FACING THE CHALLENGES OF THE WEB 2.0: A CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE ON PARTICIPATION AND MOBILIZATION

Roberto De Rosa - <u>roberto.derosa@unicusano.it</u> (Niccolò Cusano University - Rome, Italy)[*]
and Dario Quattromani (Tuscia University - Viterbo Italy)

ABSTRACT

Configuring politics 2.0, Chadwick (2009) says that the web acts as a "dynamic coordination platform" rather than a mere catalogue of static pages containing information. The aim of this work is to present and discuss the participatory phenomena in the new arena represented by the web 2.0, particularly the role of Social Network Sites (SNS). The frame of reference we chose began with the US presidential campaigns of 2007/2008: from that moment onwards the already existing and the newly born social media have shown their full potential, thanks to its pervasiveness and the number of actual users reached in a hyper-connected reality. Those were real 2.0 electoral campaigns, based on a real system of web participation – not just unconventional electoral marketing, but sharing of ideas and decisions that involved millions of users of the network, continuing even after the elections, with their virtual but active presence on a social network. Our research question aims at verifying if these new communication arenas are able to widen, transfer, substitute or reduce the confrontation area. Once outlined the boundaries of this analysis, we will describe the evolution from the original modes of participation to the new mobilisation relationships created by the e-medium.

1. Web Communication and Participation: An Introduction.

Changes in political participation during the last few decades have been interpreted with uncertainty. While some scholars have identified the crisis of the traditional forms of political involvement – both visible participation (registration in political parties and trade unions, voters' participation), and latent participation (interest in politics, trust in institutions) – as empirical evidence of a crisis of democracy tout court, others have taken it as an indication of the metaphor of "the democratic phoenix ", i.e. the capability in re-invent their own democracy; this double point of view seems to indicate that, despite a decline in traditional forms of participation, these have achieved their traditional educational role, freeing civic resources in

the society that have supplied new forms of participation and innovated the forms of political action of citizens. These opportunities are essentially the outcomes of lower participation costs, so that there are many more actions available to citizens through *cyber-politics* with more flexible and efficient types of interaction (Robles-Morales J.M., Córdoba-Hernández A.M. 2019).

The impending influence of new technologies on the characteristics of political participation lies in their same peculiarity: high interactivity, free and equally guaranteed access. A web created network is at the same a source of information, a means of communication and a segment of the public sphere; therefore, this new medium will affect the political participation to the extent that determines the changes in the circulation and diffusion of political information, in the forms of communication and in the configuration of the public sphere.

Whitworth, Garnett et al. state that "informational resources are essential for communities, rooting them in their own history, helping them learn and solve problems, giving them a voice in decision-making and so on." In order to improve digital inclusion, and inclusion in the informational and democratic processes of society, it is essential that "communities retain the skills, awareness and motivation to create and manage their own informational resources" (Whitworth, et al., 2012). The building of an informational community is a first step, but then quality and relevance of information must be guaranteed and improved.[i]

The crisis of the traditional forms of politics has encouraged new opportunities and resources for participation, at the same time digital media have made it possible to quickly put them in connection, providing an organisational infrastructure to the forms of bottom-up participation and effectively answering to the new participation needs of contemporary citizens. The earliest experiments in liquid democracy represented by "civic networks" have created new digital squares where citizens have found a room for a new leading role. The web network has integrated the channels of representation, since it has offered tools for a direct participation well outside the traditional role of social and institutional ombudsman (Rodotà,1997).

Some of the subjects that more than others have benefited from the decline of classic agencies of socialisation and political mediation seem to be the social movements: from the end of the sixties until now, the cycles of protest that have succeeded have suffered a strong acceleration, particularly in the last decade, so much that the protest has itself become "normal political action, frequent and socially accepted, […] made visible and communicated by television, by satellite, but especially by the internet" (see Raniolo, 2002; Norris, 2001; Mosca and Vaccari, 2012, Mazzoleni and Sfardini 2019)

When reasoning about the relationship between the internet and social movements, we must look at the medium rather as an opportunity to innovate action repertoire of the movements than as a mere instrument of communication: from this point of view, we have to make a distinction between forms of action expedite by the internet - as pre-existing the web network - and forms of action internet-based, i.e., that exist only because of this medium.

At the end of the '90s, the question was raised in the following terms: does the internet reinforce existing models of participation and political mobilisation or does it create new ones? (Bimber et al., 1998). In a first step, research used the traditional forms and ways of participatory action as a measure – i.e., the nature and amount of political information owned by internet users participating in political activities and by those who do not participate; how many times do internet users contact spontaneously political actors or institutions to bring to their attention a matter of general interest; their number of subscriptions to online petitions, etc. Depending on the nature of the variables taken into consideration it was easy to come to the conclusion that

"the internet tends to reproduce the structure and the social processes of the offline world making consumers who are already active look more active" (De Rosa, 2014 pp. 17-20).

We must therefore widen the range of parameters to new forms of political action on the web, in order to also consider those groups typically inactive or less active in conventional offline forms of participation.

If we take for example young people, we could see that it is not true that they participate less than older generations, but they participate in a different way, experiencing non-conventional modes of political expression[ii], mainly because they are subjected to a large quantity of electronic *stimuli*.

2. Defining Web 2.0: from Common Feature to Political Peculiarity.

The neologism "web 2.0" was forged in 2004 by Tim O'Reilly[iii], but from the very start it has created some confusion. Some people define it as a platform, someone else as "an architecture of participation", others as the second generation of tools and web-based services aimed at emphasising the collaboration between users. Maybe the most correct definition is the meaning of open access world, meaning a (virtual) place freely accessible by anyone through the use of free software in order to share information and collaborate in creating new knowledge and hence a world in which the users are at the same time producers and users of information. That is why web 2.0 represents a way to work together, to learn, to upgrade, to exchange experiences and to create knowledge, then made available to everyone. It is therefore a cultural movement whose basic idea is that the site's contents should reach users (or better the community) without any filter and without any intermediation, in response to a need that "departs from the bottom".

The concept of web 2.0 is usually well defined with three words: innovation, creativity and cooperation (where you can add the concept of gratuitousness, since both the software generating web 2.0 applications and their content is available free of charge). Innovation is represented by the adoption of new tools, such as social networking, blogs, podcasts, wikis, RSS feeds (that stands for Really Simple Syndication) that approach users to each other and to the same sources of information (Santoro, 2007).

Today, against a sharp drop in the level of participation we may see the affirmation of a new way of doing politics and participating in public discussions, that is the so-called *wikicrazia*[iv], the democratic participation of citizens through the instruments of the network, particularly social network.[v]

The political implications of web 2.0 have been effectively described by Andrew Chadwick, based on an adaptation of the definition given by O'Reilly.
In its configuration of politics 2.0, the web stands as a "dynamic coordination platform" rather than a mere catalogue of static pages containing information (Chadwick 2009, pp. 9-41.

The web 2.0 platforms are places of aggregation and integration of users' actions and relations; thereby they are being seen as instruments for participation, as well as an informative environment. Chadwick says that these environments own two specific features that make them means of involvement: scalability, i.e., the platform's capabilities – for example, Facebook or Twitter – to adapt itself (almost in real time) with sudden increases of participatory contributions of users, with this allowing the web 2.0 to coordinate and organise mobilizations on a large scale. The second feature is the "long tail" phenomenon[vi], i.e. the typical characteristic of the network that allows it to meet the preferences of those citizens who in the past age of mass communication were not reachable because it was preferred to use generalists messages

in order to intercept a wide range of audience. Thanks to the platforms existing on the network, even smaller and fragmented groups can recognize and coordinate together (Bentivegna and Boccia Altieri, 2019); at the same time, their preferences can be intercepted, communicated and mobilised for the public activity, thus increasing a political offer that is sculpted and renewed listening to the citizens on the network.

The potential for cooperation and relations building allowed by the web 2.0 may be a precondition for the development of the so-called collective intelligence[vii], derived from the combination of knowledge and points of view offered voluntarily by the citizens. Thus, for example, users of a debating space can not only publish messages or comments, but also evaluate their liking for those already published, so that the other participants may recognize the content that have generated the most interest and then deliver their attention upon them. The functions "Like" on SNS like Facebook and YouTube, or the "retweet" on Twitter, do precisely play a function of sharing and dissemination of a content. In this way, "the digital citizens become particip-active: not only they participate in political activity but they are themselves producers of content, create links and they are promoters of people networks of and acquaintances"[viii].

Another political characteristic of the web 2.0 is the continuous experimentation (The Vortex, 2012, p. 23]: due to this feature, software is always in a Beta version, because it is continually updated and improved, often thanks to users' suggestions and comments. These circumstances lead to two relevant outcomes in the relationship between citizenship and politics. On the one hand, it causes the overlapping of the information tools of informed participation in a precise and constant direction towards users' preferences and behaviours, thus increasing the flexibility of everyday practices of democratic citizenship. On the other hand, it expands the users' involvement in designing instruments of citizenship, because they are called to report problems and to suggest new initiatives. Just as a result of this tendency to continuous innovation, the web 2.0 represents a suitable place for practising new forms of participation and sharing on a small scale, and on specific issues. Open Polis is an example: a site that monitors and controls the activities of Italian MPs through the cooperation between volunteers' citizens, which deals with a single reporting political activities through a computer system for data sharing (Mosca and Vaccari, op. cit. p. 187).

Last but not least, a further connotation of the web 2.0 with political significance and its enhancement of rich media experience: content passes not only via text, but above all through sophisticated audiovisual media (Mazzoleni and Bracciale, 2019, Moroni 2020). The increasing importance of the images may help in changing the ways in which citizens shall inform and participate in the network, especially to the extent that the audiovisual stimulation involves the emotional sphere as well as the rational one. As Giuliano da Empoli writes with regard to Obama, for the President of the USA "personal is political: his history coincides with his program and there is no better topic than to communicate with his electorate"[ix].

According to some scholars the web 2.0 success points towards a cultural change even more than a technological one, concerning the concept of participation and the role of the individual. The experiments in participatory networks of the nineties were characterised by the concept of "virtual community", a social network distinguished by strong bonds and a collectivistic orientation. In the web 2.0, instead, it converts operatively the idea of a society focused on individuals-based networks and connected with a personalist concept, which emphasises the word from the individual in his social environment, within a context of exploitation of opinions, especially those coming from the minorities. The propensity to develop the independent and individual dimension can be found, according to Beck (Beck, 2010 p. 25), along with the

freshness concentrated on political participation, which has gone from being a constraint of permanent membership to temporary decision subject to confirmation.

3. Internet and politics: at first glance.

The oncoming of *web 2.0* and social networks like *Facebook* and *Twitter*[x] facilitated the transfer and the rebuilding of the political community on the net. Before analysing the actual innovations in political participation, it is useful to review the literature regarding the phenomenon.

A first wave of studies on the binomial "politics and web" has interested the seventies and the eighties, with a major focus on the clash between "apocalyptic and integrated", i.e. a clash between those who saw in the new media free technologies capable of providing tools for social redemption, and those who saw the network as a weapon of control and tyranny (Eco, 1964; but also in Raniolo, 2002, p. 172).

In the nineties the separation in the analysis of the relationship between traditional politics and online politics does persist: on the one hand those who saw the internet as a missed opportunity to bring the people back to the politics (against increasing rates of abstention), to include them in the decision-making processes, encouraging a greater circulation of information and transparency of institutions; on the other hand those who looked at the information and communication technologies as instruments of oppression in relation to its citizens. A clash of visions synthesised in the duality "technologies of freedom and control technologies" (Mosca, L., Vaccari, C., op. cit. p. 10).

The debate has reached a new stage in the last decade, pondering on whether and how the internet would have changed the relationship of power in political arena, formulating three possible settings:

- The "equalisation" setting: the internet would allow fringe players – with poor resources, with little access to institutional channels – to increase their weight in politics;
- The "normalisation" setting: in the medium and long period the usual political actors would take possession of this new medium settling down and transforming the online politics in "the same old politics";
- The "strengthening" setting: traditional political actors would have used the internet as an additional resource to increase their visibility and their power (Mosca, L., Vaccari, op. cit., p. 11)[xi].

The digital revolution, more recently, has seen for the first time on the scene the new "post-bureaucratic political groups", i.e. "light" organisations capable of activating collective action by exploiting limited resources and that maintain less binding relations with their members than in the past. In his historical excursus, Bimber (Bimber, B. et al., 2012) notes as collective action was, in a first step, organised by mainstream groups as the parties, then by circumscribed and monothematic (single issue) interest groups, and finally groups that constitute and mobilise around single events (single event).

Today it is possible to state that none of the hypotheses endorsed in the first years of the new century have been fully confirmed, nor falsified. It is more correct to say, indeed, that the internet and the web 2.0 tools strengthen levels of commitment and participation already existing, but it is also evident the promotion of connection and participation between less traditional social actors, in view of a crisis of traditional forms of political involvement (Mosca, L., Vaccari, op. cit. p. 12). In wider terms, online politics configures itself as a complex outcome

of contradictory, incoherent and opposing dynamics, whose final outcome is often explained by contextual and environmental factors (Altieri G., 2013 p. 161).

The different opinions about the Arab revolutions of the 2010-2011, and their real capability to spread themselves through the use of the network and the web 2.0, may be useful to testify the co-partnership of these factors and dynamics: if on the one hand we have talked about the power of the network to create "organisation without organisations", which gives to the individual political action an unimaginable degree of freedom until now, on the other hand the empirical findings allowed to highlight how the success of the Arab Spring has been determined only marginally from the diffusion of the network and its use by the people, rather having the economic conditions and the political and institutional landscape of single countries led to dictate the fate of the protest movements (Matiz, 2014).

4. Web 2.0: How to Participate in and to Mobilise.

The advent of the new communication technologies in modern western society has led many scholars to consider the impact that the new media have on the democratic process and therefore on the relationship between citizens and politics. Those who gave a positive reading of the emergence of the network in a democracy argues that the internet and its evolution in web 2.0 have the advantage to promote the participation of citizens in the debate on issues of public importance and therefore on the positions taken.

The fact that in recent years the web has shortened the distance between citizens and the political class stands out positively, especially in the light of the growing disaffection for politics that has struck the democratic systems nowadays. Considering the decline in electoral turnout – generated by an endemic problem of trust and credibility of politics in relationship with the citizens-voters – the digital technologies have played a dual role showing a leading role in the 2000' politics. It seems quite possible to imagine an organisational architecture of participation that will enable organisations to adapt and prosper in turbulent times… outlining the 'adaptive institution working in collaborative networks' based on principles of e-maturity and public value. Concepts like public value[xii], e-maturity[xiii] and collaborative networks have been seen as real tools also for political institutions, like political parties, concerned with changing their participation processes and using their knowledge and understanding to make the most effective use of emerging technologies to enable change" (Garnett, F., Ecclesfield, N., 2008). If, on the one hand, the web is one of the main instruments that politics uses in the reconstruction of its relationship with the citizens, on the other hand it nourishes and amplifies the process of anti-political feelings that appoints many European democracies, in these years, and particularly the Italian one (as seen in the case of Grillo, his blog and the Five Stars Movement).

Another plus point of the web network, in its weave with citizens and politics linkage, it's having created a virtual square in which the opportunity of meeting and comparison were previously unthinkable. Surfing in the internet the information offered is increased exponentially and the news spread in real time, through multiple channels and formats (Bentivegna, 1999 p. 12); not only you can read newspapers and insights but also read the full text of a speech made by a politician or a public figure, see him live streaming, listen to him via podcast, discuss and chat with him.

New media are an important resource for the public and the political debate, because they release information and opinions; stimulate the attention and expertise on topics of general breath and legislative measures, urging the civic involvement of the citizen (Mosca, L., Vaccari,

C., op.cit., p. 95) and, as it has already been pointed out, an informed citizen is more suitable to actively participate.

However, on this aspect not all of the literature does agree: scholars, such as Norris, argue that the internet plays foremost a role of "strengthening", i.e. encourages the participation of those who are already active, thus creating a virtuous cycle that involves those who are already motivated. Certainly, the online participation must be understood as a complex concept and an articulated practice, where it is possible to distinguish different forms of activism – from information to debating, to mobilisation with protest actions – related to different profiles, motivations and political behaviours (Vaccari, C, 2012; but also Norris 2000).

Bentivegna does also note that the expansion of information channels has a double value: on the one hand it has a highly democratic value since an informed citizen can control the exercise of power and the government activities, on the other hand it "exhibits a surplus value relatively to the multiplication of the opportunities in taking the floor. […] (there is) not only an increase of information, but also an increase in opportunities in taking the floor for subjects who do not always have the possibility to find space in traditional media" (Bentivegna, op. cit, p. 13).

As we shall see later, the peculiarity of the web 2.0 does change the relationship between citizens and politics: participation has become active, bottom-up, multi-directional and multi-faceted. "It is through digital media that citizens begin to actively use their critical consciousness both individually and collectively" (The Vortex, op. cit. p. 79).

According to the negative point of view on the digital era, it is pointed out the danger of creating a sort of technology domain on individuals able to control and manipulate opinions, decisions and behaviour. In the same direction, the supporters of the "social determinism" have supported the theory according to which the innovations introduced by digital media are filtered by the institutions and other actors holding the power, thus, the web would not have generated significant changes in the functioning of modern democracies, nor it would have favoured the birth and the appearance of new political actors and intermediaries (Vaccari, C, op. cit. pp. 11-12).

The coming of the net has so far denied both readings and it has been converted into a new communicative space that puts forward his own process and that has typical social context dynamics in which the internet has developed, in such a way that some authors such as Resnick argue that in the web it can be found "an organised structure of political life present in the real world". According to a process of "normalisation", cyberspace reproduces structures already traced in reality (Resnick D, 1998). From this point of view technology and culture – intended as a socially shared symbolic system of signs and meanings – are not in opposition but do produce a new specific unity: technoculture (Balsamo, 2011).

5. An Online and Offline Experience

The distinction between the size of the network and that of the reality was at the centre of a good part of the reflections on the relationship between the internet and political participation. When the net has begun to assert itself in the public sphere and spread in the everyday life of its citizens, the optimistic thesis of those conservative or "apocalyptic" had a feature in common: i.e. the online and offline concept as two clearly separated sphere, guided by different logics and characterised by significantly far-away actors, processes and political outcomes.

These considerations are more focused on political participation, on electoral competition between parties, on parties' organisational structure and movements and interest groups.

From the point of view of political participation, some have asked if the internet has fostered an enlargement of the participation, by reversing the tending decline in the offline activities - hence more conventional - organised by political parties and trade unions and - at the same time - by specifically developing online activities, as debate on policy issues through forums and blogs. The move from information to mobilisation is inseparably linked to that from the online/offline dimension, and many scholars agree today that political participation is conveyed at the moment in which the aggregation of online information (obtained collecting information, sharing, and debate on social networks, blogs and forums) ensues a form of offline mobilisation, still regarded as the only real and concrete manifestation of political conscience (Altieri, op. cit. pp. 28-29).

The topic of participation does not only involve just the forms, but also the subject of the involvement and, firstly, the citizens. The study of the internet as a dependent variable in the couple "citizens" vs. "political participation in the net" sets the goal to explain what kind of factors lead people to inform and participate online, i.e., to analyse the features that affect its use for political purposes by the citizens. To answer this question let's take a step back up to the theory of Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995) according to which the people do not engage in politics for three main reasons: "because they can't, they do not want to, nobody asked them for". Therefore, political participation necessarily passes through the resources possessed by citizens, their motivations, their inclusion in social networks and their contact with political mobilisation channels.

Considering the topic of resources, the study of net-participation cannot take into account that the distribution of digital media is not homogeneous, especially from a sociodemographic point of view. seAccording to some empirical studies, including that conducted by Ceccarini and Di Pierdomenico in 2010 (Ceccarini, L., Di Pierdomenico M., 2010 pp. 343-369), use of new media made by citizens in order to inform themselves on policy issues and participate online does affects a minority of subjects. Beyond having resources as a high education or belonging to the male gender, it is first and foremost the population size to make a difference. Being young is intertwined with a widespread and everyday uses for digital media. These are tendencies that characterise both the Italian scene and that of other western democracies, United States ahead, where the internet now exceeds the printed media as a source of overall information.

Even in comparison with television, the trend among the younger is to inform themselves relying on the sources found on the internet, which is considered a more reliable and transparent source than TV (Pew Research Center, 2008). That is the thing about digital divide and the related inequalities in "access to" and "use of" the internet (Bracciale, 2017). Over the years the parameters with which to measure the phenomenon did increase up to include aspects such as the connection speed, or other types of disparities linked to the advent of broadband and Wi-Fi connections.

However, overcome the stumbling block of accessibility, as noted by scholars such as Vaccari and Bentivegna, the political interaction on the network and through the network could compensate for shortages of another important resource of participation: time[xiv]. It is obvious that, against a commitment reduced to quick and easy initiatives, the external influence of participatory action decreases, compared with the ongoing participation in physical places, so that part of the literature has significantly defined these forms of involvement as "unimportant", because actions such as copy and paste a link or a post does not result from an autonomous processing (Shulman, Kotz, Howard, 2009). Despite the fact that observations like these deserve attention, it seems appropriate to adopt the observation of Christian Vaccari that, by invoking the Michels' "irony law of oligarchy", does also notice that participation in political

parties and political organisations has been, for most of the cases, led from the outside and operated by a small circle of people (Vaccari, op.cit).

With regard to the effectiveness of the online engagement, moreover, it is necessary to draw the already cited distinction between the instrumental dimension of participation, directed to obtain a certain result, and the expressive one, oriented to express an identity and a sense of belonging[xv].

The reasons for which citizens participate, their motivation are a basic question in the discussion of web participation.

The Internet is a selective medium (Bimber, 2003) since it makes it possible for the user to select the type of information that he wants to reach, by choosing the sources that he prefers. Technology, therefore, provides the tools to participate in but not necessarily the motivations to participate.

As regards to political mobilisation, the third variable affecting the participation, the internet has certainly multiplied the opportunities for candidates, parties, movements and pressure groups to offer to the citizens to be engaged in and out of the net: "the distinction between being a citizen offline and online began to dissolve" (Chadwick, 2006).

In the same terms Bauman has recently stated[xvi], by saying: "all of us, separately but also simultaneously, live in two separate universes: online and offline. The second one is often called the real world, even if the question of whether this definition fits better to the second with respect to the first becomes gradually questionable".

Kim and Ellison state that Social media may also encourage social learning of political engagement due to their unique affordances such as visibility: analysing a two-wave survey conducted before the 2016 presidential election in the United States, they notice that the observation of others' political activities on social media inspires users themselves to model similar political behaviours, which foster offline political participation (Kim and Ellison, 2021)

Social networking sites feed and expand the "offline" social networks of individuals, increasing the possibilities that these encounter political content and opportunities for involvement through word of mouth on the net. The development of the uses of social networking has contributed to thinning and gradually redefining the distinction between online and offline dimension, thanks to a process of hybridization between the network and the political and social reality. This phenomenon arises essentially from three reasons, the first being, without doubt, the integration between the internet and the daily life of citizens: the network permeates the experiences of consumption, sociality and citizenship in the contemporary world; rather than a reality in itself, the internet is increasingly tied to the practices and social relationships that already exist offline.

The second reason is the ever more widespread access to the internet through smartphones and tablets, exponentially increasing the mobile dimension of the network. Taking Italy as an example, it is considered to be the nation with more smartphones than inhabitants; in fact, the penetration of mobile devices amount to 158 %, with more than 97 million active SIM cards against a population of almost sixty and a half million inhabitants (See study and statistics edited by "We Are Social, Digital & Mobile Around the World," January 2014, slides 95-96, http://wearesocial.net). The integration between network and mobile telephony opens up new participation practices more adaptable and more interconnected with times and places of daily life. More and more applications will allow users to map their geographical location and share it with other citizens, creating a virtual map of common real-world locations; this strengthens the bond between network and territories, between online and offline.

Finally, the third motivation refers to the web 1.0 evolution – mainly intended as a great archive (database) of easily accessible information – in web 2.0: in this new scenario the web

becomes a predominantly relational environment through social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook[xvii], as well as portals of event organisation and meetings like MeetUp, sites of audio visual content sharing as YouTube, services of real time exchange of information such as Twitter, team-working and upload to the web of knowledge such as Wikipedia and the but not the last sites of information and bottom-up comment as the galaxy of blogs.

Online and offline dimensions are hence intimately linked and the web becomes a medium for users to share and enhance their experience of everyday life. One might wonder, what are the consequences of this integration for citizens and political actors? From the point of view of the citizens, as it has been pointed out by quoting Chadwick, the network offers them the possibility to carry out the same practices of citizenship that we could make offline – for example, the signature of an online petition – and in other cases it allows citizens to organize, or find events to take part on its territory: for the Italian case we could quote the "Purple People" and/or the Five Stars Movement experience or even, for the United States, the events organised by MoveOn.

"Overall, online participation is a selective activity, linked to the availability of a connection, e-skills, motivation and the ability to receive solicitations to participate. In addition, exposure to online politics may stimulate interest and increase the involvement towards that offline. There seems to be, in short, an osmosis between participation in the network and the physical places, for which the former tends to reinforce the latters, especially among the citizens more involved in public life" (Vaccari, op. cit. p. 41).

Political relationship and shared identity that can be built and maintained on the net can therefore result in resources and real offline tasks, with political and electoral outcome much more significant than the term "virtual" suggests[xviii].

In other words, there is a process of hybridization and fusion between online and offline involvement practices that contribute to bring different forms of participation, such as the more institutional one – as the party militancy – to the civic one – as the volunteer – to those sub-politics, or such as consumerism. Turning to the political actors, the coming out of new technologies – such as relationship channels and virtual spaces of action that affect reality – has allowed organisations to move more nimbly between structures of participation and interaction that in the past were considered mutually exclusive. Structures of personal (involving the construction of strong bonds between participants) and impersonal (which instead are limited to the associate membership at a distance) relationships are increasingly supplemented by organisations that are using the net in order to collect funds from their supporters, and to organise them so that they meet and organise on the territory. Structures of institutional shareholdings i.e. based on a top-down control of organised – and entrepreneurial – bureaucracies that indeed do support the individual initiatives born from a bottom-up start – do combine together because of the nature of the net, through the exchange of data between the leadership and membership of the organisation, and allow to harmonise behaviour, as exemplified from the Obama electoral campaign, which on the one hand did allow supporters maximum freedom, but on the other hand did continuously gear his supporters to carry out certain activities in specific places to reach an electorally defined target.

The result of these processes is that political parties, social movements, interest groups and associations may use digital repertoires of collective action, becoming more similar and integrated between online and offline, so that the structures and the forms of organization and mobilisation of political subjects with different characteristics and objectives flow in resembling and amalgamate (Mosca, L., Vaccari, C., op. cit.).

6. *sympathisers* **On Participation, Mobilisation and Politics 2.0.**

The reasons to be on the web, and today even more on a social network, do primarily come from the need to shorten the distances between citizens and politics, dialoguing with their constituents, involving them in the construction of the political agenda, and strengthen the relationship with volunteers, supporters and sympathisers, and finding a constructive dialogue with the opponents.

The use of new technologies to improve the democratic participation does date back to the end of the nineties, when the web was already defined as a "social revolution of our time". For Coleman and Blumler direct interaction produced by the new media gives citizens the feeling of being in front of a transparent political class that not only has nothing to hide, but that is available to act in a peer to peer relation with them. According to Barry, the intense interaction with the public is useful both to optimise and intensify the feedback between politics and citizens and - in the case of government - to minimise the possibility of unexpected political quarrels in the moment in which they adopt unpopular decisions. In a certain way we can say that the online participation engages the citizen.

Walters, Aydelotte and Miller[xix] did identify five objectives in the public involvement in the decision-making process:

- discovery: to give citizens the opportunity to obtain information online;
- education: to educate citizens on a problem and the proposed alternatives;
- measurement: to consider citizen preferences;
- persuasion: to convince public opinion toward a favourable alternative to political;
- legitimation: to ensure that the participatory process of citizens is recognized by public institutions.

Chadwick[xx] also notes that there is a positive association between the use of the internet and political participation, because the internet offers a deep coverage of news facilitating the possibility of collecting information quickly, without costs and favouring the civic consciousness of the citizen. On the other hand, empirical research led in recent years has often encountered a disappointing state of the art. Mainly because political actors consider the internet more as an information tool and less as a space in which to engage their supporters and confront them openly. The approach of the institutional political actors to digital media seemed quite shy and mostly exploitable, linked above all to the their desire to show a cutting edge image of themselves, to speed up its internal communication and knock down costs[xxi]

Three explanations have been offered to motivate this reluctance of political actors in using the web 2.0 tools. The first one is that individual candidates and parties as a whole, are not prepared to lose control of their communication, thus avoiding online interaction, even when they exalt it in words. This is why political actors are more likely to use digital media to provide information rather than to allow the participation of citizens. The first aim of the sites of the parties was precisely to provide standardised information, rather than creating a participatory channel. The second explanation lies indeed in the so-called "fear factor": when political actors evaluate the possibility of experimenting innovations, they tend to overestimate the risks and underestimate benefits because they fear that the media will give more weight to the errors than they will give to the successes. Finally, all the institutionalised structures are sensible in the face of change: especially parties are organisations which are traditionally impervious to change and they shall adapt and gradually adopt new technologies, as it has already happened in the past with radio, television and other software[xxii].

Contrariwise, Bentivegna (1999) observes that, in contrast to such organisational resistance and fears, the spaces made available by the web and online network offer the conditions to the

parties to recover and enhance some organisational features that in the meantime have gone lost. For example, the networking function, here assumed as the possibility to organise the activities of all the party branch and stakeholders who are collateral to the party, and also a function of community building. Proposals of initiatives, enrolment, organization of supporters: all of these activities become more easily manageable through the network, with less time and in modes that were unimaginable before.

The awareness of a too large gap between civil society and politics has encouraged to seek alternative channels to obtain at least some input from citizens to take as a support or as an address in the management of public affairs. In this sense, the new media act as the place in which the public of a country does express and manifest itself. In the absence of direct channels with citizens, the new media are considered a "substitute" of public opinion, of easy consultation and immediate availability. Communication via email and the offer to participate in discussion forums where users are invited to express their opinions: those are occasions that allow the party to obtain indications that come directly from the citizens on issues of public importance. Thanks to these open spaces of comparison, the party can integrate the indications which originate from traditional sources taken as reference to know the climate of public opinion in the country with those gathered in the first person by means of the direct relationship with citizens[xxiii].

It is always more needed, since most of the analyses show that political parties are at a growing distance with their population as a whole, for electoral laws to objectively contribute to either choose or to establish a relationship between elected and territories. The idea that in the web, numbers are what does count – intended as followers or fans – and not the vitality, the participation and interaction – and so on the conviction that a leader must necessarily have thousands of followers and that this in itself mean you have followed, consensus, credibility – it is a psychosis afflicting with no distinction all political groups. Doing a more profound analysis, it is possible to discover that those thousands of followers on Twitter - for example - are *botnets* and *fake*[xxiv] bought a few Euros to become countable.

Murky operations like these generate, politically, a boomerang effect. To convince other people or to convince themselves that followers or fans of the "virtual square" are real and that their number is translated automatically into votes it is equal to the "analogical square", about it is said above: i.e. "crowded piazzas and empty ballot boxes "[xxv].

7. Conclusions.

The aim of this work was to present and discuss the participatory phenomena in the new arena represented by the web 2.0, particularly the role of Social Network Sites (SNS).

A brief introduction on web communication and participation, described how the crisis of the traditional forms of politics did encourage new opportunities and resources for participation, while at the same time digital media have made it possible to quickly put them in connection, providing an organizational infrastructure to the forms of bottom-up participation and effectively answering to the new participation needs of contemporary citizens.

Following with a definition of the web 2.0, an innovation which represents a way to work together, to learn, to upgrade, to exchange experiences and to create knowledge, then made available to everyone, the article went through a review of the literature which took into consideration different waves of studying, whose results are quite mixed, thus revealing that, in wider terms, the online politics configure itself as a complex outcome of contradictory, incoherent and opposing dynamics, whose final outcome is often explained by contextual and environmental factors.

The crisis of the traditional forms of political engagement has stimulated new opportunities and resources for participation, at the same time digital media have made it possible to quickly put them in connection, providing an organisational infrastructure to the forms of bottom-up participation and effectively answering to the new participation needs of contemporary citizens.

The earliest experiments in liquid democracy represented by "civic networks" have created new digital squares where citizens have found a room for a new leading role. Web 2.0 is the environment which is conceived as an architecture of participation based on innovation, creativity and cooperation. It is no coincidence that this context favoured the hypothesis of an evolution of democracy into e-democracy; however, as many authors remind us (Chiusi, 2014; De Blasio 2020), it is always important to bear in mind the complexity of the relationship between digital technologies and democratic institutions, the role of platforms in the life of political parties and the criticalities represented by digital architectures for democracy.

This environment creates the conditions for the affirmation of a new way of doing politics and participating in public discussions, a new way of democratic participation of citizens through the instruments of the network, particularly social network pointing towards a cultural change even more than a technological one, concerning the concept of participation and the role of the individual.

In its configuration of politics 2.0, the web is therefore a dynamic coordination platform rather than a mere catalogue of static pages containing information. Of course, new media tools are more likely to strengthen levels of commitment and participation already existing, but it is also plain the promotion of connection and participation between less traditional social actors, in view of a crisis of traditional forms of politics. In wider terms, online politics configure itself as a complex outcome of contradictory, incoherent and opposing dynamics, whose final outcome is often explained by contextual and environmental factors.

The web has surely shortened the distance between citizens and the political class and stands out positively, especially in the light of the growing disaffection for politics that has struck the democratic systems nowadays. Considering the decline in electoral turnout – generated by an endemic problem of trust and credibility of the polity in relationship with the citizens-voters – the digital technologies have played a dual role showing a leading role in the 2000' politics.

If, on the one hand, the web is one of the main instruments that politics uses in the reconstruction of its relationship with the citizens, on the other hand it also nourishes and amplifies the process of anti-political feelings that appoints many European democracies, in these years, and particularly the Italian one (as seen in the case of Grillo, his blog and the Five Stars Movement).

The web 2.0 represents a new communicative space that puts forward his own process and that has typical social context dynamics developing an organised structure of political life present in the real world.

Social networking sites feed and expand the "offline" social networks of individuals, increasing the possibilities that these encounter political content and opportunities for involvement through word of mouth on the net. The development of the uses of social networking has contributed to thinning and gradually redefining the distinction between online and offline dimension, thanks to a process of hybridization between the network and the political and social reality. Online and offline dimensions are hence intimately linked and the web becomes a medium for users to share and enhance their experience of everyday life.

The result of these processes is that political parties, social movements, interest groups and associations may use digital repertoires of collective action, becoming more similar and integrated between online and offline.

Spaces made available by the web and online network offer the conditions to the parties to recover and enhance some organisational features that in the meantime have gone lost. For example, the networking function, here assumed as the possibility to organise the activities of all the party branch and stakeholders who are collateral to the party, and also a function of community building. Proposals of initiatives, enrollment, organisation of supporters: all of these activities become more easily manageable through the network, with less time and in modes that were unimaginable before.

The awareness of a large gap between civil society and politics has encouraged people to seek alternative channels to obtain at least some input from citizens to take as a support or as an address in the management of public affairs and also a source of legitimation.

Over the last few years, some tendencies, related to the context of communicative dynamics in digital environments, lead to an expansion of the reflection on the link between new media and political participation. New critical aspects that may undermine participation in Web 2.0, such as incivilities, polarisation and echo-chambers should be considered. Indeed, some authors argue that public debate is increasingly characterised by 'disintermediation' (Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri, 2021). Public space has become multiform and multifaceted. The multiplication of actors who can feed information can cause misinformation, disinformation or alternative realities. Moreover, the prevalence of hostile language and violent opposition has not only become a practice inherent to the dynamics of interaction between citizens and between them and politics, but is often the very rhetorical register of political actors.

This 'communicative polarisation' fuels political polarisation with heavy repercussions in participatory terms that have yet to be investigated.

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[i] We are referring to the "Aggregate then curate" model that suppose the creation of community-defined, object-centred and good quality collections of informational resources: while ''amateurism'' and a lack of quality in the production of online resources is certainly possible, it is not in any way inevitable. A/C is a process by which the quality of online resources can be assured, having been validated from the perspective of each domain of value: objective, subjective and intersubjective (Whitworth, A., Garnett, F., & Pearson, D., *Aggregate-then-Curate: how digital learning champions help communities nurture online content. [inclusion; online content; social media; digital learning champions; communities]*, Research in Learning Technology, 20, 2012).

[ii] The main forms of online participation, the non-conventional ones, include:

S*lackctvism*: the term is a contraction of slacker and activism. It indicates a form of " low-effort participation ", that is to say a participation act whose only manifestation is the support for a cause through subscription to a online petition, sharing a critical post over the government actions or a political party, the expression of consent/dissent through the use of social networking in various ways (for example, the use of badge or like to express the adhesion to a cause). The most discussion on this phenomenon consists in the virtual fulfilment of the need to feel (be) useful and, above all, to have a significant impact on policy.

Lurking; this is also interpreted as a low intensity form of participation, if not even as non-participation at all. The *lurkers* are the ones who lie in wait, hide and watch the events develop. In the online experience *lurking* is the behaviour of anyone who reads the email or the post of a debate, without being actively involved. Empirical research has shown that, for every initiative of participation in the network, only a small part of those who participate are really active, while all the others remain in a state of latency or participatory observation. It is therefore a silent majority, whose function is still to be investigated.

Adbusting: is a form of cultural activism and at the same time a form of criticism of satirical mould. In altering a message ironically, i.e. making a parody of photos, videos, or existing statements, the *adbuster* is trying to make people smile, but above all he is trying to make them reflect on the passive and uncritical use of the traditional media, or sometimes it sensitises the community on a pressing social issue (Rosa, R., C*ittadini digitali. L'agire politico al tempo dei social media*, Maggioli, Apogeo Rimini, 2014, p. 19);

[iii] The term Web 2.0 has been closely associated with Tim O'Reilly, a communications consultant and supporter of open source software, who was the first one to use this term during the "Web 2.0 Conference" of his company *O'Reilly Media* at the end of 2004. The term 2.0 is borrowed

directly from software development in which the *dot* notation indicates the development index and the subsequent release of a particular software package. In this case the phrase puts the emphasis on the differences with respect to the so-called Web 1.0, spread up to the nineties, and composed mainly of static web sites, without any possibility of interaction with the user except the normal hyperlink navigation (presence of links to other news) between the pages, the use of e-mail and search engines.

iv This neologism refers to a democracy strengthened by collaborative tools (the wiki) and by the collective intelligence that has created phenomena such as Wikipedia, the popular online encyclopaedia. We owe this definition to Alberto Cottica: a character from multifaceted genius, first musician then economist. In this second role he is a cooperative and online public policies expert. He worked for the Ministry of Economic Development and for the Council of Europe. In 2010 he wrote a book entitled *Wikicrazia*. Fonte: http://nellacittainvisibile.blogspot.com/2011/11/cottica-wikicrazia-crowdsourcing-web-20.html

v To open the doors to this new way of doing politics in which we relate constantly with the citizens was the American President Barack Obama, the first politician to have successfully created an electoral campaign 2.0 that let him win the election to the White House, for the first time in 2008. A true system of web participation – not just unconventional electoral marketing, but sharing of ideas and decisions that has involved million of users of the network. A share that has continued even after the election, with the activation of portals dedicated to comparison about the choices of the government and with the personal presence on a social network, where the American president is followed by almost 40 million people on Facebook and almost 24 million on *Twitter* (Sources: https://www.facebook.com/barackobama, https://twitter.com/BarackObama (April 6th, 2014)).

vi Cfr., Anderson, C., (2007), quoted in The Vortex, (a cura di), *Fare politica digitale*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2012, p. 30) The author took over the so called "long tail" theory by observing Amazon's turnover, the largest e-commerce site in the world, in which the most important part of the sales were not the *best-sellers*, but the *niche* titles instead: thanks to the fact that they cannot be easily available offline, they could only be purchased online.

vii These possibilities become even more relevant to the extent that governments respond positively to requests for transparency and dissemination of information through projects such as the American "data.gov", that collects and makes available to the public databases generated by the federal government invited interested parties to make use of it in a creative, in order to produce new knowledge with respect to the manner in which the institutions have used the data (Source: http://www.data.gov/).

viii "With the digital forms of political activism outside of politics is multiply not only for the quantity, but especially for ability to aggregate, do critical mass, producing content and enter by fully involved in the direct dialog with the policy itself" (Cfr., The Vortex, (a cura di), Fare politica digitale, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2012, p. 27).

ix And again it is Obama, who demonstrates this trend: when re-elected in 2012 announced the news on Twitter with a picture of him and the First Lady embraced, and these three words as the caption: "Four more years". Almost 780,000 people have retweeted that image (Source: https://twitter.com/BarackObama/status/266031293945503744/photo/1).

x On February 4, 2013 Facebook had its 10th Birthday. In 2004 it was a small network for US college students, a decade later it was a nation of 1.2 billion monthly visitors from Asia (351 million), from Europe (276 million), from the USA and Canada (199 million) and other territories. The enormous success of Facebook as a means of communication and participation is ascribed to some of the characteristics that make it first with a network of people, in which the relational aspect is the first floor. Twitter is a platform of microblogging launched in 2006 with the aim of bringing on the internet features of sms, by sharing textual content not longer than 140 characters (Bennato, Ben Hassen, Panconesi, 2010). In 2012 Twitter reached 500 million registered users and in 2013 the title was quoted on the stock exchange.

xi On these last two theories an important support was given by Bruce Bimber: in his view the individual political participation would not be so much influenced by the information revolutions because the so-called "information-poor" would not benefit, as poor in economic, intellectual, social and political capital; rather, according to the American scholar, the information revolution touches the organisational level, highlighting new actors that pose as intermediaries between institutions and citizens.

xii Garnett think of public value as being part of an 'adaptive' service cycle through which the trust that is the basis of valued relationships can be developed, in other words the ways in which an political institution that is proactive in the public domain can measure its positive social impact : better outcomes, services and trust (Garnett, F., & Ecclesfield, N., Developing an organisational architecture of participation. BJET (British Journal of Educational Technology), 39(3), 468-474, 2008)

xiii This framework was derived from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology model of e-maturity with its five levels roughly mapping to the degree to which an organisation had developed computer networks to support its core business and ultimately create access beyond the organisation

xiv "To inform themselves and participate through digital media may constitute an advantageous alternative in terms of time for three reasons: it does not require physical movements; it can occur at times most convenient for users instead of moments set by the organisation; it includes tasks that can be performed rapidly: read and sign a petition, make a donation, submit an e-mail, spread content on social network, leave a comment on a blog are all actions relatively onerous in terms of time" (Vaccari, C., op. cit., 2012, p. 37 Translated from the original Italian version).

xv In particular, SNSs often become an excellent vehicle for expressing one's ideological positioning. Some research (e.g. Ferrucci P, Hopp T and Vargo, 2020) points out that Facebook can often be a particularly attractive platform for the expression of ideologically extreme political sentiment. Such proposition is generally consistent with research on partisan media, fake news, disinformation, and misinformation, which broadly shows that Facebook is the central marketplace for such content (e.g. Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017)

xvi Bauman, Z., "La Nostra Vita da Immigrati Digitali", in *La Repubblica* June 25th, 2014, p. 59;

[xvii] There are studies showing that it is certainly not possible to generalise the role of SNSs as elements capable of fostering participation. In this sense, we refer to some specific studies such as the one by Theocharis and Lowe (Theocharis Y. and Lowe W., *Does Facebook increase political participation? Evidence from a field experiment*, in "Information, Communication & Society" 19(10): 1465–1486, 2016) in which they point out that the use of Facebook, by far the most popular social media platform with over 1 billion users, rather has a negative effect on participation.

[xviii] Thinking of the efficiency of Barack Obama election campaign – that we will not discuss – which in 2008 has succeeded in mobilising its supporters on the internet, obtaining tangible benefits such as funding, volunteers, and events organised spontaneously by his supporters, spreading the message of the candidate, etc.

[xix] Cfr., Aydelotte J., Miller J., Walters L.C., Putting more Public in policy analysis, Public Administration Review, vol. 60, n°4, luglio/agosto, 2000

[xx] Cfr., Chadwick, A., Digital Network Repertoires and Organizational Hybridity, Political Communication, vol. 24, 2007

xxi Cfr., Bentivegna, S., Rethinking Politics in the World of ICTs, 2006, citata in, Vaccari, C., La politica online, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2012, p. 19

xxii Cfr., Ward, Vedel, Ward, Gibson, Nixon, 2006

xxiii Cfr., Bentivegna, S., La politica in rete, Meltemi, Roma, 1999, pp. 54-58

[xxiv] While the most known *trolls* are profiles that interact with other users for the sole purpose of fomenting discussions and disturbing the communication with provocative, off topic or without sense messages, the *fake* are counterfeit profiles, which conceal identity or mimic others. In both cases there is a "human" management tending to distort and disturb the reports on social networks, blogs and forums. *Botnets* are instead machines veritable, artificial profiles that carry out the actions planned. It goes from spam private messages via Twitter, to the automatic sending of email, to simple inflated social figures, which increase the perception of the result of a politician or visits a website generating access, views, automatic comments. There are tools to verify the quantity of fake followers and inactive users a certain site, page or profile, among which the best known and trusted www.fakers.statuspeople.com

[xxv] Cfr., Di Salvo, M., *Fake e percezione, in, Politica 2.0, la politica e la comunicazione nell'era digitale*, e-Book, Amazon.it, 2014

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