

Abstracts

The virtual public sphere in the local space

by Chiara Sebastiani (University of Bologna)

This article aims to explore whether and how new information technologies support political participation in local communities moving from Habermas' later conceptual definition and empirical representation of the public sphere as: a) a space of political action with a specific political function, linking civil society to political institutions; b) a space organised on three levels, two of which based on face-to-face interactions and one "abstract" level which includes both "traditional" media and media based on new technologies. Afterwards, it will be considered how in recent years the potentialities of the "virtual public sphere" have been increasingly explored in political decision-making processes on the local level, as a structure favouring local democracy through public deliberation and direct participation on issues relevant to local communities. It will be noticed that the "virtual space" (namely the internet) produces a new level of the public sphere only under specific conditions as, in contrast to the potential universality of inclusion which characterises the public sphere, it may also produce dynamics of exclusion from and restriction (or destruction) of the public sphere. Thus the political significance and effectiveness of a public sphere based on new information and communication technologies depends on the structure and resources of participant networks as well as on the relationship with the traditional media. The article ends with a critical view on "e-democracy" as a concept which tends nowadays to include a number of top-down institutionalised "participatory" practices and devices some of which, far from representing a means of political empowerment, are at the best instruments of good administration and at the worst of depoliticization and manipulation.

Keywords: Public Sphere; New Information and Communication Technologies; Local Democracy; Political Participation.

Internet and political participation in Italian and French elections

by Cristian Vaccari (University of Bologna)

Contemporary Western parties are often said to be facing a legitimacy crisis, which most scholars attribute to a weakening of “party on the ground” structures and activities. However, the development of various internet-based participatory tools and applications could incrementally help parties to overcome this problem and partially restore their democratic legitimacy. This article explores these issues through a comparative quantitative analysis of Italian and French parties’ websites in the 2006 and 2007 elections. Results highlight a noticeable difference in the use of participatory tools, which is more common in French than in Italian websites, especially with respect to online resource mobilization. Moreover, significant disparities emerge in both countries among parties of different ideological orientations, as progressive parties’ websites are significantly more participation-oriented than those of communist, centrist, conservative, and radical-right ones.

Keywords: Electoral Campaigns; Political Parties’ Websites; Participatory Tools; Italy and France.

New media and collective action in Spain: the events of March 2004

by Javier Alcalde Villacampa (European University Institute) and Igor Sádaba Rodríguez (University Carlos III, Madrid)

This paper presents the static and dynamic dimensions characterizing the media opportunity structure for collective action in Spain. These characteristics help explaining the emergence of a cycle of mobilization between 2003 and 2004, concluded in the events that took place between 11 and 14 March 2004. Through an examination of different data, including participation to protests and type of mobilisations, the use of new technologies and the role of official and alternative media, the text aims at studying the extent to which the emergence of recent waves of social mobilisation is linked to and shaped by the new communication technologies. Specifically, the focus is on the spontaneous demonstrations of 2004 against the Spanish centre-right government (13 March) after the terrorist bombings in Madrid (11 March) and a few days before the general elections (14 March). This analysis allows developing some reflections about the role of communication in processes of collective mobilization.

Keywords: Spain; Social Movements; New media; Political and Media Opportunity Structure.

Between consensus and conflict. Media practices in the Italian movements against precarity of work

by Alice Mattoni (European University Institute)

This paper aims to explore the relationship between social movements and the media during the recent Italian cycle of struggle against precarity. Starting from two significant protest events related to the contentious issue at stake, the paper takes into consideration activists' media practices developed in a complex mediascape. From such a perspective, the paper examines empirically the "quadruple A" model proposed by Dieter Rucht (2004), partially revisiting its four main dimensions: abstention, adaptation, alternative and attack attitudes towards the mainstream media. The paper suggests that in a complex mediascape different kind of media practices intertwine and that: 1) a certain degree of abstention is also possible with regard to the more established independent media; 2) face-to-face interactions frequently mix with temporary, protest-related media; 3) activists could use the same media texts to communicate with disperse and different audiences. The main data sources consist of primary documents produced by activists and in-depth interviews with the activists themselves.

Keywords: Social Movements; Mainstream Media; Information and Communication Technologies, Precarity; Media Practices.

Fights for recognition and role of the mass-media: the meanings of the "Gay Pride"

by Luca Trappolin (University of Padua)

Media coverage of protest events represents a growing field of research for social movement investigation. Usually, scholars tend to study media as tools for mobilization and the relation between media and social movements is generally analysed as a matter of access. The hypothesis of this article is that media are actors who interact with social movements, their opponents and allies in order to define the meanings of the protest. It will then be assessed how media participate in the process of frame construction. The analysis of the Italian national Gay Pride of 2002 provides the opportunity of answering this question. The empirical research is based on newspaper articles and pictures published by newspapers when covering the mobilisation.

Keywords: Social Movements; Gay and Lesbian Mobilizations; Media Frame Analysis; Homosexual Identity.

From inequalities to discriminations: the impact of segregation

by Marco Oberti (Sciences-Po Paris)

This paper develops a comparative analysis of the riots in the banlieus and the student movement against the CPE (first employment contract) in France. If both movements are based on young people mobilization, not all the dimensions which are important in explaining the riots (social classes, ethnicity and race, generation, space, family structure, gender) are equally pertinent for the student movement.

The riots were indeed the expression of relegation and a profound resentment that brought into play both ethno-racial (youth from African immigrant backgrounds, directly concerned by discrimination and racism) and social dimensions (low-income backgrounds). However, the riots did not develop simply on the basis of age and class, but rather they brought into play the urban forms (segregation) of the increasing precariousness of part of the low-income population, particularly those of immigrant origin.

Segregation reinforces the interaction and the association between these dimensions, and is a favourable condition for riots because of the concentration in the space of all the characteristics which are perceived as object of discrimination and because of the best control of the territory. This shift, from inequalities to discrimination, is particularly visible in some specific social spheres like political representation, labor market, police, housing, and school.

Keywords: Riots; Segregation; Inequalities; Discrimination.