Removing or Changing Intermediaries?
Disintermediation, populism and the Five Star Movement's Use of the Internet

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1. Introduction

Disintermediation, that can be broadly defined as the removal of an intermediary from a relation, can be considered as an increasingly relevant phenomenon in contemporary society. When one thinks about the changes occurred in commerce, business, journalism, or communication in a broader sense, it is impossible not to notice that there is a propensity towards more direct and less intermediated relationships, also fostered by the spread of the Internet. Moreover, in the political field, disintermediation can be found in the increasing attempt, pursued by citizens and political actors themselves, to skip the mediation role of the political party. Disintermediation can be also regarded as a key feature of the so-called «populist style»: populist parties and their leaders are traditionally considered as hostile towards all kinds of mediations, in the name of a direct relationship between citizens and power, and this attitude is mirrored in their discourses and practices.

In this paper I will focus on the political field, specifying (by outlining dimensions and indicators) the concept of disintermediation, defined first by Chadwick (2007), and showing its links with populism. I will then analyse the Internet as a (political) disintermediation tool through the case study of the Five Star Movement (FSM), a populist party (Corbetta e Gualmini 2013, Tarchi 2015) whose identity has been shaped by a «cyber-optimistic» vision of the Internet (Mosca, Vaccari and Valeriani 2015).

The paper will be organised as follows. First, starting from the seminal contribution of Chadwick (2007), I will introduce the concept of disintermediation, outline dimensions and indicators and analyse it as a key feature of the populist style. Then, I will provide a brief overview of the FSM. After having introduced the key features of the party, and in particular after having examined the role played by the Internet for this party, I will analyse its use of the Internet, at the national and at the local level. Regarding the national level, in addition to the analysis of the party statute and rules, I will analyse the online participation tools employed by the party, that mainly are online votes (in this regard I collected and classified all online votes held since 2012) and «Lex». Regarding the local level, I’m conducting a fieldwork study in a FSM's district group in Turin. I therefore participated at the group’s activities and had the opportunity to speak with FSM's activists. For the purposes of this work, I will also use as data six semi-structured interviews that I conducted with: a FSM's MP, elected in the Senate; a former FSM's MP, elected in the Chamber of Deputies and then expelled from the FSM with an online vote; a FSM's district councillor in Turin; an activist that dealt with the electoral campaign of the Turinese candidate mayor, then elected; two activists from the local group that I am studying.

The aim of this paper is therefore three-fold: in the first place, I want to clarify and specify the concept of disintermediation and link it to populism; in the second place, I want to apply this framework to the

1 In order to distinguish this activist from the other two, the interview will be marked with [EC], that stands for Electoral Campaign.
use of the Internet of the FSM; in the third place, my aim is to compare the use of the Internet at the national and the local level.

2. Disintermediation

The term disintermediation broadly defines the removal of an intermediary from a relation. The entry «Disintermediation» by Andrew Chadwick, included in Mark Bevir's *Encyclopedia of Governance* (2007), remains the best starting point in order to understand this concept. Chadwick (2007, 232) states that disintermediation means «removing intermediaries from a supply chain, a transaction, or, more broadly, any set of social, economic, or political relations». After being used in the 1980s in the financial sector, during the dot-com boom of the 1990s the term became popular and it was used to capture the ways in which the Internet was diminishing the role of previously powerful organizations in social, economic, and political life, by reducing the need for those who have some traditional claim to expert knowledge or market dominance.

In the first place, I want to clarify some points. The first is that here I will focus on disintermediation in politics. The second is that (although in this paper I will deal with the Internet as a means of disintermediation) disintermediation can be also found outside the Internet. After all, criticism to intermediate bodies dates back to Rousseau (at least). Therefore, the Internet is a tool and not the tool of disintermediation, at least in politics. Thirdly, perhaps paradoxically, I believe disintermediation to mean more an intermediary change than a removal, as suggested by Chadwick's definition. Some would argue that it is «ontologically» impossible for disintermediation to mean both «intermediary removal» and «intermediary change». Indeed, I do believe disintermediation (especially in politics) to imply primarily an intermediary change: the decline (removal) of an old intermediary (or form of intermediation) in favour of a new one. Chadwick himself actually states that the claim that intermediaries, especially in politics, are being undermined by new information and communication technologies «needs to be assessed». He notes that old intermediaries are surviving and new ones are mushrooming. Indeed, those in position of power are likely to shape the adoption and implementation of a new information and communication system in such a way to enhance their power, reinforcing inequalities based on other sources (position in a hierarchy, expertise, experience). Assessing this claim, although limiting to the case of the FSM, is one of the aims of this paper.

Starting from Chadwick's seminal contribution, within the framework of my broader research project, I began to ponder about disintermediation in politics, in order to define it better, outline the concept's dimensions and find indicators for the empirical analysis. Having decided to focus my analysis on the political field, I observed that the political party can be considered as the most important intermediate body in that domain. Parties structure electoral competition, recruit political personnel, make citizens participate, aggregate their needs and requests and create public policies (Bartolini 1996, della Porta 2009). Scholars have claimed that parties are facing a crisis (see Daalder 1992), and this claim has been going on for decades, up to being internalized by parties themselves (Mastropaolo 2011). But although delegitimated and transformed over time (see Duverger 1951, Kirchheimer 1966, Panebianco 1982, Katz and Mair 1995, Carty 2004) it is beyond doubt that parties continue to exist. The general question that guides my broader research project therefore is: what they have become?

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2 As I already said, disintermediation processes could be also found in other fields: for instance, I have mentioned changes occurring in journalism and commerce. Regarding politics, those relating to the Internet aren't the only disintermediation processes happening: personalisation (Blondel and Thiébault 2009, Karvonen 2010, Garzia 2011) presidentialisation (Poguntke and Webb 2005) and the opening up of internal decision making processes (Cross and Katz 2013, Pilet and Cross 2014) can be considered, in my opinion, indicators of disintermediation.

3 Norberto Bobbio (1999, 290. cit. in Cuono 2015, 305) identifies Rousseau as the first critic of intermediate bodies.

4 My research project is focused in the investigation of disintermediation processes in two Italian parties: the Five Star Movement and the Democratic Party; my aim is to analyse disintermediation as a form of contemporary party change.
Considering the political party as the most important intermediary in the political field, I then generally define (political) disintermediation as the (attempt to) skip, remove or weaken the political party. In particular, I am not focusing on the «demand» side (that is, citizens and their detachment from parties, that could lead to a lesser identification with, vote to and participation in parties) but on the «supply side», that is how parties organise themselves and carry out their activities. Looking at this side, we can say that parties are traditionally considered as organisations that exercise a mediation role, being the main gatekeepers between citizens and politics.

On the one hand, then, I can define disintermediation as a weakening of party intermediate organisation. How can we assess it? In this regard, I believe that disintermediation can be seen as an increased power given to the party leader and/or party members and supporters, that would result in a decreasing power and importance given to the party's intermediate organisation. I define this kind of disintermediation internal disintermediation. Since I defined disintermediation as a greater power detainted by the party leader and/or «base», to the detriment of the party's internal organisation, I can outline two sub-dimensions of internal disintermediation: «from above» (great power to the party leader) and «from below» (great power to party members or supporters).

On the other hand, as I already said, parties are gatekeepers between citizens and politics. Then I can say that we face disintermediation if there is a weakening of the party in playing that role (and I call this dimension external disintermediation).

Moreover, I decided to add another dimension in addition to the internal/external one, distinguishing between parties' rhetorics and practices of disintermediation: what a party say and what a party does. In the first place it is interesting to observe the gap between the two aspects; moreover, parties' self-representation is a crucial yet overlooked theme in the literature on parties (Kittilson and Scarrow 2003).

Regarding indicators, for internal disintermediation I decided to look at centralisation (from above) and opening (from below) of internal decision-making processes, analysed through the classic intra-party democracy indicators (selection of the leader, selection of the candidates, selection of policies, Scarrow 2005). Regarding external disintermediation, among the multiple gatekeeping roles that a party can play, I decided to focus only on participation in the party. For the purposes of this work, regarding the FSM I decided to analyse participation at the national level through the examination of the online tools of participation of the party and participation at the local level through a fieldwork study. The use of the Internet is an interesting topic to analyse because it crosses all these dimensions, since it can potentially be used (and in the case that I will analyse it is used) for candidate and policy selection, and can be considered as a participation tool.

2.1 Populism and Disintermediation

Disintermediation can be also considered as a key feature of the so-called «populist style». In fact, one of the features of populism, that is mirrored in their discourses and practices, is the hostility towards mediations (Taguieff 1997, 10): not only populists oppose institutional and procedural mediations, in the name of a direct link between the people and power, but also journalistic mediation: in fact, they favour a direct communication between leaders and followers. Parties, as we will see, are obviously one

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5 It is worth to underline that the removal of an intermediary is likely to bring another intermediary to light. I consider it a sort of «zero-sum game».

6 Here lies a point of relevance of the concept for political science. The concept of (internal) disintermediation encompasses two processes, often considered separately: that of the increasing role of the leader (presidentialisation) and that of the opening up of internal decision making processes to members or even supporters.

7 Here I'm obviously simplifying: parties are not monoliths (Katz and Mair 1993). It is necessary to identify clearly which part of the party I'm referring to.

8 Bartolini (1996) identifies five «functions» of the party: structuring of the electoral competition, recruitment of political personnel, aggregation of demands and interests, participation and mobilization, creation of public policy. In my research project I decided to focus only on participation both for reasons of feasibility and because the functions of recruitment of political personnel and aggregation of demands can be analysed examining the internal dimension of disintermediation (selection of candidates and selection of policies).
of their favourite targets. This aversion derives from the intolerance towards both the constraints of representative democracy that interpose between the people and power and from the exaltation of directness between leaders and followers.

But how to define populism? Populism is notoriously a highly controversial concept, both regarding its «nature» and its content: regarding the first aspect, while some scholars define it as an ideology (even though a thin-centred one, Mudde 2004) or a mentality (Tarchi 2015), others recognize it as a political strategy (Weyland 2001) or a discursive style (Taguieff 2002). In this paper I will define populism as a «political style». While the classical references for the conception of populism as a political style are Margaret Canovan (1981) and Pierre-André Taguieff (1987, 2002), a definition of populism as a political style has been more recently outlined by Moffitt and Tormey (2014, 387). These authors stress the performative and relational elements of the notion of «political style», defining it as «the repertoires of performance that are used to create political relations».

On the one hand, in their opinion a political style doesn't encompass communicative and discursive elements only; on the other, the relational element is taken into account in their definition. This definition is particularly useful for the purposes of my research because on the one hand, as we have seen, I consider disintermediation both a rhetoric and a practice; on the other hand, from my definition of disintermediation we can see that it can be considered as a particular type of (direct) relationship between leader and supporters (internal disintermediation) and between citizens and politics (external disintermediation).

Regarding the «content» of the populist style, I can draw on the definition of Mudde (2004) and define populism as a discourse that depicts society as separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the pure people versus the corrupt elite (especially the political one). Moreover, according to populists, politics should be an expression of the «general will» of the people. How this definition of populism and my definition of disintermediation intersect?

On the one hand, looking at the first part of the definition, we can conclude that the mediation role of the party is rejected by populists because parties are considered as part of the corrupted elite. On the other hand, from the second part of the definition we can see that the mediation role of the party is refused because politics should be a direct expression of the general will of the people, not mediated by parties. But how the general will of the people should be translated into political action, according to populists?

Mudde distinguishes between the 1970s New Left populism and the contemporary right wing populism: while in the first case the answer is through participation – citizens should have a direct say in politics and then their will would be taken into account – for right-wing populists the answer is leadership: the leader knows what people want and citizens don’t have to be bothered by politics and participation9. We can see that in both cases there is no room for the mediation of parties: it should be noted that also in my definition of disintermediation the mediation role of the party can be skipped «from below» and/or «from above».

To sum up, populists consider parties, among the other intermediaries, as corrupt and useless: they favour a direct relationship between leader and followers and between citizens and power. This belief is mirrored in their discourses and, to a certain extent, their practices: it is interesting to note that populists, even though hostile to the term, are organized in the majority of cases in parties (Heinisch and Mazzoleni in press). Moreover, they successfully participate in the electoral competition, sometimes also taking part in the government of democracies (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015). We can see then that even in this case disintermediation would mean more an intermediary change (a different form of intermediation) than an intermediary removal. It is therefore important to analyse the gap between the rhetorics on disintermediation and disintermediation practices.

In conclusion, if disintermediation means reducing the role of the party's intermediate organisation and its gatekeeping role in the relationship with citizens, in favour of a more direct connection, then the Internet can surely be a disintermediation tool, exploitable by populists. But how disintermediation works in practice? In the remaining part of this paper I will show how the Internet it is used by a very

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9 I believe that these two «types» of populism coexist today.
peculiar party: the Five Star Movement. This party has been chosen as a case study because it represents a unique and relevant case of populist party both regarding the role and the use of the Internet and the lasting electoral successes.

3. The Five Star Movement: An Overview

Before getting to the analysis of the use of the Internet by the FSM, I need to provide a brief overview of this political actor, in order to better understand its characteristics and peculiarities (on the FSM see Bordignon e Ceccarini 2013; Corbetta and Gualmini 2013; Bordignon e Ceccarini 2014; Biocci 2015; Tronconi 2015; Bordignon e Ceccarini 2015, Ceccarini e Bordignon 2016).

The FSM is a new Italian party founded in 2009 by the comedian Beppe Grillo and the businessman Gianroberto Casaleggio (owner of a company of consultancy for online strategies, Casaleggio Associati, whose role needs to be analysed further). The first electoral successes came in the 2012 local elections and then in 2013 FSM was the most voted party at the general election, the first of its short history (25% of the votes). This was a rather unexpected result that boosted and deeply influenced the growth of a newborn party, accelerating its institutionalisation. More than 150 MPs entered in Italian parliament, and the public exposure of the party, until then considered a risible competitor by other political actors, increased. Nowadays, FSM is considered one of the two main parties in the Italian party system (the other being the centre-leftist Democratic Party).

The main aim of the party essentially was (and, we could say, still is) to bring «ordinary citizens» into the «control room» of politics. Against the backdrop of a strong anti-party sentiment, FSM thus capitalized on electors’ and citizens’ discontent. From the beginning, great importance was given to the themes of direct democracy and online participation, often paired. But these aims were also paired with an opaque internal decision-making structure. The founders always maintained a great share of power, the right to permit the use of the party logo (that is owned by Grillo) and (most importantly for the purposes of this article) the ownership of the party IT infrastructure.

Another substantial matter to point out is the party’s organisation. The populist and anti-party nature of this political actor is mirrored in its particular organisation, that can be summarised in the party motto «uno vale uno» (that can be translated as: everyone counts as one). FSM rejects (party) hierarchies and claims that elected representatives and rank-and-file members are interchangeable. Indeed, a two-term limit has been established for FSM’s elected representatives, that call themselves «citizens in parliament». No «party in central office» officially exist, and all the main party activities (as, for instance, enrolment) pass through the party’s and the leader’s website.

The FSM, coherently with its populist and anti-party nature, claim to be «beyond» the traditional political axes of right and left. For our purposes, as we will see, it is interesting to note that a recent study on the FSM’s electorate (Ceccarini and Bordignon 2016) shows that it is characterised by the coexistence of three distinct politico-cultural areas, that influence voters’ attitudes towards issues: 35%

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10 As I will explain, FSM does not consider itself as a party but rather as a Movement or a Non-party. On the contrary I do believe the FSM to be a party, that is – following Sartori’s definition – «any political group identified by an official label that presents at elections, and is capable of placing through elections (free or non-free), candidates for public office» (1976, 63).

11 Gianroberto Casaleggio died in April 2016. In a first phase (until 2013) he had no public role. As outlined by journalists (but the fact seems self-evident among activists), its role has been replaced by Davide Casaleggio, his son and partner of the company.

12 The most voted coalition was the centre-left one, and that is the reason why (due to the Italian electoral system) the FSM didn’t win the elections.

13 Due to space and time constraints, I won’t speak here of the FSM political program.

14 I will consider two different sites: the first and most important is www.beppegrillo.it (I will call it the «leader’s website» and it is commonly referred to as «the blog»), that is the leader’s blog and is indicated as the party headquarter in the statute, then there is www.movimento5stelle.it (that I will call the «party website» that is the site where the enrolment takes place. From the latter it is possible to access the Forum and Rousseau (also called the «operating systems»). Online votes take place in Rousseau but are announced on the former. All these sites are managed by Casaleggio Associati.
of the FSM's voters rejects the categories of right and left; the remaining part is equally divided between the left and the centre and right.

At the local level, the party works essentially as a «brand-giver». Candidates that want to run for (local) elections have to request a «certification» in order to use the party logo. Besides this, in general local groups organise themselves autonomously, at least as long as there are no problems.

With regard to the topic of this paper, that is the use of the Internet of this political actor, the first important point to stress is that the FSM is a new party: it was officially founded in 2009. This is interesting because, compared to other parties that – in a sense – adapted themselves to the Internet, we can say that the FSM was born with the Internet, or better with the so-called «Web 2.0». In the second place, the fact that one of the two founders owned a company whose aim is to develop Internet strategies for organisations and digital marketing (besides being author of books on the importance of the Internet for organisations, see Casaleggio 2015) is relevant too. The company, based in Milan, can be considered the (though unofficial) physical headquarter of the party, where the certification process takes place: «I will send this to Milan», activists candidly say talking about the «certification» paperwork.

In addition, the party's so-called «staff» (an equivalent of the «party in central office», whose identity is unknown) is composed by the company's employee.

The «staff» is Casaleggio Associati's employees, paid by him [Casaleggio]. They help him in running the website, the Twitter account, the certification of the lists... They handle problems, like expulsions... That's the «staff», more or less fifteen people, I don't know. They support us and we don't give them a penny. Casaleggio pays them. Fairly, he «does marketing» and thus there are advertisements on the website, it's normal, they have to get by too. We are not taking public funds, we, the MPs, we aren't giving any money to the national FSM. (MP, 25/3/2016).

Casaleggio Associati is a commercial enterprise and have to find a system to profile people (...) Facebook, Twitter and Google have an agreement with Casaleggio Associati in order to profile people from a commercial and political viewpoint. (...) Profiling is used to know where the market will go. (Former FSM's MP, 6/8/2016)

I see how communication agencies work and Casaleggio Associati basically is a communication agency. Casaleggio manages the communication, the presence of the FSM nationwide in terms of its «image», and then it is fair that it's him that decide who manage the communication in Rome, who will and will not be broadcasted in TV. (Activist [EC], 5/3/2016).

4. The Use of the Internet: New Media Populism?

Before getting to the analysis of the use of the Internet by the FSM, I will reflect on the role of the Internet for populist parties in general and for the FSM in particular. Little has been written on the interplay between the Internet and populism on a theoretical basis (Bimber 1998, Biancalana 2014, Gerbaudo 2014), and the question of whether populist leaders and supporters use the Internet in a specific way remains for the most part unanswered (see Bartlett, Birdwell and Littler 2011, Bentivegna 2014, Engesser et al. 2016. For radical right parties see Caiani and Parenti 2013).

One of the most important contributions on the relationship between (news) media and populism is that of Gianpietro Mazzoleni (2003, 2008) on «media populism». According to Mazzoleni, since populist leaders' style is particularly suitable for a journalistic routine that favour anything that «breaks the routine», some characteristics of contemporary media systems (such as spectacularization, personalisation and dramatisation) are providing populists leaders notoriety, legitimacy and visibility. This (unintentional) «convergence of goals» can boost populists' consensus («political populism nests perfectly in an environment where media populism thrives»), even though Mazzoleni states that no causal link is to be made, since the media are not independent but rather intervening variables in the framework of other «structural» processes.

Starting from this contribution, we can ask ourselves whether or not we are facing a sort of «new media populism». Indeed, regarding the Internet, we can say that populists can take advantage of some characteristics of it, especially if framed in a «cyber-optimistic» manner. I have already explained that the Internet can be considered a tool of disintermediation, and that disintermediation can be considered a key feature of the populist style: consequently, I believe that populists could exploit the
Internet (at least) as a rhetorical weapon, presenting it as a way to weaken party intermediation and to create a more direct relationship between both leader and supporters and people and power. As in the case of Mazzoleni's «media populism» populists can take advantage of societal and political broad transformations (in the case of «media populism» commercialisation, in this case disintermediation), because their style fits with these transformations.

Moving to our case study, the Internet has always been considered by Grillo and Casaleggio both as an alternative tool for communication (against journalism, that was considered as close to traditional parties) and for political organisation. In a book published in 2013, speaking about the increasingly importance of the «Net», Grillo and Casaleggio stated that:

In a relatively short time, everything will change. Traditional media will disappear, together with the most part of the hierarchical structures that govern the various aspects of society and economics. Among those are parties, that will be replaced by movements (Grillo and Casaleggio 2013, 7).

It is not the aim of this article to reconstruct in detail FSM’s rhetoric on the Internet. Drawing on my (Biancalana 2013, 2014) and other (e.g. Mosca, Vaccari and Valeriani 2015) previous works we can define FSM’s rhetoric on the Internet as hyperbolically «cyber-optimistic» (Vaccari 2012): the Internet is pictured as «an inherently transparent, democratic, and accountability-enhancing technology» (Mosca, Vaccari and Valeriani 2015, 127). As concerns the topic of this paper (political disintermediation), I will focus here only on the references to the Internet in official documents, such as the statute and party rules.

But, in order to comprehend the role of the Internet in the FSM, it is necessary to go back to 2005. In that year, 4 years before the constitution of the party, Beppe Grillo opened a blog (we know now that Grillo was already advised by Casaleggio at that time). Grillo’s blog (www.beppegrillo.it) was (and is) structured in a classic, top-down way: there is a post and then comments below. The blog was used not only as an alternative communication tool for Grillo’s social, environmental, and political campaigns of the time, but people reading the blog were also urged to act, and Grillo’s web-campaigns soon became «real». Indeed, a few months after the opening of the blog, Grillo asked readers to meet, using the social network Meet-up. The «Friends of Beppe Grillo» meet-ups, that initially were mainly small discussion groups, would eventually become the local FSM groups. Between 2007 and 2009 Grillo started to «certify» electoral lists according to some criteria (candidates mustn’t be members of other parties, be convicted, having done more than a mandate...): the aim of the certification was to be published on the blog in order to obtain public exposure. So even though this wasn’t a direct political engagement, the blog worked as a kind of showcase of «virtuous» civic lists. Then, the certification started to come with the permission to use a symbol («Five Star Lists», then) and eventually the FSM was founded in 2009. After the foundation of the FSM, in 2009, the blog was indicated as the party headquarters and all party’s activities passed through it. So, we can say that the Internet has always been

15 It is interesting to note that Meet-up in Italy is «monopolised» by FSM. In a compelling reportage, the journalist Francesco Costa (2014) wrote about the peculiarities of the Italian Meet-ups: at that time Meet-up in Italy had 250,000 members (Italy was the second most represented European country after the UK), but 170,000 of these users were registered to groups that refer to Grillo. Meetup in Italy has come to be characterized precisely by the groups that use its service, becoming something different from what it is in the rest of the world. It is interesting to note that activist themselves perceive Meet-up as almost a synonym for FSM or, broadly, political activism: in an interview (14/6/2015) an activist said that Meet-ups used to organise also other things [than the FSM’s ones]. After the foundation of the party, for the most part of groups Meet-up remained the preferred organisational tool. It is worthy to note that in July 2015 a post appeared on Grillo’s blog (Meet-ups alone aren’t the FSM) stating that members of the Meet-ups weren’t entitled to speak on behalf of the FSM. Only those that obtained the permission to use the party logo (that is the certification, given to candidates and elected representatives only) could do it. Moreover, since most groups changed the Meet-up name from «Friends of Beppe Grillo» to «Five Star Movement» the post urged Meet-up members not to use the party name. We can consider this as an attempt to «centralise» communication and online participation to the official website, managed by Casaleggio Associati.

16 It is worth to note that, although the Meet-up net structured itself «bottom-up» (following Grillo’s call), the foundation of the party was a «top-down» one: Grillo (and presumably Casaleggio) decided to found the party and wrote the statute and the party rules.
fundamental to FSM dynamics and that the role of the IT infrastructure (leader's and party's websites) in the party's organisation increased over time.

I would start by analysing the party's main documents: the statute (Non-statute, 2009) and the party rules (FSM's Rules, 2014)\(^{17}\). According to the party statute, significantly called «Non-statute»\(^{18}\), the party's headquarter is the website of Beppe Grillo (Non-statute, article 1), and the Internet is considered as central for party's enrolment, consultation, deliberation, decision and election (Non-statute, article 4). Moreover, the FSM acknowledge to «all Internet users» the steering power, that is usually detained by few (Non-statute, article 4). This is a key point, as we will see, in order to understand the use of the Internet by the party: in a populist fashion, the Internet is seen as the tool that directly links people and power.

Starting with party enrolment (Non-statute, article 5), this is equated with a website registration. Indeed, the only way to officially\(^{19}\) join the party is online. The registration gives access to a number of rights: the right to discuss and determine the political direction of elected representatives via the Forum and Lex, the right to participate in online consultations and the right to become a candidate (FSM's Rules, article 1). We will see that the control on registrations and account eliminations (that is, the control on party membership) is a key responsibility, and Casaleggio Associati (called in the rules the «manager of the IT system») is in charge of that. Regarding online consultations, that will be the topic of next paragraph, according to the party rules these can be used to choose programmes and policies, to select candidates, to modify the rules\(^{20}\), in the expulsion procedure and for other topics (FSM's Rules, article 2).

The Forum is a classic online forum, and (differently from all other online participation tools) it is accessible by anyone, even though only registered members can start threads. The Forum is a rather confused place of discussion, and it seems basically left to itself. So, leaving aside the Forum, there are essentially two main online participation tools in the FSM: online votes and Lex. These functions are embedded in the so-called «operating system» (now called Rousseau). Indeed, online votes happen on the «operating system» but are announced on the blog (and with an e-mail sent to members that have the right to vote). I will start dealing with online votes and then I will analyse Lex and the operating system (Rousseau).

4.1 Online votes

Online votes have been used by the FSM for different purposes. One is that of choosing national and regional candidates: indeed, party members can directly decide on candidates with online votes. The other is to exercise the «steering power» mentioned above: in certain occasions, party members have the opportunity to «direct» MPs through online votes. The rationale is in both case, since elected representatives are mere spokespersons, to give members a direct say in party and political decisions.

We can classify online votes by territorial level and by type. I collected all the online votes publicised on Grillo’s website up to 30th June 2016: 66 online consultations have been held from December 2012 to June 2016. There are three territorial levels concerned: the local (16 votes), regional (20 votes), and national one (30 votes)\(^{21}\).

At the local level, in 14 cases out of 16 online consultations have been used to select candidates (mayor and/or the city councillors). In one case members were asked to cast their vote in order to decide whether or not to impeach a councillor (Turin, 7/10/2014) and in another case in order to select the

\(^{17}\) These rules were released in December 2014 in compliance to the Italian parliamentary law. These rules, as well as the statute, were never voted by members.

\(^{18}\) Indeed, the Non-Statute is not the real (legal) statute of the party. But the rules contained in it are considered binding by activists and members.

\(^{19}\) It is true, though, that is possible for everyone to participate at the local level. Indeed, while participation at the national level is online only, at the local level face-to-face participation is fundamental and highly developed (see below).

\(^{20}\) It is worth to mention that the party rules don’t mention how to change the rules.

\(^{21}\) I counted the selection of European candidates as one, even though happened in two turns. In the case of regional or local consultation, only members residing in the territory can vote.
first three points of the electoral program of the city of Rome. Turnout depends on the number of registered members and obviously on the size of the city, and vary from 102 (selection of the city councillors of the city of Pesaro) to 3.862 (selection of the mayor of Rome). A question that is worth to ask is: why in some (actually, most) cases there are no online consultations to select candidates at the local level? The online consultation at this level has been used in two cases: if there are conflicts into the local group and therefore there are two different lists that want to run under the FSM symbol and, more recently, for big and «difficult» cities (e.g. Rome and Naples, 2016), where it is «risky» to leave total control to the local group. In the first case, the vote is on the entire list, in the second, members can select single candidates. In all other cases, local groups are free to fill the list, that will be eventually certified.

Where there are two lists there is an online consultation, but also for big cities. I mean, Rome is Rome. It's not just a city, it represents the centre of the country, it is the capital city, it has a tremendous budget hole, the parliament is located in Rome… You must decide candidates through the blog. Also because the mayor of Rome has a huge power compared to other cities… (MP, 25/3/2016)

[In Rome] they didn't want to give autonomy, on the contrary there was control. Probably they didn't trust the candidates. (Activist [EC], 5/3/2016)

Like an activist said, «control arises in critical cases», and since all the online procedures are managed by Casaleggio Associati, online consultations are a means in order to establish control. According to FSM’s members, the online method used, for instance, in the case of Rome, would prevent «infiltrations», even though they admit that «if in the past three years I registered to the website all my relatives up to the eighth degree of kinship, then I would win». Where the local group is able to fill a list, no online consultation is needed. Paperwork is sent to Casaleggio Associati's offices where is checked, and if all documents are in order the certification is given. Without the certification it is impossible for the group to run under the FSM symbol, then who is in charge of this procedure maintain a great share of power.

At the regional level, online consultations have been used only to select regional councillors and regional presidents. Here turnout varies from 854 (Umbria) to 3.974 (Campania). The regional level is interesting because it shows the institutionalisation of the method of the online consultation to choose regional candidates. Since there are not official regional branches of the party, but only the elected representatives, it is difficult for members to meet and decide candidates, like in the cities. Nevertheless, until 2012 no regional online consultations have been organised for the 7 regional elections held in that period. We must say that then members were fewer and consequently the organisation easier. In 2013, 2 out of 7 regions held an online consultation to choose candidates, whereas in 2014 and 2015 all regions did it. Moreover, unlike in 2014, in 2015, all the procedure, starting from the proposal of the candidacy, was online (see note 4 of the FSM's Rules). In 2014 local groups, according to activists from Turin, maintained a sort of control of the procedure. «Activists' control», as an activist said: candidates were chosen «face to face» among activists.

22 This was the first official online vote on a program ever. Indeed, despite the FSM's rhetoric on the «program written by citizens», even the 2013 national electoral program was released in a «top-down» way, without neither an (online) consultation nor a ratification: «From October 2012 to January 2013 we spent time writing programs, speaking with citizens… It was a waste of time» (Former FSM's MP, 6/8/16). On the contrary, at the local level (at least in Turin) the program is usually written by citizens. In this particular case (Rome 2016), we can note that members could vote in order to decide the first three points of the program, so this is not a vote on the content of the program.

23 In other cases, the leader decided not to give the certification at all, so that no FSM list would run. Since the party logo is owned by Grillo, these decisions are up to him and activists can not have a say.

24 In Rome candidates were asked to sign a sort of «contract» stipulating that elected representative should resign and pay a fine (150,000 euros) if the image of the FSM was damaged by the breaking of the FSM's rules. Moreover, for important decision elected representatives would have to ask the approval of a legal staff, coordinated by Grillo and Casaleggio.

25 We will see that there is a huge difference in the case of online and offline votes for the selection of local and regional candidates: in the first case «members» are entitled to vote, in the second «activists» are.
At the regional level it is more difficult to meet, we are talking about cities that located up to 150 km one from the other, and then organising meetings is complicated, anyway we are doing it, but in that case we use the national blog and if there is an election an online consultation is opened, there are candidates, proposed by local groups, and then there is a vote. Anyway, it always starts from below. When there are regional elections within every province… Every province choose its candidates, since the province is smaller, then it is easier to meet and to fill out a kind of list, and then if the list is too long we, the group, make an initial selection and then we send it to Milan. At the last regional elections many candidates worked on the territory and proposed their candidacy, we discussed and we made a list that was voted and then finally an online consultation was held for the certified list.

From 2015, it is necessary to send the candidacy directly (online), the only requirement is to be a member of the FSM (registered to the site). In 2015 the procedure to select candidates for regional elections was the following: first, registered members (with a certain seniority) proposed their candidacy online, then two online consultations were held. The first, at the provincial level, in order to select councillors; the second, at the regional level, in order to select the candidate president among the most voted councillors (see, post Candidature online per le regionali 2015, 9/12/14). Like in local consultations, Casaleggio Associati is in charge of the whole process.

At the national level, FSM makes use of online consultations for a vast array of topics. The rationale for online votes is that elected representatives are only spokespersons, that have to follow what people say. Therefore, the Internet is seen as the perfect means in order to do that. Since 2012 FSM has been holding online consultations, that I will analyse in the following pages. One important point to stress is consultations are usually proposed «from above». Consultations appear on the website without advance, an email is sent to members. But, who decides whether or not hold a consultation? FSM's rules (article 2), states that online consultations are held to: decide electoral programs, select candidates, modify rules, select a part of the Appeal Committee, decide on expulsions and on any topic decided by «the leader» or members (for members there is a highly complicated procedure, see below). It is the leader that has the power to call a vote (article 3, FSM's rules). According to an MP, in reality the decision to held a consultation is taken «together».

We haven't included some topics in the programme, we haven't discussed some topics in our electoral campaigns. When we deal with something important, then we discuss: Senate, Chamber of Deputies, Beppe Grillo, Gianroberto Casaleggio... We discuss and if we decide [to hold a consultation] then we decide how to write the question. All together, all levels are concerned. We try to investigate, whether or not to vote, whether or not the topic is understandable. According to an MP, in reality the decision to held a consultation is taken «together».

According to the same article, members could request a consultation. In order to obtain it, a proposal of consultation, subscribed by 500 members, has to be send to a PO Box (!). The proposal would be then published on the website for one week. Then, if one fifth of members decide to support the proposal, an actual online consultation would be held. It is interesting to note that there is not the possibility for members to propose a consultation online. The process is in this case rather complicated and than indicates that consultation «from below» aren't appreciated.

We can divide votes held from December 2012 to June 2016 into six categories: 1) candidate selection, 2) parliamentary activities, 3) expulsions, 4) political strategy, 5) party activities, 6) elections of party cadres. In this chart it is possible to see the turnout. The average participation is approximately 28,500. Considering that it is plausible to imagine that members increased in this timespan, we can see that there is not a clear turnout «trend».

26 Regarding consultations, it is important to distinguish between an «initiative» (a consultation that can be requested bottom-up by the electoral body) and a «referendum», that is proposed top-down (cfr. Uleri 2003).

27 The last time that a membership figure was released was in June 2014 (87,656). Other figures were released in December 2012 (about 31,000 members), April 2013 (about 48,000), January 2014 (about 80,000) and February 2014 (about 85,000).
Regarding candidate selection, the first online vote ever was that of December 2012, in order to select candidates for 2013 general elections (the so-called «Parlamentaries»). Then a similar procedure was repeated in 2014 to select candidates for European parliament. Essentially these were online «closed primaries». In both cases there were limitations both for becoming a candidate (only members that already tried to be elected with the FSM but weren’t could run for MP in 2012, on the contrary only «seniority» was required in 2014) and for voting (it was required to having been member for a given period of time). The whole process, from the proposal of the candidacy to the vote, happened online and was managed by Casaleggio Associati.

Regarding parliamentary activities, as I have already said, FMS consider its elected representatives (at least in its rhetoric) as spokespersons, «citizens in parliament», that have to follow what the people say. The means to do it is obviously the Internet and Grillo’s website. Obviously, not «everything-that-is-not-in-the-programme» is voted, but as an MP says, «important» issues only. This opinion seems to be shared among activists.

When you find yourself in the municipality council or in parliament it isn't possible to consult the web for everything, at a certain point you must take a decision of which later you will be accountable for, it is absolutely right, it mustn't be a detachment between the base, the territory, and elected representatives, but at the same time it is not possible to ask opinions for everything. As a matter of fact, we got over it (…) it is not practically feasible. (Activist [EC], 5/3/2016)

According to the same activist, the focus has shifted from «I’ll let you participate, before» to «I will be accountable for it, later». Indeed, activists have a direct and equal relationship with MPs: they usually are very present in their constituency and are known to be very responsive to citizen's messages on social network sites (e.g. Facebook).

Nine out of seventeen votes regarded the electoral law: indeed, an official FSM electoral law was constructed, through nine consecutive votes. Nine questions were posed to members, starting from general questions (proportional or majoritarian system) to the particular ones (electoral threshold, preference voting). It is relevant to say that all questions were «closed»: that is, members could vote either for one or for another solution, without proposing one themselves.

Another vote that can be classified in this category, since involved members to give directions to the MPs via the website, is the selection of the president of the Italian republic (in 2013 and in 2015). In 2013, in the first place members proposed names for the president, and then in a following consultation members had to chose the FSM candidate among the 10 most voted. That was one of the few cases in

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28 In Italy there is not a direct election of the president of the republic, MPs are responsible for it. With the online vote the FSM tried to overcome this and to give members a say.
which the vote was certificated by an external company. In 2015 the process was different, since MPs proposed a series of names, that were then voted by members.

The other six consultations regarded: abrogation of the clandestine immigration crime, metropolitan cities, selection of the supreme council of the judiciary's judges, civil unions, selection of a member of the constitutional court and the anticorruption law. I will analyse clandestine immigration, civil unions and anticorruption law, since they are the most voted and thus considered as important by members.

In January 2014 members were asked to decide whether or not the MPs should vote the abrogation of the clandestine immigration crime. In October 2013 two MPs proposed the abrogation, that was eventually voted in a parliamentary committee. The leaders then wrote on the blog that the issue wasn’t in the electoral program and that nobody was consulted. But the problem, as outlined by them (see post Reato di clandestinità, 13/10/2013) was more in the substance of the proposal than in the method used (obviously, a lot of topics aren't in the program). Basically, they were openly against the abrogation of the clandestine immigration crime. In January, when the law had to be voted in the Senate, an online consultation was held and members voted in favour of the abrogation, then against the leaders. Consequently, MPs voted accordingly to the online vote. This consultation is relevant since we can see that while practically it is the leader and not members that decide whether or not to hold a consultation, once the consultation is held the results are binding, even though against the will of the leader.

In October 2014 members were asked to vote on civil unions (vote in a parliamentary committee), and the vast majority voted in favour of it. In February 2016 the law had to be voted in parliament, but Grillo and Casaleggio let MPs «free» to vote, because the law now included the so-called «stepchild adoption» (that wasn't included in the past consultation). They choose to not repeat the online vote because «ethical issues» were at stake. This consultation is relevant because it shows clearly that the choice of whether or not hold a consultation is taken by the «guarantors».

Finally, the anti-corruption vote is interesting because of the presentation of the vote. The law to be voted by members (and then by MPs) is presented in the post with the link to the online vote as «insufficient». It is rather clear from the text that precede the consultation what is the hoped result. Indeed, 80% voted against and so MPs voted accordingly. But we have to say that, in the case of the clandestine immigration law, despite the clear position of Grillo and Casaleggio members decided to vote in favour of the abrogation.

To sum up, we can see that online consultations for «directing» MPs are actually rarely used and that activists consider equally (if not more) important the direct relationship with elected representatives. It

In other cases, the most part, there is not an external body to certify the consultation. Consequently, members and citizens have to simply trust the figures released by the party.

Grillo and Casaleggio call themselves «guarantors» of the FSM. This definition, as I have verified during my fieldwork study, is widely accepted by party members and is not problematised.
seems that online consultations are used (or not used) to solve internal conflicts and to legitimize and ratify choices. In a nutshell, to «pass the buck» to members. Ceccarini e Bordignon (2016, 151) state that, due to the characteristics of the party's electorate, «the job of deciding what stance to adopt in relation to specific issues is not one that the party’s leaders find easy. Whatever position is taken, there is always a risk of provoking discontent on the part of a not insignificant proportion of the party's supporters». Online consultations can be thus seen as a mean to overcome this problem: thorny decisions are taken online by members, «the Net» decides in a zero-sum game. It is significant then that online consultations have been (or not been) held on two very divisive issues, clearly identified as left-wing or right-wing, such as immigration and civil rights.

Another important use of the online votes by the FSM is the use for expulsions of members, especially elected representatives. Until December 2014, the FSM’s Code of Conduct for MPs said that the MP assembly can propose the expulsion of another MP, and then the decision has to be submitted to the members with an online consultation. From December 2014, as I have already said, new rules have been created, and the expulsion can be requested only by the leader. The member/elected representative is then «suspended» and have 10 days to tell his version. After that period of time the leader decides on the expulsion. The member/elected representative can then appeal to the Appeal committee (see below): if the committee accept the version of the expelled member then the leader must open an online consultation. We can see that with the 2014 rules the leader obtained an increasing power on this topic, and the event of an online consultation is less likely to happen. Since 2012, 5 expulsion votes have been held, involving 9 MPs (none of these followed the 2014 or the previous rules). In all cases of an online vote members confirmed the expulsion. The expulsion (besides signifying the withdrawal of the certification and the permission to use the logo and implying the obligation to leave the parliamentary group) equates to an account deletion, and Casaleggio Associati is in charge of that. But is known that also common members have been expelled by the FSM. Since the account deletion equates to the impossibility both to vote and to become a candidate, then the account deletion can be considered as a powerful tool for eliminate those who dissent.

Regarding «political strategy», two votes that fit into this category have been held: whether or not to meet Matteo Renzi and to which European group adhere. In the first case Matteo Renzi, leader of the Democratic Party and appointed by the president of the republic in order to form a new government, proposed to the FSM a meeting. Again, the thorny decision to accept this request was then left to the members and, as in the case of clandestine immigration, Grillo and Casaleggio wrote that they didn’t agree to meet Renzi. On the contrary, members again voted in favour of it. Grillo then agreed to go to the meeting but didn’t took it seriously: because of Grillo’s attitude, the meeting lasted few minutes and there was no real discussion (so that the result was the same of non accepting the meeting). In the second case, the result was practically predetermined. Like in the anti-corruption law, it is to note here the importance of the question and the relevance of the choices available to vote. Indeed, the choice was between EFL, ECR and Non-Attached Members, while a part of members and MEPs wanted to enter in the Green group. This option wasn't pursued and it is known that Grillo wanted an alliance with UKIP's leader Nigel Farage (EFL).

Regarding party activities, as I said two votes have been held, of which the most important is the change of the party symbol (the other was whether or not to accept a protest proposal, made by Grillo,

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31 Before 2012 some members were expelled, without the online consultation.
32 The importance of the «rules» (that as I say were never voted by members and can not be changed) and the respect of the «rules» is a recurring theme in FSM members' discourses. It is interesting to note though that often rules are not applied or are applied in an arbitrary way.
33 The expulsion, as I've been able to verify in my interview with an expelled MP, is a sort of «online pillory» for MPs. Their name and face are put on the leader's site, together with accusations without contradictory opinions. Moreover, users often write unpleasant comments both on the leader's site and on the Facebook pages of the expelled member.
called «parliament in the streets»). Indeed, in November 2015 Grillo asked members to vote on the new party symbol. In the original symbol was indicated the name of the website (www.beppegrillo.it) and then the name of Grillo. Members could choose whether substitute this URL with the FSM's one (www.movimento5stelle.it) or leave the space blank. Members chose the first option. This was presented as a step towards the institutionalisation of the FSM and a decreasing role of the leader. But it is worth to note that both the first and the second domain are owned by Grillo and managed by Casaleggio Associati.

The last category that I identified is the election of party cadres, and this happened two times: the election of the so-called «direttorio» and of the Appeal Committee. The first vote took place in November 2015. Grillo proposed 5 MPs in order to «help him» in managing the party. That was a huge change in the spirit of the FSM, because until that moment no other leadership figure appeared except for Grillo and Casaleggio. But here is interesting for us the online consultation. Members were asked to accept or not accept a 5-persons list. Eventually, 90% of members voted in favour of it. The second consultation happened in December. As I said in December new rules were released and the Appeal Committee created. Members were then asked to choose 2 out of 3 members of the committee among a 5-persons list, prepared by the leader, while one member is chosen directly by the leader. When asked about this particular consultations and about the method used, activists reply that the persons in the lists were the most appropriate for the position: no one problematise the method. As I will say, shortcomings of online votes seems to be overlooked by members.

In conclusion, we can outline some points regarding online votes. While it is true that the FSM is the only party in the Italian party system that systematically ask all members to participate to the life of the party with online votes, creating a direct link between party members and elected representatives, there are also some shortcomings that need to be outlined.

First: who can call a vote? Basically, consultation come from above. The procedure for asking an online consultation from below is rather complicated and, remarkably, involves the postal sending of a proposal. Second: how the question is asked and the available choices are important issues that can influence the outcomes of the vote. In fact, almost always members vote on predetermined options. According to critics, this type of online consultation:

It is worst than holding a remote control, because you don't have the opportunity to decide, you choose on the basis of what others gave you as an option. That's no «deciding», that's «ratifying». (Former FSM's MP, 6/8/2016)

But we can also say that, when the opportunity is given to them, members can be considered rather autonomous from the opinion of the leader(s) (see the immigration and the Renzi vote). Third: the entire process is managed by Casaleggio Associati and there is no way to have the results certified («How do you know that the votes are real?», a former FSM's MP asked rhetorically). Only in rare cases there was an external certification of the results. This could weaken the legitimacy of the results, even though it seems that members have no problems to believe in the trustfulness of them. The last point is that consultations come with no advance. As activists remarked, «if that day I'm not at home, I couldn't vote». It must be remarked, though, that activists don't perceive these as «real» problems: on the contrary are rather enthusiastic of these participation tools.

4.2 Lex and the «Operating System»

Lex is a part of the website in which members can comment law proposals of FSM's elected representatives. Lex was launched in late 2013 and has now a regional, national and European section, for regional, national and European law proposals respectively. Elected representatives that want to present a law in their assembly have to post it into Lex before. They also have to post an explanation and a video. Then, for two to four months activists can comment the law. There are five types of comments: advice, integration, modification, objection, defect of form. After that period of time, the
elected representative must integrate the law with members’ comments and present a written report in which explain the modifications occurred and also why some comments haven’t been accepted. Indeed, the elected representative is in charge of the whole procedure and can decide whether or not to accept comments.

This section of the website is reserved to registered members and consequently it is impossible to researchers to access it. During an interview, I asked an MP to show me this part of the website. The number of comments depend on the topic and vary from tens to hundreds. But we noted that there are also a lot of «encouragement» comments (e.g. «Well done! Keep it up!»), not related to the topic of the law. Indeed, it seems that there is no «moderator» and every member can freely comment. The MP acknowledged the problem of these off-topic comments. Another problem acknowledged by the same MP was that of the pointlessness of making laws in a moment in which the party is in opposition, and that the law resulting from Lex would be better used in order to create amendments to other laws.

Again, relating to the high number of «encouragement» comments and to the fact that comments are not «structured» (that is, in Lex there is not a discussion among members as in applications like Liquid Feedback, but only untied comments temporally ordered, just like in Grillo’s site) a former FSM’s MP pointed out that:

> the opportunity for citizens to participate is reduced: the fact isn’t that people don’t participate; they do, but uselessly. (Former FSM’s MP, 6/8/2016).

Until May 2016 it wasn’t possible for members to propose a law, function that is now enabled («Lex Iscritti», that is «Lex Members»). The proposed law must fit certain requirements and it is first evaluated by the «Rousseau staff». The drafts that pass this first evaluation can be later voted by members. The first two voted laws will be assigned to an elected representative, that would then post the law on Lex and consequently bring it in parliament. July 5th 2016 the first online vote of «Lex Members» has been held: members had the possibility to choose among 129 proposals of various nature, from the constitutional law to the separate waste collection. Turnout was around 15.000 (one of the lowest ever). The two most voted proposals were the introduction of the imperative mandate in the Italian constitution and the reopening of brothels in Italy.

It is too early to evaluate this new function. But we can say that although being a totally innovative system for a political party, only two proposals would be eventually taken into account, with a very slim chance to become an actual law (see the remarks on the pointlessness and uselessness of this kind of participation). It is important here to stress that even in this case (as in the case of all FSM’s online participation tools) the rhetoric is that of «direct democracy» (the name Rousseau speaks for itself). Although the risk is to feed a sort of «expectation’s gap» (Flinders 2012), as I already said my interviews show that this is not happening. Activists are rather enthusiastic of this tool, even when they aren’t regular users: through it and through the direct relationship with MPs they perceive to have the opportunity to influence national politics, so that we can say that these tools increase their political efficacy (or better, the perception of their political efficacy). It seems thus that this and the other online participation tools have mainly a «symbolic» and «identifying» function: through them the myth of the openness of the internal decision-making processes of the party and that of the empowerment of the member are created and reinforced, marking the difference with other Italian parties. And it works.

Both online votes and lex are part of the so-called «operating system», that can be seen in the next page in a screenshot taken in April 2016. As we can see, through the operating system (presented in a new shape in April 2016 after the death of Casaleggio) home page it is possible to access to online votes and Lex. Moreover, there are links to other functions such as fund raising.

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34 Unless becoming a member, but I preferred not to.
4.3 The Local Level: The FSM's Use of the Internet in Turin

Until now I presented the use of the Internet at the national level, but things are different at the local level. In particular, here I will present the case of Turin, city in which I'm conducting a fieldwork study. It is important to stress that, although some characteristics may be similar, the FSM at the local level is different in each city and region where it exists (for a comparison, see the work edited by Roberto Biorcio, 2015). Even with regard to the use of the Internet my results are thus strictly limited to the case of 'Turin'.

Speaking of the face-to-face offline participation, in Turin there are three layers of participation to the party: at the city level there is 1) an assembly reserved to activists that is usually held every two weeks and 2) the so-called «workgroups» that are in charge of analysing and proposing policies, in order to support the elected representatives. Furthermore, Turin is divided in 8 districts and there is a FSM's group for each one. Speaking of online tools, I had occasion to note that each of these layers has its (open or closed) online counterpart such as the website, Facebook page, mailing list, Whatsapp chat and so on.

Starting with enrolment, as outlined above, at the national level it is possible to join the party (and then participate to the party's online national activities) only via Grillo's website. While it is true that for using the «operating system» and to become a candidate it is necessary to be registered at the party website, at the local level are considered «activists» those who actually participate. Indeed, no one asks activists whether or not they're registered to Grillo's site (unless they have to become candidates, see below).

But, how then to distinguish activists from non-activists? The solution found in Turin is to consider an «activist» who participated to at least one previous meeting. In order to «count» and coordinate these activists (e.g. in order to decide the date and the agenda of the meeting) at the city level they use a...
Facebook (closed and hidden) group. Indeed, the FSM's Turin group do not share with «Milan» a list of registered persons in the city, so that it is impossible for them to know the exact figure of FSM's members in the city. Indeed, the national and the local enrolment are two different and separate channels that cross only with regard to candidate selection.

We have a closed (hidden) Facebook group of activists from Turin, we drafted a regulation and if you want to participate to our activities – we always start from the territory – you want to participate to the FSM, you have to write to us. «In which district do you live?» (…) «Well, you're in district X, contact this person that is the district councillor» and you start to participate in district X. So, if a person is really interested, he/she will contact the district councillor that will tell to him/her: «we have a stand this Saturday, we have to do this and that», even simple stuff like to go and get the materials, be there and so on. Or «we need you to participate to this committee in the district council». You come, you do it, after two or three times in which you show yourself you can be part of the closed Facebook group and you can come to our city meetings, you can vote and so on. (Activist [EC], 5/3/2016)

In the districts, two among the main activities of the groups are the stands and the open meetings. As explained above, these activities work as a sort of gatekeeper for becoming an «activist». Indeed, in both cases it is possible for everyone (whether or not registered to Grillo's blog and whether or not included in the Facebook group) to participate, and in the case of meetings, to vote after the second time. I participated to one of these open meetings. I presented myself as a researcher only after a while, and the presence of a «stranger» to their meeting didn't actually worry them. Indeed, the aim of this open meeting was only to present the candidates at the district council and the electoral program at the district level, so that no decision was to be taken.

It is interesting to note that at the end of this meeting a couple of practical things needed to be decided, such as the date for the next meeting and where to hold the next stand. The meeting was still in progress but activists said «Let's speak about these topics in the chat», so that me and any other people that wasn't in that activists-only Whatsapp chat didn't see or participate to the decisions. Therefore, it seems that for them the Internet is more the «continuation of the assembly» than «the communication means outside the assembly», as an activist defined it. In another occasion, I noted that the Whatsapp chat was used by the new district councillors at their first district council meeting in order to ask other activists advice on a vote that was taking place.

Speaking of publicity of activities, there are indeed two mailing lists at the district level, one for activists and one for citizens. Citizens are advised of public activities via the citizens' mailing list, the Facebook open group and the district group's website. Activists told me that the reason for this double channel is their fear for «infiltrations», but that actually once a person becomes an «activist», is considered like any other senior member (having thus access to the activist's chat and mailing list). But it is important to stress that the meaning that FSM's activist give to the fact of being an activist is actually very practical. It's something that has to be proven «on the field». Face-to-face participation is considered «fundamental» and «unavoidable», both with regard to the relationship with other activists and with citizens (e.g. at the stand).

For us activism is a real, tangible, material thing. I do believe that there are much more persons signed up in Grillo's blog than activists in Turin. (Activist [EC], 5/3/2016)

In fact, the second main activity of the local group are the stands. FSM's activists meet every week (whether or not in the electoral campaign period) in order to hold a stand and speak with citizens. The stand is the place where to meet both citizens and other activists and participate. Usually, activists hand out flyers and speak with citizens. Also, according to an activist, the stand is a method to collect people

36 In Turin the social network Meet-Up has soon ceased to be used. Bobba and Cilluffo (2015, 30) attributes this to the increasingly central role played by the website of the regional FSM, that was created after the election of the two regional councillors in 2010.
37 I will call «member» the person registered in the website and «activist» the person that participates to the (offline) activities of the FSM.
38 I participated since April to the activities of a district group. My results are thus limited to this particular group but, according to activists, more or less every district group works in this way.
that want to sign in to the mailing list and become an activists. For many people with whom I spoke the first step in the participation to the FSM was an encounter at the stand, together with the reading of Grillo's blog. Even though the reading of the blog seems to be less important for activists than for supporters.

The least I was into the Movement, the most I used to read the blog. (Activist, 14/6/2016)

The third important activity of the district group is the support to the district councillor(s). In the 2011 local elections two FSM's councillor entered in the city council, plus one in each district. After the 2016 local elections the number of elected representatives increased: they are five in the district that I'm studying. Thus, a great part of activism was and is to support and help the councillors. As I said, district councillors, like all the other elected representatives, are considered and consider themselves as mere spokespersons and require help from the outside, from citizens and other activists. As a district councillor, elected in 2011, said:

I always say that I'm alone but the branches, the roots are around me and are all the people that surround me. I can't be at the same time in all the districts but all activists live there and so they can report, they can write documents… (District councillor, 1/6/2016)

The Internet is perceived as a means to do that, together with the face-to-face relationship in the meetings and at the stand. Moreover, regarding this activity, it is interesting to mention an online tool of participation called «Fourth Republic» that was developed by activists belonging to the district group that I'm observing. Practically, it is the equivalent of «Lex Members» at the district level, and it is managed by local activists. All citizens that require the registration to Fourth Republic can propose a local law, that must be voted, modified and amended by other registered members and at the end assigned to the district councillor(s), that must take it to the council.

With respect to Lex Members the process seems much easier, not to mention that here all citizens can participate. It must be stated, though, that this isn't seen as a system in competition with the national and official one (managed by Casaleggio Associati). In the website of the project we can read that the promoters of the project feel «respectful and grateful towards “beppegrillo.it” and its staff» and that their aim is to «join forces» with Casaleggio Associati and improve the use of the Internet by local FSM groups. Indeed, one of the project's aims is to «preserve the autonomy of local FSM groups, without undermining or questioning the national objectives of the FSMs», together with pursuing «independence from large providers of infrastructures and services, in order to preserve values such as freedom and autonomy». This discovery left me surprised, as I knew Casaleggio Associati to be hostile to «unofficial» application (see the post 19/9/2013, that states that «No certified applications exist unless those of the blogs»). Activists say, though, that this tool has been rarely used.

Being a small group, we meet. I think that when «the human relationship» is the most economic and convenient solution, then «the human relationship» is to prefer. (Activist 14/6/2016).

Furthermore, regarding the activity of city and district councillors, the Internet (and in particular Fourth Republic) is used as a means to share information among activists and with citizens (for instance, to share all the district council documents and to report on district council's meetings) and, interestingly, to get to know «good policies» developed in other cities.

Finally, regarding candidate selection for the last (June 2016) local elections, both the candidates to the city and district councils and the candidate mayor were chosen completely offline, by secret ballot, in activists-reserved meetings. As outlined above, in Turin the FSM is considered «a good team», no divisions or critical cases arose and then there was total autonomy by the groups.

In conclusion, two things need to be underlined regarding the candidate selection procedure, at least at the district level: in my interviews and observations I noted that the most important feature of the candidate is being an «activist». Indeed, in Turin, at the city level the activists' assembly decided not to
candidate people that, although registered to the website (thus «members»), weren't «activists», that is didn't actively participate and devote time to the FSM. On the other hand, there is another necessary condition to become a candidate: it is strictly necessary to be registered in the website and thus to be an official «member» of the party. Because, as an activist said during a meeting, as concern candidacies, «Not to be signed in in Grillo's website is like not to be an activist».

5. Conclusions

The aim of this paper was three-fold. First, I wanted to define and specify the concept of disintermediation, linking it to populism. In the second place I tried to apply this framework to the use of the Internet by the FSM. Finally, my aim was to compare the national and the local use of the Internet by the party.

If disintermediation means reducing the role of the party's intermediate organisation and its gatekeeping role in the relationship with citizens, in favour of a more direct connection, then the Internet can surely be a disintermediation tool. In this paper, after having showed why and how disintermediation can be exploitable by populists, I analysed the role and the use of the Internet of a peculiar populist party, that can be considered a unique case both for the role played by the Internet and the electoral successes obtained.

Speaking of internal disintermediation, I have said that the centralisation and the opening of internal decision making processes can be considered as indicators of it, and that a means to analyse them is to focus on candidate and policy selection. We have seen that the Internet can play (and, in the case chosen for the analysis, actually plays) a great role in both processes.

On the one hand the great and direct power of FSM's members in candidate selection at the national and regional level is unquestioned. On the other hand it is worthy to note that the «environment» in which this selection takes place is shaped «from above»: the creation of the rules and the managing of the IT infrastructure in which the selection occurs show a high level of centralisation.

Regarding «policy selection» we can consider the way in which members can influence the conduct of elected representatives. We have seen that the aim of the FSM is, in a clear populist fashion, «to give to all Internet users the steering power», and that it has developed some innovative tools of online participation: online votes and Lex are the means to directly influence elected representatives, so that the role of an intermediary organisation can be considered superfluous. But again the problem is that, besides the control on the IT infrastructure, in the case of online votes it is unclear who decides what is to be voted (and which are the available options). Moreover, the fact that members have to send proposals for online consultations (initiatives) to a PO box and that only two laws proposed with «Lex Members» would be taken into account, is highly indicative of the fact that the procedure is managed «from above». Turning back to our interpretation of populism and disintermediation, we can say that the two answers to the question of how to translate the will of the people into political action coexist in this political actor: here we find both participation (through online tools) and leadership (in the management of the rules and the IT infrastructure).

I have also said that disintermediation could be considered more an intermediary change than an intermediary removal. The case of the FSM seems to assess the claim of Chadwick on the surviving of intermediaries in the Internet age. Indeed, we have seen that at the national level the party's IT infrastructure is strictly controlled by a private company. Data show that the position of power of Casaleggio Associati is not questioned, as the release of a new participation tool happens in a top-down way, in a way in which the creation and modification of rules for participation is not shared. Furthermore, the role of Casaleggio Associati as a new intermediary seems clear: besides being in charge of party enrolment, with online votes and Lex the firm acts as a gatekeeper between members and elected representatives, while with the certification process it controls candidacies at all levels. Compared to old party intermediaries, the level of accountability of this new intermediary seems even lesser: the members of the Appeal Committee, that would be a sort of «supervisory body» are almost
entirely chosen by the leader(s). The «party in central office» is composed by Casaleggio Associati’s employee, whose identity is unknown.

It is true that the mediation role of Casaleggio Associati can be (and is) partially skipped through the direct relationship and communication between members and/or citizens and elected representatives, mentioned by activists as one of the greatest peculiarities of the party. This direct communication happens both online (via Facebook) and offline, even though it is completely informal, differently from Lex and online votes.

Regarding external disintermediation, I looked at how the participation in the party works. Here the differences between the local and the national level are huge. Regarding the relationship between the national and the local level, we can say that the role and the use of the Internet as a disintermediation tool are very different in the two contexts. In fact, while it is impossible to participate at the national FSM's activities (online votes and Lex) without being a «member», everyone can easily become an «activist» and have a say in the local assembly. Official membership (and thus the registration in the party’s website) is required only in order to become a candidate, that is a person that is entitled to use the party logo and speak on behalf of the party.

At the local level, differently from the national level, communication and organisation are almost entirely disconnected from Casaleggio Associati. Activists don't know the figure of party membership and «Milan» don’t know the figure of activists (is difficult to know it even for activists themselves). Activists manage the local FSM as they wish and, besides the certification process and as long as there are no problems, they are completely autonomous from «Milan». This mechanism show a «short circuit» in the case of candidate selection for regional elections: in this case the fact of being an «activist» lose its (great) importance, as everyone that is a «member» can become a candidate and vote online.

The Internet is widely used and considered important by local groups but, as an activist said, «we are not digital champions». FSM's activists, unlike what one could think, are not a group of computer engineers, and the Internet is simply used in order to fill the lack of an intermediary organisation, in a rather unsophisticated way (e.g. the Facebook group that becomes the «official» way to count activists). These unofficial tools (Facebook, Fourth Republic, Whatsapp chats) are by no means controlled by Casaleggio Associati, fact that can lead to say that the use of the Internet in order to remove party intermediaries is more developed at the local level than at the national one. In the case of Fourth Republic we see that the attempt to imitate the national tool (Lex) at the local level substantially fails: this could be seen as a proof of the fact that dynamics are different at the two levels, and that face-to-face participation prevails at the local level.

But the two levels share a common point: both at the national and at the local level the Internet is used to exclude non-members and non-activists. At the national level, only registered members can have access to the «operating system» (and thus exercise the «steering power»). At the local level, Whatsapp chat and reserved mailing lists are used to exclude untrusted people. This is a rather normal dynamic for a (political) organisation: the problem lays in the gap with the rhetoric of the Internet as a means of absolute transparency and inclusiveness carried on by the FSM's leaders.

A last point that needs to be underlined is that a party like the FSM was created and reached a great success in a country like Italy, dominated by a television-centric mass-marketing approach, in which digital media have played a smaller role compared to other Western democracies (Vaccari 2013). Eurostat data (2015) shows that although 75.4% of Italian households had access to the Internet at home (the EU average being 82.6), Italy does not stand out regarding other indicators. The map in the next page shows the percentage of individuals who have never used the Internet: we can notice that Italy is one of the countries where this percentage is higher (Eurostat, Community survey on ICT usage in Households and by Individuals, 2015).

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39 It should be stressed that even tools like Facebook or Whatsapp represent a new form of (unaccountable) intermediation: the working of these tools and the data contained in them are not under the control of activists.
Does this picture portray FSM’s voters and supporters? Survey data presented by Mosca, Vaccari and Valeriani (2015, 148-9) show that FSM supporters are «more connected to the Internet and the main social media, more eager to obtain political information on the Web, and more likely to engage in online political endeavours of various kinds than the rest of the Italian population. But, even though M5s voters are «clearly more enthusiastic about the Web than the rest of the Italian population (…) digital media are still less popular than television and newspapers among them, just as they are in the whole sample» (145). In conclusion, they state that «the electoral success of the FSM is not rooted simply in an effective Internet strategy».

I believe my analysis to further support this claim: the relatively low turnout of online votes (compared both with the number of members and voters), the use and the (rather uncritical) perception of online tools of participation by activists and the great importance given to activism intended as «hard work on the field» can lead us to maintain that the success of this political actor is to find elsewhere. As stressed by Mazzoleni (2008, 64) analysing the interplay between media and populism, media are to be considered intervening rather than independent variables, and in this particular case «structural» factors seem to be more appropriate to explain the great success of this political actor.

Bibliography


