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**Introduction**

From universities to pre-schools, from hospitals to the transport system, in the last decade social media have become ubiquitous. Within everyday life, people are constantly encouraged to share their opinions and thoughts, to comment on and produce digital traces of their lived experiences on social media. Therefore, it is not surprising that these platforms have become important spaces for civic participation. It is also not surprising that these forms of individual engagement have been seen as emancipatory, radical and transformative. Reflecting on these new forms of participation, different scholars have argued that social media had created the basis for the emergence of new, horizontal forms of social organizing, which would overhaul existing political and economic structures (Tapscott and Williams, 2006; Benkler, 2006; Shirky, 2008; Castells, 2012).

In contrast to these works, in the last few years, we have seen the emergence of critical research in the field that has challenged these platform-centric and techno-deterministic approaches. Such research has focused on ‘digital practices’ and has shed light on the multiple ways in which social media platforms have transformed political repertoires of social protest,(Dencik and Leistert, 2015; McCurdy, 2011; Mattoni, 2012; Treré, 2012; Milan, 2013; Kavada, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2012; Juris, 2012; Wolfson, 2014; Barassi, 2015’ Cammaerts et al, 2013). This body of literature has provided us with a more thorough understanding of social media activism. In fact, rather than focusing, on the analysis of mainstream social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, these works have focused on the multiple outlets that define the information ecologies of activists (Treré, 2012).

This paper aims to add to this body of literature by arguing that, an important dimension of social media activism has been left out from current debates on activists’ digital practices: the issue of political data flows. In the study of social media activism, this article will show, we need to critically investigate the relationship between political data flows and digital traces and to highlight the multiple and complex ways in which social media use is tightly interconnected to the processes of *political profiling*. The scope of this article is one of openness and inquiry. Its aim is to explore the need to reflect on political data flows across and beyond social media platforms. Its goal is to set the tone for the emergence of new, and exciting research in the field.

**Social Media, Civic Engagement and the Transformation of Political Participation?**

The relationship between internet technologies and civic engagement has a messy and unpredictable history, defined by the interconnection between technological use on the one hand and the emergence of new political repertoires of action amongst social movements on the other. This messiness and complexity became evident especially during the 1990s, when as some scholars have shown (Castells, 1997; Juris, 2008), political activists started to enact a new form of politics, based on a political discourse of connectivity and networked affinity (Day, 2005). In his brilliant historical account of this transformation, Wolfson (2014) used the concept of ‘cyber-left’ in order to describe the ways in which the social movements of the last 20 years have been shaped by a political logic that combined the network as an organizational structure, the practice of participatory democracy in decision making, and the use of internet technologies as binding agents.

The development of social media technologies marked a new transformation for online civic engagement, with ordinary citizens embracing the cause of social movements. The viral flows of images, the immediacy of communication, and the possibility of relying on individuals’ personal networks were all important technological features that came into play in the triggering of mass protests across the world from the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ to the Occupy Movement. In responding to these developments, we have seen the rise of research in the field that has explored the ways in which social media were transforming civic engagement by fostering a new logic of ‘aggregation’ (Juris, 2012) and ‘assembly’ (Gerbaudo, 2012) and therefore enabling the participation of large masses of citizens.

The extent to which citizens have become involved in political affairs, demanding to be part of political decision making, is reflected in the emergence of new bottom-up and largely populist political parties capable of attracting large masses. What is striking about these forms of political participation is their affective dimension (Fenton, 2016) and the fact that they often rely on digital discourses. The rise of the 5 Star Movement in Italy, which holds 25% of the Italian Parliament and has an appointed mayor in Rome and Turin, is a vivid example of this. Largely constructed on citizens’ outrage against the political elite, the political discourse of the 5 Star Movement was based on a techno-utopian understanding of the democratic potential of the Net, which was used to overshadow the profoundly authoritarian nature of the party (Treré and Barassi, 2015).

In understanding the increase in civic participation through social media, as well as the emergence of new forms of political organizing at the grassroots level, therefore, we need to avoid the the temptation to embrace an unfounded techno-optimism. On the contrary, we should rely on the understanding that if social media can be perceived as fundamental tools in the mobilization and organization of civic engagement and social protest, they also need to be understood as problematic technologies for political action. Within current research we find different approaches providing us with a more nuanced understanding of the problematic nature of social media platforms for civic participation. Whilst some scholars focused on the fact that the corporate structure of social media often inhibits rather then reinforce social protest (Leistert, 2015; Barassi, 2015), others have addressed other issues such as digital surveillance (Morozov, 2011; Hintz, 2015), multimedia platform organising (Treré, 2012; Mattoni, 2012), time regimes (Kaun, 2015) or changing understandings of collective identity (Kavada, 2015; Milan, 2015).

As the recent critical research in the field as show, therefore, we need to be aware of the social complexities and structural constrains that define the relationship between civic participation and social media within and beyond platforms. In order to do so, it is essential that we focus on everyday digital practices. Drawing from the understanding of ‘media as practice’ (Couldry, 2004; Brauchler and Postill, 2010), these scholars have provided us with a variety of great scholarship on activists’ uses of social media technologies (McCurdy, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012; Mattoni, 2012; Barassi and Treré, 2012; Cammaerts et al, 2013). As mentioned in the introduction, by focusing on digital practices rather than social media platforms, these works were of central importance because they deconstructed techno-deterministic and platform-centric approaches in the study of social media and civic participation. In fact, on the one hand they have highlighted the social complexities of activist media practices which combine social media use with the use of other platforms and technologies, such as mailing lists (Barassi and Treré, 2012; Barassi, 2015), radical tech activism (Milan, 2013) or alternative media (Mattoni, 2012). On the other they have show the cultural variety and specificity of social media use in the context of social movements . These works on activists’ digital practices have therefore enabled us to move beyond techno-centric and ethno-centric understandings of social media activism.

Although extremely insightful, within current research little attention has been paid to another important dimension of civic engagement through social media: the complex relationship between digital practices, personal data flows, and the digital profiling of citizens.

**Engaged Citizens, The Personalisation of Politics and the Visibility of Political Protest**

There are two fundamental characteristics that differentiate social media activism from other forms of civic engagement. In the first place, political participation on social media is heavily personalised (Fenton and Barassi, 2011; Segerberg and Bennett, 2012). This personalisation is expressed by two different processes. On the one hand the individual relies on personal networks to gather and share information, mobilise and organize. On the other hand, the individual displays one’s own identity narrative through the production of political posts, comments and images. In the second place, political participation on social media is based on a new logic of visibility. In her engaging critique of social media, Milan (2015) argued that in the last few years we have witnessed a transition of political repertoires, from a politics of identity to a politics of visibility. Politically engaged citizens and activists today are constantly sharing posts and information about their political experiences and direct actions, and their political practices are often defined by mediatized understanding of visibility.

Both the personalization and visibility of social protest have been understood as largely positive characteristics, which democratize media production and empower individual agents to bring about social change through the mobilization of personal networks and the display of identity. In fact, according to Castells (2009), social media technologies enable individuals to re-program networks, and re-channel messages from the grassroots level, leading to important political transformations (2009: 412-415). Furthermore, he refers to Eco’s idea of the ‘creative audience’ and argues that self-expression through social media platforms empowers individuals providing them with a new type of ‘creative autonomy’ (2009:127).

In contrast to those who believe that these transformations are profoundly empowering for civic engagement, my understanding is that we have much to gain if we appreciate how problematic they can be for engaged citizens. In the past I looked at the problem of the ‘visible individual’ for social protest (Barassi, 2015) and I have argued that in an era of selfies and social media, individual messages are often given the same importance as the messages that have arisen out of the tensions and negotiations of a collective of people. Therefore, ‘collective messages and voices’ of oppositional groups become suffocated by the information overload of the online space and by the sheer abundance of individual messages (Barassi, 2015; Fenton and Barassi, 2011).

Here however I want to focus on a further, yet under-investigated, problem that emerges from the interconnection between the personalization of protest and the new politics of visibility across platforms: the problem of personally identifying flows of political data. As the next part of the article will show, the everyday use of social media for political participation creates digital traces which enable the political profiling of individuals, and can impact on different dimensions of social life. In the majority of cases the information posted on social media is personal identifying information. With the rapid rise in use of these technologies for civic engagement and participation, we have therefore witnessed a dramatic increase in flows of political information that is directly traceable to one individual. Yet little is understood about the complexity of these flows of political data and about their implications.

**Datified Citizens, Digital Surveillance and the construction of Individuals’ Political Profiles**

Within current research, the concept of digital surveillance has emerged as a way of understanding some of the social implications of data flows. Andrejevic (2007) provided us with a broad analysis of how digital surveillance has been affecting different domains of social life including politics. Morozov (2011) heavily criticized the western techno-utopianism during the Green Revolution in Iran and has shown that most of digital interactions of protesters were surveilled by the police to find evidence for arresting dissidents. Furthermore, in the last five years, following the Snowden affair, scholars have referred to the concept to highlight how governments and web giants as well as mobile corporations had joined forces to surveil every aspect of citizen life (Raley, 2013) with critical implications for our public and legal lives (Andrejevic, 2013).

Although the concept of digital surveillance is important for the understanding of data flows, as Elmer (2004) has rightly argued, the concept must be critically appraised and understood. In fact, the notion of surveillance alone does not capture the multiplicity of digital processes enabled by web 2.0 companies that *require* and *request* the personal data of users, in order to automatically store it, share it and cross-reference it. Rather then focusing on the notion of surveillance alone he adds we therefore need to consider how these technologies enable a process of *profiling*, which enables the gathering of users’ past choices and behaviors to predict future needs (Elmer, 2004:5).

Following Elmer (2004), I believe that it is essential that we focus on the process of profiling when examining flows of personal identifying political data. On social media, engaged citizens post information about the political causes and campaigns they join, they openly criticize governments and institutions, upload images of themselves during protest events and share links to political opinion pieces. This information is not only accessible to digital corporations and advertising agencies, but to different social actors who have access to social media, such as schools, institutions, employers, insurance brokers etc. What is important to understand is that all these political data flows enable the construction of a more or less coherent political narrative, which enables the political profiling of individuals.

When we think about these processes of political profiling we are faced with another complexity. According to Leaver (2015), one of the key problems of current discussions on data flows and online identity is the assumption that users have an agency in the shaping of their digital profiles. Yet this is not entirely true; By referring to the notion of ‘web presence’ Leaver (2015) argued that it is essential that we appreciate the fact that digital identities are not only constructed by the subject/user, but are often constructed by others. Through the sharing of posts and tagging of images, engaged citizens on social media play an active role in the construction not only of their own digital profiles but also of the digital profiles of others.

These digital interactions are widespread, and although they may appear to be harmless and playful, they may in fact have a significant impact on individuals’ everyday lives. In fact, whilst an individual concerned with his privacy may decide to limit the images shared online, he/she cannot prevent others from posting images of his political activities. Hence, as Nissenbaum (2010) has rightly argued, today, individuals are not only loosing control over their personal data flows but they are loosing their right to determine how their personal information is shared from context to context. The dramatic increase in personally identifying political data flows, therefore, is raising critical questions on processes of political identity construction, self-representation and moral autonomy. These questions, I believe, should be at the very heart of future research on social media and civic engagement.

**Conclusion**

In the last decade we have seen the emergence of significant research in the field of communication studies, investigating the complex relationship between social media and civic engagement. By focusing on digital practices, scholars in the field have shed light on the multiple ways in which online political participation unfolds beyond social media platforms. These works have been of particular importance, because they have not only shown that social media activism is part of broader and more complex information ecologies of resistance, but also that social media use amongst social movements varies from context to context from situation to situation . As this paper has shown, we need to bare these works in mind when we want to move beyond simplified understandings of civic participation online, which focus entirely on social media use. However, the article has also suggested that what is missing from current research in the field is a careful understanding of the complexities of political data flows across platforms, and their social and political implications.

As this article has shown, there are two fundamental characteristics that differentiate civic engagement on social media from other forms of public engagement: the personalization and visibility of political participation. The interconnection of these two dimensions enables the flow of political data, which is directly connected to individuals’ personal details. In this framework, one’s own political beliefs, opinions and actions become widely public. Within current research on social media and civic engagement, however, we have very little understanding of the social complexities of these political data flows. Certainly, these data flows are tightly linked to processes of digital profiling (Elmer, 2004) and that individuals have little control over these processes because much of one’s own political data is posted by others (Leaver, 2015). If, as Gangadharan (2012, 2015) has argued, digital profiling can have a fundamental and often discriminatory impact on social minorities, then we should start to highlight the implications of online political profiling. This can enable us to appreciate the social complexities of the information ecologies we live in whilst questioning the impact of online data flows have on democratic emancipation and social justice.

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