becoming increasingly political, while at the same time, he was preaching anti-politics with colourful and impolite language from the stage, until the climactic “V-day” (abbreviation for Vaffanculo-day, roughly translatable as “F*** Off day”; Ruggiero 2012), a calling for the introduction of a Bill of popular initiative to remove from office members of the Italian Parliament previously tried and convicted for crimes. The V-day is considered to be the first case, in Italian history, of a political demonstration developed and promoted via bottom-up mobilization on the blogosphere and on a number of social networking services (Pepe and Di Gennaro 2009).

To this day, the Web remains the core organisational resource of the Movement, primarily through the Blog and the Meetup platforms, paralleled with an extensive use of social media tools such as Twitter and Facebook. Bordignon and Ceccarini have argued that the global dimension of the Movement is mostly represented by the Blog, while the local dimension is mostly identifiable in the Meetup platform, and the different instances of meetups “in the flesh” that the platform allows to put in place: “[v]isitors to the blog were invited by Grillo to use this platform to organise themselves independently in local activist groups. At a central level, the distinguishing features are great professionalism, the availability of sophisticated technical skills and a strong orientation towards political marketing. At the peripheral level, groups of ‘friends of Beppe Grillo’ form the backbone of the organisation” (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013: 11).

⁴ See for example <http://scaccoalweb.dotblog.it/2007/09/grillo-distrugg.html>

⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2008/mar/09/blogs>

⁶ http://www.forbes.com/2009/01/29/web-celebrities-internet-technology-webceleb09_0129_top_slide_8.html

⁷ BBC News (February 26, 2013). Profile: Beppe Grillo. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-21576869>

Web-based applications and tools are understood by the Movement as the facilitators of local-level participation, the instruments enabling mobilisation and monitoring around central, controversial issues and ultimately, an “active” conception of citizenship and citizenry (Tisch 2010), as well as a reconciliation between citizens and institutions by bringing them closer. Reports, articles and critical questions, published on the Web for everyone’s perusal, allegedly increase the visibility of the problems that “really matter”, and gather citizens around those problems. The Blog itself is the primary venue to exert one’s right to active citizenship: it may be likened to a “super-node” among peer nodes in a network, with some coordination functions such as, for example, ensuring the communication between meetups. Damien Lanfrey highlights the M5S’s structure as a “meta-organisation”, a network of micro-organisations of different sizes, scope, and activities, partially coordinated at the central level, through the blog, and partially autonomous (Lanfrey 2011).

8.3 The Internet and Direct Democracy: A Vision and a Narrative

While the Web was quickly becoming the main organizational tool of M5S, by means of Grillo’s blog and a number of word-of-mouth initiatives resting with social networking tools such as Twitter and Facebook, a “digital narrative” was taking shape in the discourse of Grillo and his followers as one of the underlying foundational themes of the Movement—an ideology, a vision and an electoral programme at once. Free and Open source software, broadband connectivity, Internet infrastructure development, peer-to-peer exchange, Creative Commons, even analogies between the M5S and the Norwegian, Icelandic and German Pirate Parties, acquired an increasingly prominent role in Grillo’s speeches. In the leader’s rhetoric, the Internet became the monitoring tool *par excellence* (Lanfrey 2011), able to maintain the elected accountable and to break into the heavily politically-unbalanced Italian media system, by providing a plurality of alternative voices and the means to spread them, with no need for intermediation.

Most of all, the idea of participatory and direct democracy fostered by Grillo and his followers is construed as having a “natural counterpart” in the Internet. Because of its alleged lack of intermediaries, Web- and application-based tools are the foundations of the user/citizen’s “turning into the State”. The delegation of decision-making responsibility from voters to elected officials, the cornerstone of representative democracy, supposedly becomes obsolete with the Web. Within a recurrent frame of “each person counts as one”, reminiscent of the peer-to-peer paradigm, the role of the citizen becomes one of supervision and surveillance of whoever is in charge—who remains a peer among peers, as s/he was chosen by them. Politicians should be the people’s “employees” and their mandate should be temporary—their actions and operations subjected to a continued monitoring

process, facilitated by digital and social tools. A practical experiment of direct democracy via the Web was carried out in Fall 2012 for the *primarie*, the M5S internal elections that would prelude to the 2013 parliamentary elections and select candidates for them, and later in the year, by the *quirinarie*, the preliminary selection of candidates to the presidency of the Italian Republic. However, according to the MoVimento’s very sources, the experiment was undermined in both cases by limited participation (about 40,000; Valentini 2013), and a number of criticisms, which we will come back to later, were raised about the transparency and consistency of the methodology used for gathering votes.

Beppe Grillo’s direct democracy narrative has been varying from an initial desire of “improvement” of existing direct democracy systems, such as referendums and popular initiative bill proposals, to the cancellation of such instruments—which still presuppose a final intervention by the established political class to take into account the will of the people thus expressed. The (so far) final version of direct democracy advocated by Grillo suggests a “replacement” of politics with citizens (Valenza 2013), which entails a number of rules aimed at ensuring that elected officials act as civil servants, not as career politicians. Such requirements include the acceptance of substantial cuts in their deputies’ and senators’ salaries, the rejection of electoral reimbursements (a usually heated topic in Italian politics), and a strict limitation in the number of parliamentary mandates. Other requirements are more intimately linked to the M5S’s reliance and large presence on the Web: direct democracy also means that elected officials should periodically submit themselves to the judgement of the voters on the Web, and ensure that political procedures, where decisions related to citizens are taken, are made as transparent as possible. The extensive use of live video streaming and Web archiving of all kinds of political meetings and consultations is an answer to this requirement.

8.4 Internal (non-)Democracy: From Web Strategists to Logos

If the “directness” and the “peer-to-peer” dynamics—as well as the role of the Internet in the implementation of such dynamics—are emphasized in the M5S’s relationship to the external world, the internal organization and governance of the Movement and its digital platforms is more complicated, and has been heavily criticized, on occasions, by M5S affiliates themselves—sometimes with drastic consequences.

As previously mentioned, the M5S has in some respects a decentralised, networked structure, with independent initiatives on a variety of issues being carried out in different local contexts. Yet, the “*Movimento 5 Stelle*” symbol and the *Blog di Beppe Grillo* are managed in an entirely centralized and somewhat opaque way, by Grillo himself and his associate, Gianroberto Casaleggio, a Web strategist. Notwithstanding the proliferation of M5S-related alternative Web

platforms, as the “central node of the membership network” (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013), the Blog is crucial for M5S elected representatives to be widely heard. Based on the Movement’s “Non-Statute”,⁸ its access can be forbidden to members who, according to a non-appealable sanction from Grillo, are deemed to have infringed one or more of the seven rules regulating the Movement. Furthermore, the M5S logo is “registered in the name of Beppe Grillo, the exclusive owner of the rights of use [of the mentioned logo]”. With this clause, Grillo is concentrating the set of rights related to the political and electoral use of the Movement’s symbol in his hands—as well as the capacity and right to expel members from the M5S. Bordignon and Ceccarini note that, “[i]n this sense, the M5S is dissimilar to the pirate party, which has adopted instruments and practices of liquid democracy, by employing technologies for the decision-making process, such as the *LiquidFeedback* platform” (2013: 12).

The role within the Movement of Casaleggio, the CEO of the marketing and Web strategy consultancy firm Casaleggio Associati, managing the Blog, is also ambiguous. Several M5S activists perceive him as a “shadow figure”, with a profile that is a lot more discreet than that of the leader and spokesperson Grillo, but with an influence on the Movement’s governance that is perhaps even greater. In May 2012, Casaleggio will end up writing a “self-discharge letter” to the *Corriere della Sera*, one of Italy’s most-read newspapers, stating that “For those people asking who is behind Grillo, or talking about a ‘shady marketing firm’, I would like to point out that I have never been ‘behind’ Beppe Grillo, but at his side. [. . .] I am the cofounder of this movement” (Casaleggio 2012).

The fragility and shortcomings of the M5S’s internal democracy ultimately spill over the boundaries of the Internet and the Web, to be exposed via more traditional media. In April 2012, Giovanni Favia, then a M5S prominent representative, is hosted by journalist Michele Santoro in his programme *Servizio Pubblico*. Off-the-air, he uses strongly negative words to describe Grillo’s supremacy over the Movement’s political symbols, and the spin doctor, “Small Brother” role played within M5S by Casaleggio. In September 2012, at *primarie* time, the TV programme *Piazzapulita* broadcasts the video containing Favia’s frank remarks, exposing his deception, as an activist, for the ways in which Grillo and his guru manage internal expressions of dissent, as well as the governance, management and decision-making of the Movement and its platforms. Together with Federica Salsi (another M5S representative, municipal councillor in Bologna), “guilty” of taking part in another popular TV programme contrary to the Non-Statute’s provisions, Favia is expelled from the Movement, and the decision posted on the Web with great drama and fanfare—and criticisms.⁹

⁸ <https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/materiali-bg/Regolamento-Movimento-5-Stelle.pdf>

⁹ <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2012/12/12/movimento-5-stelle-grillo-espelle-giovanni-favia-e-federica-salsi/443548/>

8.5 The *Imperative Mandate* and Its Dilemma

The model fostered by the M5S proposes that politics be structured around the “imperative mandate”, i.e., that the elected representatives should be directly dependent from, and directly accountable to, the voters. However, the political will of the latter is—albeit based on an ongoing feedback system with followers and militants, enacted through the Internet—interpreted by the leader and “guarantor” of the Movement and his thought leader of reference, contested web strategist Gianroberto Casaleggio.

Sociologist Ilvo Diamanti, a long-time careful observer of Italian politics, observes that the full implementation of both of these core features is very difficult to achieve, as they presuppose two very different conceptions of what the Movement is (Diamanti 2013). The “room for interpretation” by leaders that has de facto characterized the Movement’s actions as a political entity so far makes it more alike to a party like any other: an organization of politicians, more or less “professionalized”, with a common identity and common interests, and vulnerable *vis-a-vis* the temptations and privileges of power. However, the M5S was indeed born as a network, not only because of its digital networking component, but because it was created out of that fabric of groups and committees engaged on themes of common good, environment, public ethics, that are somewhat separated from mainstream politics, populated by mostly young people, operated at the local level on a voluntary basis, and drawing their line of conduct by pragmatic, daily experience.

For this reason, the prompt answer to the leader’s call may be difficult to achieve in every occasion—and it may be equally difficult to let the model of direct democracy and the imperative mandate prosper, now that political elections have assimilated the Movement’s exponents into the rules and principles of representative democracy. The individuation of the voters’ very needs and demands may be difficult to achieve as well, lest the interpretation by the leaders become too cumbersome. Because of the M5S’s very lack of ideological cohesion and structure, which has assembled a variety of markedly different citizen profiles under the banner of the “five stars” (public water, environment, sustainable transport, development and connectivity), the allegiance to the leader, necessary to trust his “interpretation”, may be equally problematic. Elected people and activists do not answer exclusively or directly to the leader, as they have not been chosen by him but by other activists and followers with whom they have developed a close, independent, often personal relationship. Interviews of M5S militants show how their accountability, allegiance and in turn, their commitment and action, is based on the trust-informed relationship with their peers, rather than with Grillo himself (Corbetta and Gualmini 2013). That of M5S is the dilemma of a political entity oscillating between “traditional” and “personal” parties: it would most likely not exist without Grillo, the proprietor of a trademark, a platform, and a strategy. However, Grillo’s “property” does not, or *should* not, extend to the Movement itself; the M5S is no “business-party” with elected representatives as employees,¹⁰

¹⁰ A metaphor that has often been used for Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia.

but a bus on which, at different stops, a heterogeneous group of passengers with different destinations has found its place (Diamanti 2013). Will this bus, with its heterogeneity, be able to maintain its route as it faces the long-standing, albeit creaky, structures of representative politics?

8.6 Technical Obfuscation, Political Uncertainty

Moving beyond the imperative mandate dilemma, criticism of the heavily Web-based M5S model extends to the intrinsic technical uncertainties that arise if the Web is used not only as a “mere” rallying platform, but a true instrument of direct democracy, used to vote candidates in preliminary rounds of election before the final M5S representative goes on to the national, final round. Polemics have arisen, for example, during the *quirinarie*—the preliminary elections for the M5S candidate to the presidency of the Republic. In this occasion, relatively few people voted, and those who voted were not given much information about how their input (and their personal information) was handled (Valentini 2013).

It is argued that the M5S’s Web-based direct democracy will end up being an imaginative variation of technocracy, for a number of reasons. First, and perhaps obviously, any individual who controls the technology has the capability to influence the voting process; less obviously, users of the platform are in fact very “profilable¹¹”, making it easier to identify specific cores of users/militants/voters. Most of these users have very limited technical knowledge of the platform but are, nonetheless, very “digitally active” and willing to get informed online, despite any warning message that may come from their machine; thus, they may be most easily attacked and eventually integrated into a botnet.¹² Once they are part of such a system, they may be exposed to a very sophisticated level of attacks.

Using the “rallying platform” constituted by the Blog as something more—as a true instrument of direct democracy—is certainly a laboratory of experimentation of participatory and emancipatory technologies that have been investigated, studied and tested in the past with very limited practical implementation. While this is hailed as an interesting result in itself (Luna 2013), it is argued, however, that the experiment may be going too far all of a sudden: an important amount of power and control is bestowed upon a technology that may not be sufficiently mature—and, in the process, to its administrators—with the idea that, if need be, a backup plan will

¹¹ Users that make their tastes, interests, and preferences explicit on the Web; these elements make it easier for third parties to establish their profile, and target them with content they are more likely to follow—content that may be malicious.

¹² A merger of robot and network, a botnet is set of computer programs, connected via the Internet, communicating with one another to perform tasks. While not all botnets are illegal, botnets often include computers whose security defenses have been breached, and whose control is now in the hands of a third party. Computers can be co-opted into a botnet to execute malicious software.

be envisaged later on. Both processes should be monitored, however, as “political history merged with technology.”¹³

Second, the closed-source technical platform, managed exclusively by the Casaleggio Associates firm, gives its administrators a complete liberty of action—and the means for implementing a technical obfuscation of such actions. Administrators are not only the staff of the firm, but also the anonymous consultants that are likely helping what is and remains a social media marketing company to propose a direct democracy platform. The opacity of the platform makes it a lot more complicated, as well, for the public to know about—let alone react to—any deliberate attack enacted by any entity that is sufficiently technically savvy to take over the system. There is a lack of transparency in technical and political choices, especially when it comes to electronic voting and selection of candidates. Only long-time associates can access the voting platforms, while the Blog is the only public space where the debate happens in an open way.

The M5S model provides yet one more occasion—and perhaps one of the most interesting so far, in terms of the co-evolution of politics and the Internet—to rethink and challenge the myths surrounding the modes of operation of online platforms and their supposedly intrinsic democratic value. The model, with its qualities and its shortcomings, encourages further scrutiny of what constitutes the “objectivity” and the “neutrality” of algorithms subtending platforms such as Google, Twitter, and Facebook, crucial to the daily lives of our online, socially active selves (Musiani 2013). It suggests, once again, that the “invisible work” subtending the infrastructures and the architectures that make the Internet operational constitutes inherent arrangements of power (DeNardis 2012). Finally, the M5S model may be a laboratory to observe a further incarnation of what Evgeny Morozov describes as a widespread “rhetorical trick” of Internet culture. According to him, the public tends to think about features such as objectivity and neutrality as being consubstantial to networked technologies. “We think (those features) represent ‘the Internet’ and then we transfer those features to the ‘Internet’ itself, so that whatever other projects come out from ‘the Internet’ are essentially believed to have these features. So I’m not surprised that M5S can claim to be totally horizontal, transparent and Internet-driven while exercising few of these features” (Morozov 2013). The ways in which online platforms for political engagement may be “black boxes” in need of further scrutiny, and technical obfuscation may be a proxy for political uncertainty—the impression of participating in the political process without ever getting full assurances that your actions count—are brought to the fore by the M5S experience.

¹³ In the words of Claudio Agosti, director of Hermes—Center for Transparency and Digital Human Rights. <http://logioshermes.org>, on the NEXA mailing list (April 2013).

8.7 Conclusions. Technology and Rhetoric: The M5S Facing Itself

As I am writing this piece, the M5S looks in trouble. After the national elections triumph just a few months ago, the Movement's following has drastically dropped in most cities where the June 2013 municipal elections were held.¹⁴ Internal and external controversies shake the Movement, ranging from Grillo's "iron-fisted" management of dissident voices to the poor performances displayed by some M5S senators and deputies in the first months of life of the new Parliament.¹⁵ Is the M5S destined to a fall as spectacular as its rise has been? Without attempting a prediction that will most likely be obsolete by the time this essay is published, my conclusions try to highlight what, in the unfolding narratives and daily practices of the Movement, makes it an interesting novel actor in the relationship between politics and the Internet—regardless of what its ultimate fate is going to be.

For reasons prompted by, but not limited to, the economic crisis, traditional, mainstream, representative politics are currently undergoing a deep crisis of legitimacy and public trust. The M5S, regardless of its online persona, can be interpreted as a search for answers to this crisis, by providing an innovative party model and suggesting that "other ways" are possible for the relationship between citizens and politics. The drive behind the M5S's spectacular rise in Italy rather than elsewhere, in this moment of history rather than others, probably has more to do with the structural, deep-rooted problems of Italian politics, the magnitude of the challenges to the sustainability of its economy, rather than with "revolutionary" changes prompted by the Internet.

The point where the Internet becomes crucial is the practical "organization of democracy" fostered by the Movement, based on collective action regrouped ad-hoc around specific issues; on "monitoring citizens" with a wealth of online information and instruments at their fingertips; and on liquid democracy instruments that facilitate the gathering of consensus around people and issues, allowing citizens to directly shape candidates, programmes, decisions. These very practical aspects, clearly linked to the use and daily practice of networking technologies, come wrapped in a narrative of *natural* and unavoidable consequences of the Internet "age", "spirit", or *Zeitgeist*.

However, both these sets of practices and narratives of the Internet as a liberating and inherently democratic force co-exist in a highly problematic way—problematic for the daily operations of the Movement, and for its public image *vis-à-vis* third parties—with an intentionally opaque management of the material devices, platforms, arrangements subtending the organisation of the Movement. These often

¹⁴ Huffington Post (May 27, 2013) Comunalì 2013, Il Movimento 5 Stelle fa flop alle urne. http://www.huffingtonpost.it/2013/05/27/comunalì-2013-il-moviment_n_3342376.html.

¹⁵ E.g. L'Unità (March 4, 2013). Lombardi scivola sull'elogio del fascismo. <http://www.unita.it/italia/capogruppo-camera-alzata-mano-fascismo-casapound-mussolini-cinquestelle-meeting-eletti-grillo-m5s-1.486668>.

remain hidden behind M5S’s very “virtual” persona, fostered and encouraged by its leaders, but are no less present for that—and are ultimately affecting the Movement’s very legitimacy. M5S is and remains an entity with a permanent organisation, professional employees, a centralized management of its material infrastructure, and a top-down, highly personalised management whose problematic approach to the control of dissent and criticism is a persistent issue within the Movement.

The recent evolution of M5S from a primarily destructive “call to arms” into a parliamentary force to be reckoned with, entering those very institutions and political processes it allegedly wishes to erase, has made explicit what is the Movement’s main challenge in the close future: not to be afraid of its own success, of its connecting, lobbying and rallying instruments. Rather, to build on them, by engaging in a reflection about the M5S’s apparently irreconcilable features¹⁶ and the ways in which this peculiar nexus can move forward in a sustainable way.

What’s in all this for the Internet and digital social media, as means, facilitators, detonators of another possible way of doing politics? Traditionally reluctant to address all matters “digital” in a more complex and evolved fashion than seeing them as challengers of the status quo, and creators of need for further (legal) reform, Italian politicians appear dumbstruck by the current situation where for the first time, a strong component of the political opposition in the country is not a traditional party but a so-called “digital movement”. Bedazzlement has led them to react in one dominant way: diffidence, distance and “enemy-framing”. On his side, Grillo has done nothing to reduce this effect; rather, he has amplified it, by choosing to ignore any possible “institutionalization” of the Movement (even after the fragmented electoral result had made it almost mandatory if one wished to obtain any practical result), and radicalizing its anti-political image.

While this retreat into trenches, on both sides, looks like a missed opportunity in several obvious ways, it is a pity for one, perhaps less obvious, reason: that it prevents further practical investigations of the ways in which the M5S may indeed keep its promise of *avant-garde* new politics, facilitated by (if not dependent upon) online digital and social networks. Without an everyday “trial”, in the real world, of its undeniably innovative and fascinating model, the Movement will find it increasingly hard to respond to its detractors. And it will find increasingly difficult to contest that the Internet may just be playing, within M5S, a rhetorical role: that of

¹⁶ Bordignon and Ceccarini (2013: 21) summarize them exhaustively and concisely: “the ‘rational’ elaboration of political proposals with iconoclastic and anti-political impulses; technical competence with charisma; the party understood as a company that sells a product on the political market with the party understood as a consumer advocacy group; the centrality of engagement and discussion with the leader’s extreme and uncompromising verbal style and propensity for monologue; the inclusive demands of the grassroots with the (democratic?) centralism of the leader; the insistence on the ‘shared’ nature of the political organisation with the ‘proprietary’ mindset that still regulates its functioning; the emphasis on deliberation from the bottom up with the necessity to ‘decide’”.

great legitimizer of amateurism and anti-politics, wrapped in the emancipatory narrative of the *digital sublime*.

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