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Hacktivism and the Italian Five-Star Movement: From the Democratisation of Information to Digital Democracy

Prof. Giovanni Orsina   Prof. Emiliana De Blasio

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Supervisor   Co-supervisor

Vittoria Crall

_____

Candidate

652802

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Abstract

The following dissertation analyses the impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) on the development of democracy through two case studies: Hacktivism and the 5 Star Movement. It compares the techno-libertarian ideology that inspires hackers with the techno-utopianism of the M5S, highlighting both convergences and divergences in their approaches to political participation and the redefinition of the relationship between citizens and power in the digital age. The main conclusion is that the Internet has transformed democracy in the "hyper-historical" era, requiring a redefinition of the concepts of citizenship, power and participation, and their interaction. Access to information and protection of privacy emerge as crucial elements for an inclusive digital democracy.

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Introduction

The advent of information technologies has always given rise to the most audacious speculation concerning the future of humanity and their relationship with thinking machines. In the contemporary era, that imaginary future has become present, and such speculations about the symbiotic human-machine relationship now constitute a historical benchmark for *ex-post* considerations on the actual success of the promises of a socio-political revolution of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). This dissertation has the responsibility, as well as the privilege, of addressing the history of digital evolution since the beginning of the so-called Fourth Information Revolution, starting from its primordial soup: that mixture of hacker communities, the counter-cultural spirit of the 1960s in Western democracies and the genesis of cyber-culture. While this digression is instrumental in the narrative, the focal point of this dissertation is the examination of two case studies: hacktivism and the Five-Star Movement (also known as M5S or FSM). To the best of my knowledge, they have not been previously examined together in academic research. If this were the case, I would understand why; apart from being two heterogeneous and relatively recent case studies, the link that places them in historical continuity is not immediately evident.

Demonstrating the existence of a connection, not necessarily a convergence, between these two anti-system phenomena that arose and grew thanks to the Internet, is one of the multiple objectives set by my master's thesis. The others can be summarised in my initial Research Question, namely:

RQ: *"How have hacktivism and the 5-Star Movement exploited the potential for horizontal interaction offered by the Internet and how has their virtual political action redefined, or challenged, the traditional cornerstones of democracy in cyber-space?"*

In order to ascertain an unambiguous response to this question in the following pages, without becoming overwhelmed by the historical stream of consciousness that characterises this dissertation, it is necessary to approach it with the specific interpretive framework known as "hyper-history". This term refers to the transformation in the course of history of the relationship between the evolution of information technologies and social progress. While the conventional wisdom holds that the dawn of history coincided with the advent of writing, which facilitated the preservation of knowledge for future reference, hyper-history signifies a paradigm shift wherein information is not merely stored and disseminated, but also subject to automated manipulation through digital technologies. The digital revolution, therefore, cannot be considered a spurious expansion of the communication revolution that began with Gutenberg because, thanks to the computational and interactive power of the new ICTs, we have witnessed the birth of a new virtual space. This immaterial environment, which has proved capable of having disruptive effects on material reality, is thus the spatial dimension of the hyper-historical temporal one. Concepts such as these are pivotal in comprehending the contextual underpinnings that facilitate the emergence of phenomena such as hacktivism and digital political movements, including the 5-Star Movement.

The rapid and yet unabated spread of the Internet has engendered a growing interdependence between the welfare of societies and ICTs, in an interdependent relationship that appears to redefine the core concepts of traditional political science. The infosphere, a term initially used in the context of earlier Information Revolutions, is now hacked to denote the socio-technological environment in which information is produced, exchanged and consumed. This environment has effectively become a space where individuals, otherwise separated geographically, can engage and interact with one another. In the context of political order, spatial proximity has historically served as its foundational principle, followed by the significant influence of institutions and organisations on communication, dissemination of ideas, and behavioural patterns. However, the evolution of ICTs has rendered such

physical spaces less relevant, prompting the hypothesis that the contemporary locus of power is situated within the intricate networks of virtual connections.

In the digital era, the governance of the infosphere has become a domain that extends beyond the purview of human control and, a fortiori, of traditional institutional frameworks. This shift signifies the emergence of a new arena in which the principle of co-evolution finds its *raison d'être.* However, the infosphere has also been transformed into a competitive field among various actors, including governments, political parties, international organisations, corporations, and digital activists. Understanding how these actors interact in virtual space becomes, therefore, crucial to understanding how the intersection of technology and politics has redefined the very essence of democratic participation in the digital age. The historical-progressive analysis of these elements is developed in three parts.

The first part of this dissertation is concerned with reconstructing the history of hacktivism, a complex socio-cultural phenomenon that, in essence, has transferred the politics of non-violent social movements into virtual contexts. This section proposes, firstly, a taxonomy that distinguishes hacktivism according to its objectives, the means used, and the configuration of the movements, taking into account the historical context in which they develop. In this perspective, hacktivism emerges as a manifestation of the transformation of subversive political action from below in hyper-history. While social movements were traditionally structured around physical squares, today, contestation also takes place in cyberspace through practices ranging from the disclosure of confidential information to the creation of alternative communication platforms, from the programming of software to circumvent censoring regimes to symbolic defacements for the purpose of denunciation. Consequently, the virtual space is transformed into a site of political engagement, where individuals and groups occupy or deform this space to express their dissent and disseminate their reasons to a global audience.

The subsequent analysis delves into the origins of hacker culture, tracing its roots back to MIT in the 1960s and the transition from a recreational and academic pursuit to a phenomenon of political contestation. The text traces the evolution of hacktivism through the lens of hacker ethics, founded on the principles of transparency, decentralisation of power, free circulation of information and

indiscriminate cooperation. It is crucial at this point to emphasise that the development of ICTs would not have had the democratic direction it actually had if those who designed the technologies had not experienced a social climate of collaboration and sharing, strongly fuelled by the most utopian areas of social and political movements. Consequently, the initial section of the dissertation is dedicated to the role of digital networks in the formation of virtual communities and the emergence of the concept of the "democratisation of information" as a foundational ethical principle of contemporary hacktivism.

This chapter subsequently focuses on analysing the first openly hacktivist collectives, starting in the early 1990s. The narrative culminates in the analysis of Anonymous and WikiLeaks as paradigmatic expressions of contemporary hacktivism, emphasising the tensions between radical transparency and national security.

Finally, the transition of hacktivism from a "pedagogical" movement, understood as an amplification of the demands of under-represented peoples or causes under the traditional media, to an actual strategy of digital resistance, with implications for contemporary democracy, is highlighted. Indeed, hacktivism, operating in a legal grey area, on a global scale and from the outside the institutional systema, enters into tension with existing regulations and traditional governance structures, once again redefining the boundaries between citizenship and human rights.

The second part of this dissertation focuses on the history of the 5-Star Movement, a party-platform officially founded in 2009 in Italy. This chapter commences with an in-depth historical-contextual analysis of the Movement's roots, beginning with an account of Beppe Grillo's media activism and his extensive use of the blog tool, progressing to street mobilisation and concluding with parliamentary representation. The subsequent exploration of the organisational structure of the M5S reveals a dichotomy between its ideal of a horizontal movement, developed by superimposing itself on the network's reticular structure and thus enabling it to connect and coordinate multiple nodes spread across the Italian territory, and the hierarchical dynamics of party centralisation that have characterised its institutionalisation. A particular emphasis is placed on utilising the Rousseau platform, a multifaceted endeavour in digital democracy, which has been instrumental in fostering internal control within the party. Initially adopted as a blog in 2005, the platform subsequently

evolved into the Rousseau operating system from 2015 to 2021, thereby establishing the fundamental framework for the M5S's organisational structure and rhetorical strategy. Despite its inability to be regarded as a direct expression of hacktivism, it does exhibit certain fundamental instances in common with such a category. This section thus proceeds to analyse the techno-utopian vision of democracy espoused by the movement's two founders, according to which political participation will be digitally mediated and disintermediated by parliamentary representation. Rooted in the rhetoric of direct democracy and collective decision-making, the M5S has championed the Internet as an instrument of unimaginable democratic renewal. The utilisation of online platforms to facilitate citizen participation, circumvent traditional media and challenge political elites, has been instrumental in embodying a vision of democracy in which digital connectivity serves as a catalyst for horizontal governance from below. However, the contradictions inherent in the evolution of M5S, from its inception as an online protest movement to its institutionalisation, reveal the tensions between its digital idealism and realpolitik.

The dissertation concludes with a third part that critically compares hacktivism and the 5-Star Movement. This section involves a comparative historical analysis of the two case studies in the context of the transformation of politics in the digital age. The analysis employs the hyper-history concept to examine how information technologies have redefined the dynamics of power, participation and citizenship. A pivotal theme that emerges is the transition from conventional citizenship to the concept of the "netizen", signifying the individual who engages in political activities within a digital public sphere. Two distinct responses to this evolution can be identified: the first is characterised by a techno-libertarian vision, promoting decentralisation of power, radical transparency and resistance to mass surveillance (hacktivism); the second one is embedded in a techno-utopian perspective, perceiving digital platforms as the automatic embodiment of an inclusive direct democracy (M5S). A comparative analysis between these two entities reveals both convergences and profound divergences. While hacktivism is often configured as an antagonistic practice, aimed at disrupting information monopolies and challenging constituted power, the 5-Star Movement has attempted to institutionalise the use of the web as a tool of direct democracy, with ambiguous and often contradictory results.

In conclusion, it is necessary to deeply reflect on hyper-history and its political ramifications to comprehend the transformations of democracy in the digital age. This discussion is crucial for anticipating the potential risks and fully embracing this evolution's benefits. Hacktivism and the 5-Star Movement serve as two notable manifestations of this transformative shift. Both phenomena underscore the paradigm shift in the locus of power, which no longer resides exclusively within the conventional domains of traditional politics. Instead, power is increasingly exercised through the intricate web of information and the participatory opportunities it engenders. In this context, the primary challenge confronting these two examples is to ensure that technological innovation does not facilitates new forms of control and inequality but instead leads to a genuine expansion of democratic opportunities for all citizens.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a comparative-history methodological approach to study the phenomena of hacktivism and the 5 Star Movement (M5S), exploring their role in the transformation of democratic dynamics in the digital age. More specifically, the research conducted in this thesis falls within the approach of comparative history as a macro-causal analysis, following the model outlined by Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers.[1] The central objective is to understand the impact of information and communication technologies on the evolution of democracy, through the two selected emblematic case studies. This methodological approach was chosen for its ability to identify causal relationships between macro-social structures and historical processes, thus allowing us to highlight the dynamics of political transformation in the digital era. The methodology adopted enables exploration of the influence of ICTs evolution on mobilisation, contestation and participation practices, facilitated by a structured comparison between the two selected phenomena.

From a logical standpoint, the predominant analytical design is the one proposed by John Stuart Mill, known as the "method of difference"[2]. This approach is utilised to examine the variables that influence the contrasting outcomes of hacktivism and M5S. On the one hand, the network functions as a medium for protest and decentralised political action, while on the other, it serves as a platform for organisation and governance. The relevance of the comparison between these two case studies is also confirmed by the centrality of technology in their evolution and their innovative contribution to the broad debate on the possibility of establishing an effective digital democracy and on the security and democratic nature of governance in the information age. These issues are equally relevant to sociological studies, comparative policy research and the field of international relations.

Furthermore, this type of comparative research is of particular pertinence within the historical sphere. It is conducted through a synchronic and diachronic comparison; the former enabled the examination

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[1] Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers, "The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, no. 2 (April 1980): 174–97. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0010417500009282.

[2] Skocpol and Somers, "The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry," 183.

of the structural and ideological differences between the two cases at a precise moment in history (the first decade and the beginning of the second one of the 2000s), while the latter reconstructed their evolution over time, identifying any points of contact or divergence.

The selection of sources was meticulously conducted through comprehensive research in virtual archives, encompassing primary sources such as manifestos, blog posts, digital platforms, and written memoirs from hacktivists and M5S exponents. This approach was complemented by the integration of secondary sources, facilitating a multifaceted analysis that not only reconstructs the historical evolution of the two movements but also enables a critical examination of prevailing theories on digital democracy. A particular focus of the study is the comparison between hacktivism and M5S, which allows for the testing of three interpretative hypotheses: the hypothesis that ICTs have an intrinsically democratising effect (M5S); the hypothesis that ICTs are instruments of control and manipulation (hacktivism); and the hypothesis of technological neutrality, the validity of which is questioned in light of the socio-political specificities of the two cases analysed. The methodological approach adopted thus proves essential for understanding not only the role of ICTs in political participation, but also the structural limits and contradictions emerging in their use by distinct political actors.

Ultimately, the comparative-historical approach was found to be essential in comprehending the interplay between the democratisation of information and digital governance. Through a comparative analysis of hacktivism and M5S, the research underscored the duality of technology as a catalyst for emancipation and surveillance, contingent on its application. The methodology adopted facilitated the reconstruction of the trajectories of these phenomena, encompassing both their theoretical underpinnings and their concrete practices. This approach enabled a clear distinction to be made between an ideological and utopian level and a realistic and pragmatic one.

This comparative analysis thus provides a useful key for assessing the future of political participation in the digital era, questioning how technological platforms can foster effective democratisation or, on the contrary, reinforce unprecedented forms of social inequality.

Part One: Unravelling the History of Hacktivism

1.1 A Taxonomy of Hacktivism by its goals, not by its -ism

> *Who controls the past controls the future.*
> *Who controls the present controls the past.*
> - *George Orwell, 1984*

The term "hacktivism" is often, and simplistically, defined as the crasis between "hacking" and "political activism". Some readers, with a more romantic disposition, may be inclined to conceptualise it as a symposium between these two worlds. Others, however, will prefer to visualise hacker activism as the two leading scholars of the doctrine, Jordan and Taylor, have defined it, as a specific social and cultural phenomenon in which the politics of popular direct action has been transferred to virtual contexts[3]: in other words, an overflow of political *pathos* even in the most codified souls. Instead, another more analytical reader might argue that the essence of political activism is in fact already contained in the very definition of the verb hacking, namely the "reappropriation of an object or system for a purpose other than the one originally intended".[4] Whether it is the reappropriation of bodies, communal spaces, information or free will, mobilisation often occurs in the aftermath of a perceived undue expropriation of one's freedoms, whose original purpose was to give meaning to the lives of citizens.

I have long sought a concise operational definition that would most effectively encompass the essential characteristics of the diverse hacktivist culture. While the definition proposed by Karagiannopoulos is necessary, it is not sufficient; he defines hacktivism as "the use of computer and network access and reconfiguration techniques that transgress or challenge cybercrime laws in order to produce or facilitate symbolic effects that confer a political message".[5] Nevertheless, it is evident

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[3] Tim Jordan and Paul Taylor, *Hacktivism and Cyberwars*, (Routledge, 2004), 2.

[4] Andrzej Zarzycki, "Mods, Hacks, Makers: Crowdsourced Culture and Environment," *KAIST Research Series*, (January 1, 2018): 74. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-8189-7_6.

[5] Vasileios Karagiannopoulos, "A Short History of Hacktivism: Its Past and Present and What Can We Learn from It," *Rethinking Cybercrime*, (November 14, 2020): 63-86. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-55841-3_4.

from the outset that this operational definition puts overemphasis on legal transgressions, ignoring or overlooking the two-core features of hacktivism, namely the nature of political protest from below and the ethics of hackers.

Regarding the first constituent element of hacktivism, the world of political contestations has not only occupied squares and streets, but also an extensive portion of academic publications in the socio-political field. However, when this phenomenon is translated into the context of networked hyper-uranium, the quantity of research produced is significantly reduced. It has been widely observed how academic scholars tend to intermittently engage with the phenomenon of cyber activism, as though it were a secondary concern. This "sobbing" approach to intellectual ferment, inevitably leads to a cascade of widespread misinformation, prejudice, ontological poverty and as just experienced, unsatisfactory operational definitions.

Taking into consideration the ethical element instead, it is important to specify that the use of digital communication networks by hackers is not merely a technical or functional matter. Rather, it is a deliberate and strategic choice to use computers in unexpected, innovative, and above all, subversive ways, with the ultimate aim of opposing to what is perceived as a constraint on individual freedoms. The motivations behind these actions are diverse, including advancing a particular political agenda, combating censorship, government surveillance, or corporate malfeasance, highlighting human rights violations, revenge, ideology, protest, and the desire to embarrass governments and organisations. However, these objectives are pursued using the hacker methodology. The phenomenon of hacktivism employs at least nine forms of typical hacker's electronic mischiefs, dismissed by Karagiannopoulos's definition as mere "reconfiguration techniques", including site defacements, site redirects, denial-of-service attacks, information theft, information theft and distribution, site parodies, virtual sabotage and software development.[6]

Each of these requires not only expertise in handling disruptive cyberspace skills, but also presupposes a certain degree of amusement in the action of breaking in and causing mayhem within a computer system that is commonly perceived to be secure.

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[6] Alexandra Samuel, "Hacktivism and the Future of Political Participation," (PhD diss., Harvard University Cambridge, 2004): 16. https://www.alexandrasamuel.com/dissertation/pdfs/Samuel-Hacktivism-frontmatter.pdf.

I tend to approach with considerable skepticism the digital "outsiders" who discuss and transcribe about cyber-world governance without fully exploring the pre-existing ecosystem of their national flag. By failing to acknowledge the phenomenon of hacktivism, colleagues, superiors and future generations are deprived of a unique opportunity to gain insight into the nuances of contemporary society. In order to provide an overview of the distinctive characteristics of the movement under discussion, I have decided to synthetise my own comprehensive operational definition, matching together the various insights from the literature review and fully embracing the hacker philosophy of "Do-It-Yourself":

> Hacktivism represents a form of grassroots political action carried out in cyberspace; it involves the ethical use of hacker techniques, which often operate in legally ambiguous spaces, to pursue objectives detached from personal economic interests and aimed at fostering social and political change.

By clearly defining hacktivism as a distinct form of autonomous political action from below, it becomes possible to address widespread misconceptions, such as those that reduce political hacker groups to criminal nerds or the alarmist ones that lump them together as cyber-terrorists.

In fact, hacktivists have nothing in common with these categories, neither in terms of goals nor means, let alone ethics. Indeed, cyberterrorists seek to inflict physical violence and material damage by attacking strategic infrastructure, such as power grids, communications systems or financial institutions, with the aim of destabilising civil society, spreading chaos and fear, and extracting coercive political concessions. Cyber-criminals, on the other hand, are driven by personal profit or the intent to harm individuals or organisations through vandalism for its own sake.[7]

Hacktivism, instead, adopts non-violent ideological principles and uses symbolic actions to promote freedom in cyberspace and stimulate public debate; however, it has no intention of self-restraint in virtual space, but, on the contrary, aspires to shape the material reality of things through its intangible disobedient actions. This time, the invisible hand, has come for the general political equilibrium.

Hacktivism reached its full potential in the early 2000s, establishing itself as the first far-reaching social and political movement of the new millennium[8].

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[7] Tim Owen, "CyberTerrorism: Some Insights from Owen's Genetic-Social Framework," *Rethinking Cybercrime*, (November 14, 2020): 3–22, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-55841-3_1.

[8] Jordan and Taylor, *Hacktivism and Cyberwars*.

The hacktivist groups that populate the common virtual space today are the progeny of a genealogical lineage, inextricably linked to technological progress. The forebears of this dynasty can be found within the subcultures that populate the diverse universe of hacktivism. These include the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s in the West, the cyberculture of the 1980s and 1990s, and the hacker culture. It would be a reductionist, and inaccurate, approach to perceive hacktivism as a spurious sum of the aforementioned three currents. Conceiving it, otherwise, as the continuation of the counterculture with other means (i.e. hackers' ones) in a communal and open cyberspace, makes the general image sharper to the neophytes of the subject.

Moreover, the radical transformation of cyberspace into a hub for interaction and power dynamics laid the foundation for what Castells later defined as the "Network Society"[9], where information becomes both a resource and a form of social organization. The large-scale diffusion of the World Wide Web marked a pivotal moment in history, as it facilitated the coexistence and confrontation of disparate entities, including people, resources, sources, money, means, ideas, power, freedom, and resistance, within a potentially limitless, yet precisely delineated, space. Attempting to impose order on a context that is inherently refractory to such a process, would be highly counterproductive. Therefore, the remaining task is to tune in to the disorder, navigating the three main contextual directions that converge in the identity construction of hacktivists, and engaging with this new *zeitgeist*. As will be evident to the reader, such a progressive historical-contextual approach, thickens the plot; but, trust the process, it explains the warp.

1.2 *Hacker Ex Machina*: the Birth of Hacker Culture

> *At that moment I, being a Christian, felt that*
> *I could come close to the kind of satisfaction*
> *that God might have felt when he created the world*
> *-Tom Pittman, The True Computerist.*

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[9] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd ed. (2011; repr., Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

The cradle of the hacker culture was the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston, U.S.A. But it is the year in which the term hacker was coined, to give a specific connotation to a limited category of assiduous visitors to some of its laboratories, that should be the source of amazement: 1959. The term hacker derives from a word that was common in the community jargon of MIT students; the word "hacks", translated in context, referred to the highly elaborate pranks with which a particularly ingenious section of the student body dabbled.[10]

Later, the term "hacker" came to mean someone who practised "freewheeling intellectual exploration of the highest and deepest potential of computer systems, or the decision to make access to information as free and open as possible".[11] This definition suggests the existence of a genuine conviction that the concept of freedom and beauty can be embodied within the digital realm. The notion that the aesthetic form of an optimal program can facilitate the liberation of the mind and spirit was, from the beginning, a compelling one.

Those who proudly identified themselves as hackers could be readily located within the university's Building 26, particularly in the Research Laboratory for Electronics (RLE).[12]

In this room, in fact, was stationed the forerunner of today's computers and the source of inspiration for HAL 9000[13], namely the IBM 704, better known as "The Hulking Giant". Despite its status as the only computer capable of performing complex mathematical calculations, the scientific community at MIT was reluctant at that time to embrace the prospect of an intelligent computer, viewing it as a utopian concept that existed only in media narratives.[14]

Indeed, at the dawn of the 1960s, it was unclear to the general public what computers would be used for. However, the media speculated about a range of possibilities, from the most implausible to the most horrifying. Computers were often portrayed as strange, complex, and expensive contraptions that would always be monopolised by a small oligarchic elite of experts. Even among the MIT's rows of desks, many students held the view that, in the distant future, computers would become

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[10] DEFCONConference, "DEF CON 19 - Steven Levy - We Owe It All to the Hackers," *YouTube*, (November 1, 2013). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=css3iTeAm_8.

[11] Steven Levy, *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution*, (1996; repr., Perlego, 1996): chaps. 1–2. https://www.perlego.com/book/1730049.

[12] Levy, *Hackers*, 2.

[13] Aisha Harris, "Is HAL from 2001: A Space Odyssey Really IBM?," *Slate Magazine*, January 7, 2013. https://slate.com/culture/2013/01/hal-9000-ibm-theory-stanley-kubrick-letters-shed-new-light-on-old-debate.html.

[14] Levy, *Hackers*, 26.

increasingly instrumental in facilitating interactions between humans and machines.[15] Nevertheless, the degree of interactivity that we have now become accustomed to in our engagement with electronic devices was beyond the realm of possibility for the majority of those few who had already had the privilege of touching one at the time.

However, as it is often the case, this cultural climate characterised by pessimism and mistrust of progress, gave rise to a genuine impetus for individuals to convene who, in contrast, fostered a profound curiosity or assurance in its potential. In the minority current of visionaries, the incurable optimists of Professors John McCarthy and Marvin Minsky, met with a student group of incorrigible onlookers who were members of the Tech Model Railroad Club (TMRC), in the Signal and Power (S&P) subcommittee.[16]

The former are commonly regarded as the fathers of Artificial Intelligence (AI). In fact, McCarthy and Minsky, already colleagues at Princeton, convened a group of approximately a dozen scientists at Dartmouth College (New Hampshire) in 1956 with the "not-so-ambitious" objective of developing a real AI (a term coined by McCarthy on that occasion)[17]. The latter group, on the other hand, comprised the younger talents who were the first to adopt the designation of "hackers". They were the individuals who possessed the expertise to navigate the complex network of wires and relays that powered the TMRC trains[18]. As their interest shifted from model railways to programming, their abilities reached an exceptional level, becoming the most promising students of the two professors.

In 1959, while McCarthy and Minsky were attempting to engage The Hulking Giant in a chess match, Peter R. Samson, a student member of the S&P, initiated the first hacker incursion into the IBM 704.[19] This event marked the beginning of a series of events that would irrevocably alter the course of history. One of the primary goals of the TMRC was, from the outset, to gain access to the MIT computers by any means necessary. Samson, Kotok and Saunders, who were among the earliest hackers, were particularly intolerant of the MIT computer labs' primary rule: "No one should touch

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[15] Levy, *Hackers*, 26.
[16] Levy, *Hackers*, 27.
[17] John McCarthy, Marvin Minsky, Nathaniel Rochester, and Claude Shannon, "A Proposal for the Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence," *www-formal.stanford.edu*, August 1955. https://www-formal.stanford.edu/jmc/history/dartmouth/dartmouth.html.
[18] Levy, *Hackers*, chap. 1.
[19] Levy, *Hackers*, chap. 1.

or tamper with the machine itself"[20]. The rationale behind this constraint was to prevent the costly machines from being damaged or destroyed, as this would have caused significant financial and reputational harm to the university and its insurers.

However, their impatience with the *status quo* was mirrored by the two AI pioneers, who perceived the sharing of knowledge and time as the cornerstones of the realisation of their project. They were cognizant that the interactivity with computers, so ardently desired by the two, would remain unattainable without a co-operative student engagement.

Minsky "knew that to do what he wanted, he would need programming geniuses as his soldiers, so he encouraged hacking in every possible way"[21]. Consequently, he and his colleague McCarthy established the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, purchased additional computers (besides the TX-0, they arranged for the acquisition of a PDP-1), and opened their doors to anyone interested in contributing to the Computer Sciences' future.[22]

"Minsky decided that what he wanted to do was encourage very smart people to play, and he bought a lot of toys and opened it up and everybody who wanted to play could come play with his toys. The people who liked toys, especially toys which were very complicated and full of controllable parts showed up, and those were the same people from the Tech Model Railroad Club"[23].

The AI laboratory was comprised of two distinct categories of participants: the planners, who were graduate researchers responsible for the theoretical aspects of the project, and the hackers, who were TMRC undergraduate students.[24] The cultural clashes between these two groups were particularly pronounced. The contrast was such that it created a game of *chiaroscuro* in which the hacker identity culture stood out, to the extent that it was recognisable to itself. Indeed, AI theorists looked askance at that group of passionate kids, without sharing their obsession with programming and not comprehending the goliardic aspect of it.[25]

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[20] Levy, *Hackers*, 18.
[21] Levy, *Hackers*, 18.
[22] Stefanie Chiou, Craig Music, Kara Sprague, and Rebekah Wahba, "A Marriage of Convenience: The Founding of the MIT Artificial Intelligence Laboratory," *Docslib*, 2014. https://docslib.org/doc/11612185/a-marriage-of-convenience-the-founding-of-the-mit-artificial-intelligence-laboratory.
[23] Interview with Gerald Sussman in Chiou et al., "A Marriage of Convenience."
[24] Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, (2010; repr., University of Chicago Press, 2010). https://www.perlego.com/book/1850905.
[25] Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, chap. 4.

One might discern, also, a form of envy of the former towards the latter; from the theoretically inexplicable programming of a 14-year-old boy, to making the computer perform Bach's music, passing through that chess game that Richard Greenblatt, a freshman, programmed to defeat some human opponents, the hackers were distinguishing themselves as the real pioneers of the cyber-world.[26]

As Tom Knight, a hacker visitor of the building 26 in 1965, stated "there was a set of people who viewed computers as tools, not as an elegant jewel which needed to be polished and improved"[27].

The hackers were united not only by a shared interest in "jewellery", but also by a strong anti-authoritarian foundation. This became a defining aspect of their identity, influencing subsequent generations. Rather than a company of "superhumans" capable of envisioning and overcoming computational frontiers, they constituted a "super-community".[28].

In the 1960s, the concept of allowing multiple users to access a single computer simultaneously to share resources was first introduced by hackers. This technology, known as "time-sharing"[29], enabled users of telematic communities to exchange materials and communicate with each other in real time. The precursor to e-mail, was developed with the specific purpose of facilitating peer-to-peer information exchanges between students. The research conducted by the MIT hackers at that time was instrumental in the advancement of this technology, which laid the foundations for the virtual community model.[30] This technical advancement not only revolutionized computing but also laid the groundwork for a collective ethos among hackers, emphasizing the free exchange of information as a core value.

Furthermore, the MIT hacker group was in direct antagonism to the concept of property rights. The TMRC was also known among the campus as The Midnight Requisitioning Committee, a group that conducted nighttime raids on the warehouse with the objective of stealing components necessary for the construction of more efficient machines.[31] This gave rise to a primordial form of hacking, namely the lock hacking, which involves the duplication of keys to gain access to the chambers of knowledge

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[26] Chiou et al., "A Marriage of Convenience."

[27] Interview with Tom Knight in Chiou et al., "A Marriage of Convenience."

[28] Giulio Blasi, *Internet: Storia e futuro di un nuovo medium* (Milan: Guerini Studio, 1999): 41.

[29] John McCarthy, "Reminiscences on the History of Time Sharing," *www-formal.stanford.edu*, (1983). http://www-formal.stanford.edu/jmc/history/timesharing/timesharing.html.

[30] Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, chap. 4.

[31] Pete Samson, "TMRC Dictionary," *Mit.edu*, 1959. https://tmrc.mit.edu/old/dictionary.html.

or to utilise the tools contained in them.[32] Nevertheless, it was through such illicit actions that new technologies could be developed at MIT, which would otherwise have been stifled by the bureaucracy. These new technologies would go on to shape the field of computer science as we know it today. In the mid-1960s, a group of hackers at the MIT formed the Midnight Computer Wiring Society (MCWS) with the intention of enhancing the performance of the PDP-1 through overnight modifications. In 1963, S. Nelson devised a program for the PDP-1 that generated an acoustic tone at a frequency compatible with telephone lines (in the U.S.A. 2600 Hertz, in Italy 2040/2400 Hz), thereby facilitating their use without charge.[33] In the latter half of the 1960s, the PDP-1 was systematically employed in blue-box mode to gain unauthorized access to telephone lines using toll-free numbers (800-...).[34]

This was an early example of what would become a philosophy of proletarian expropriation of communication technologies, which would gain traction in the underground scene of the 1970s and be known as phone-phreaking. This term, and practice, comprises three pivotal elements: "phone", "freak" and "hacking".[35] It can be viewed as an ancestor of the concept of "hacktivism" when we consider that during the 1960s and 1970s, the freaks represented a countercultural movement with their own interpretation of activism and individual freedoms.[36] In instances where the state did not provide the requisite subsidy to guarantee the most basic rights of citizens, such as in this specific case, the right to communicate, the contingent of phreakers proposed the utilisation of novel electronic technologies with the objective of reducing the costs associated with exorbitant telephone bills. This practice spread at an astonishing rate, attracting not only those involved in underground activities or activism but also students and individuals with limited financial resources. Two notable

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[32] Samson, "TMRC Dictionary."

[33] Luca Carettoni and David Laniado, *Etica Hacker: L'imperativo è Hands-On*, (September 3, 2005). https://www.dvara.net/hk/hackdoc.pdf.

[34] Ramparts magazine, "How to Build a 'Phone Phreak' Box!," *Phone Losers of America*, (October 14, 2012). https://web.archive.org/web/20180412094307/http://www.phonelosers.org/2012/10/2309/.

[35] Arturo Di Corinto And Tommaso Tozzi, *Hacktivism: La Liberta' Nelle Maglie Della Rete*, (2002). Https://Www.Dvara.Net/Hk/Hacktivism.Pdf.

[36] Bruce Sterling, *The Hacker Crackdown*, (2020; repr., Open Road Media, 2020). https://www.perlego.com/book/2449752.

examples are Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs, the founders of Apple Computer, who were among the early adopters of this technology.[37]

Consequently, hacker culture develops around principles and a vision of the digital realm that is widely shared by its devotees, and which immediately conveys the value range of the entire subculture. Thus, a hacker ethic was born, identified by journalist Steven Levy, which was destined to shape the specificity of the hacker collective:

"1. Access to computers — and anything which might teach you something about the way the world works — should be unlimited and total. Always yield to the Hands-On Imperative!

2. All information should be free

3. Mistrust Authority —Promote Decentralization

4. Hackers should be judged by their hacking, not bogus criteria such as degrees, age, race, or position

5. You can create art and beauty on a computer

6. Computers can change your life for the better."[38]

The underlying message is unambiguous: computers would facilitate the emancipation of humanity from the constraints of sovereign power. Hackers, therefore, became the material creators, and guarantors, of a new state of nature, in which there was nothing to fear, and everything to build. The beauty of hacking, both Taoist and inner, lies in a bold blend of idealism and cerebrality; it is therefore unsurprising that hackers used to describe themselves as a kind of *intelligencija*, a "computer aristocracy".[39]

These ethical principles gave rise to a worldview that was intrinsic to hacker culture and considered to be inherently political. It can be argued that, although hacking may appear to be a relatively aseptic activity, it inevitably evokes anarchic aspects due to the nature of knowledge in society. The act of obtaining and disseminating information, which is a fundamental element of hacking, can be seen as an act of rebellion, given that the knowledge they seek to gain and share is often inaccessible for a

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[37] Esquire Editors, "How Phone Phreaking Put Steve Jobs and Woz on the Road to Apple," *Esquire*, October 15, 2015. https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a38878/steve-jobs-steve-wozniak-blue-box-phone-phreaking/.
[38] Levy, *Hackers*, chap. 2.
[39] Levy, *Hackers*, 185

plenty of reasons, including technological and physical barriers, as well as bureaucratic and legal restrictions.[40]

It is crucial to highlight that the ethical principles underpinning the TMRC group were not merely conceptualised in a theoretical context; rather, they were directly embedded within the very codes that gave rise to the inaugural telematic networks. The evolution of these guidelines was subsequently documented, delineating the *forma mentis* and foundational ideology that unified the pioneering generations of hacking-makers. These principles were encapsulated within the Linux and Internet's software, exemplifying the symbiotic relationship, between technology and ethics, and the intimate one, between hackers and machines. The absolute freedom of information circulation is, therefore, the fundamental ethical principle upon which the other corollary ethical principles are based on. Indeed, where the relationship of cooperation is unrestricted and enables mutual growth, digital interactivity allows co-evolution. Conversely, where this is not the case, interaction turns into conflict.

1.3 From the Net to the Network Society: the Dawn of a New Digital Age

The whole problem in life is therefore this:
how to break one's loneliness,
how to communicate with others
-Cesare Pavese, Il Mestiere di Vivere: Diario

In 1969, the first transcontinental high-speed computer network, ARPAnet, was established. Funded by the Pentagon's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), it enabled a connection between hundreds of universities and research laboratories.[41] Himanen states that the rationale behind ARPAnet was often perceived to be the construction of a network capable of withstanding a nuclear

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[40] Gabriella Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy* (2014; repr., Verso, 2014). https://www.perlego.com/book/731367.

[41] Barry M. Leiner et al., "A Brief History of the Internet," *ACM SIGCOMM Computer Communication Review* 39, no. 5 (October 7, 2009): 22–31. https://doi.org/10.1145/1629607.1629613.

attack.[42] In their essay, "A Brief History of the Internet", the pioneers of the Internet's development (V. Cerf, B. Kahn and others) refuted this belief, calling it a "false rumor".[43] The true origins of the Internet were more pragmatic in nature. The director of the project, L. Roberts, an academic who had previously been at MIT before moving to ARPA, devised a network as a means of improving cooperation between computer scientists. With the introduction of the ARPAnet, researchers from the various centres in the United States began to share a sense of belonging to an in-group, even though their geographic distance or background differences.[44]

The spirit of the inaugural hacker fellowships was consequently strongly community-oriented, founded on the aspiration for collaboration in pursuit of development and the desire to disseminate resources and results among the wide society. These virtual communities began to continuously broadcast their discoveries, driven by a sense of belonging to a shared culture.

In logical continuity with this need for networking, one of the first electronic mail systems was introduced in the early 1970s[45]. It was R. Tomlinson who chose the-@-symbol, which we still use in e-mail addresses nowadays.[46]. In October 1972, the ARPAnet prototype was officially presented at the International Conference on Computer Communications (ICCC) in Washington. Among the more whimsical applications was the remote dialogue of two computers simulating a session with one computer acting as a psychoanalyst, utilising the Eliza software, and another reproducing the discursive style of a paranoid subject (Parry). For instance, the only application that interested the Arpanet researchers was, indeed, the use of e-mail.[47] The first documented use of the term "Internet" dates back to this event. [48]

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[42] Pekka Himanen, *The Hacker Ethic* (2001): chap. 5.
https://books.google.it/books?id=sxYWgpINPA0C&pg=PT100&hl=it&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=2#v=onepage&q=nuclear&f=false..

[43] Himanen, *The Hacker Ethic*, chap. 5.

[44] Lawrence G. Roberts, "Multiple Computer Networks and Intercomputer Communication," *Proceedings of the ACM Symposium on Operating System Principles* (SOSP '67), 1967. https://doi.org/10.1145/800001.811680.

[45] Himanen, *The Hacker Ethic*, 136

[46] Himanen, *The Hacker Ethic*, 136.

[47] Blasi, *Internet: Storia e futuro di un nuovo medium,* 29.

[48] "ICCC Demonstration 1971-1972," *History of Computer Communications* n.d. https://historyofcomputercommunications.info/section/6.12/iccc-demonstration-1971-1972/.

For the same ideal of knowledge-sharing, in 1971, M. Hart, professor of electronic text at Benedictine College in Illinois, had the idea for the Gutenberg Academic Project. Like a library of Babel, it offered a wealth of books that could be accessed on the Net free of charge and copyright[49].

In 1971, R. Stallman, described by Levy as "the last real hacker"[50], entered in the laboratories of MIT. He was the one who, in 1983, launched the "GNU project"[51], around which the efforts of those who believed in the utopia of free software and its collective realisation, would converge. The birth of GNU/Linux, the operating system most widely used by Internet providers, owes much to Stallman's GNU project, which made the 1980s hacker's dream of completely free and open-source software a reality. In fact, the latter formed the body of the operating system that, in the early 1990s, integrated with the kernel developed by Linus Torvalds, would become Linux and challenge Microsoft's monopoly on the distribution of the software needed to run computers.[52]

However, the most significant innovation brought about by the new "free software" was not technical, but social. Raymond's metaphor can be usefully employed here: the cooperative development of Linux has resulted in the emergence of a new sociological paradigm, that of the bazaar, which corresponds to the open model of the academy. [53]

Similarly, the large-scale dissemination of hypertext technology from 1993 onwards had a significant social impact. The publication of the technology behind the World Wide Web enabled its implementation by anyone, leading to the exponential growth in Internet use. This intangible non-place, as promised by some technophiles-visionaries, was believed to have enough capacity to contain the liberation of all Minds. What the onlookers of the dawn of the World Wide Web foresaw was a sunset of their contemporary civilisation. A new "continent" had just been discovered, and we would all be its natives.

> "…We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth.

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[49] Blasi, *Internet: Storia e futuro di un nuovo medium,* 117.
[50] Carettoni and Laniado, "Etica Hacker: L'imperativo è Hands-On."
[51] "The GNU Operating System and the Free Software Movement," *Gnu.org*, 2020 https://www.gnu.org/.
[52] Linus Torvalds, "LINUX's History," *Cmu.edu*, 2019. https://www.cs.cmu.edu/~awb/linux.history.html.
[53] Eric S. Raymond, "The Cathedral and the Bazaar," *First Monday* 3, no. 2 March 2, 1998. https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v3i2.578.

We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular,

without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.

Your legal concepts of property, expression, identity, movement, and context do not apply to us. They are

all based on matter, and there is no matter here.

Our identities have no bodies, so, unlike you, we cannot obtain order by physical coercion.

We believe that from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonwealth, our governance will

emerge. Our identities may be distributed across many of your jurisdictions. The only law that all our

constituent cultures would generally recognize is the Golden Rule. We hope we will be able to build our

particular solutions on that basis. But we cannot accept the solutions you are attempting to impose […]

We will create a civilization of the Mind in Cyberspace. May it be more humane and fairer than the

world your governments have made before"[54]

In this way, one of the lyricists of the renowned rock band, the Grateful Dead, in addition to being a co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation[55], John Perry Barlow, identified this novel virtual scenario, which can be understood with the notion of the universality without totality; indeed, any universalisation that purports to be comprehensive and self-contained, simultaneously engenders a sense of totality and exclusion. For the Internet case, whose only claim is the connection of people in a non-hierarchical order, those outside the network are not excluded, but disconnected. Consequentially, this is perceived as a deficiency not of the excluded, but of the network itself, conceived as a universal information device.[56] As Geoff Mulgan further elaborated, "networks are created not just to communicate, but also to gain position, to out-communicate".[57] The networked society is based on a logic of malleable subalternity, which does not adhere to a fixed distinction between inclusion and exclusion. Instead, the boundaries of this system shift over time, influenced by the evolution of network programs and the material conditions under which they are executed.[58]

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[54] John Perry Barlow, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace," *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, February 8, 1996. https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence.

[55] EFF, "About EFF," *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, July 10, 2007. https://www.eff.org/about.

[56] Pierre Lévy, *Cyberculture* (London: University Of Minnesota Press, 2001): 229–50. https://drive.google.com/file/d/0ByGOj9_gW1Y7QnFhVEhKVzZpUXc/view?resourcekey=0-wCXbiCtmOTKZx1hd-55lQQ.

[57] Geoff Mulgan, *Communication and Control : Networks and the New Economies of Communication* (New York: Guilford Press, 1991): 21. https://archive.org/details/communicationcon0000mulg/page/2/mode/2up.

[58] Manuel Castells, "Informationalism, Networks, and the Network Society: A Theoretical Blueprint," in *The Network Society: A Cross-cultural Perspective*, ed. Manuel Castells (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2004). https://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/2015/04/28/Informationalism%2C%20Networks%20and%20the%20Network%20Society.pdf.

Those who, over the past three decades, have inhabited or observed, in various forms and allocations, the evolution of that networked communitarian space, have not been unquestionably seduced by the "mythos of the electrical sublime"[59]. *Hacker Sapiens*, having honed the Internet themselves, as their own necessary tool for survival, have had a glimpse of the risks and intrusions associated with it. Indeed, even before the problem of the free circulation of information, there was that of the accessibility of the technologies themselves. The issue of the digital divide has always played a central role in the hacker dialectic. And the concern was justified. If only a privileged elite were able to reap the benefits of "mind amplification", then the Net would only risk exacerbating the inequalities of intellectual opportunity that already existed in the real social substrate. If, on the contrary, the Net had been used as an educational tool, as the first hacker communities had imagined, accessible to all minds, then the benefits to humanity as a whole, could have been immense.[60]

As a result, the promise of "Computer Power to the People!" [61] soon became an imperative.

To address these disparities and democratize access to computing power, fostering technological accessibility, initiatives like the Homebrew Computer Club (HCC) emerged.[62] It comprised engineers, researchers, and technicians unified by the aspiration of establishing computing as a ubiquitous practice and constructing a pioneering new computer prototype.

In 1976, Steve Wozniak, a 25-year-old hardware hacker of the HCC, developed the two inaugural personal computers designed for general use, the Macintosh I and II. These inventions, made possible by the collaborative spirit and sharing of knowledge within the Club, marked a crucial moment in hacker history.[63] It fulfilled the long-held aspiration of the hacker community to have a means of production that anyone could interface with, without physical or intellectual barriers between the user and the information.

This marked the end of the era of the Hulking Giant and the rise of the Personal Computers' one.

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[59] Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks*, (Yale University Press, 2008): 143. https://www.perlego.com/book/1089574.

[60] Howard Rheingold, *Mind Amplifier: Can Our Digital Tools Make Us Smarter?* (2012). https://rheingold.com/texts/Mind_Amplifier.pdf.

[61] Ted Nelson, *Computer Lib : Dream Machines* (Redmond, Wash.: Tempus Books Of Microsoft Press, 1987): 71, https://archive.org/details/computer-lib-dream-machines/page/n71/mode/2up?q=power.

[62] Stephen Wozniak, "Homebrew and How the Apple Came to Be," *Archive.org*, December 16, 2006. https://web.archive.org/web/20061216032239/http://atariarchives.org/deli/homebrew_and_how_the_apple.php.

[63] Wozniak, "Homebrew and How the Apple Came to Be."

In 1984, T. Leary, a prominent figure in the psychedelic movement of the '60s, published an article entitled "Personal Computers, Personal Freedom", in which he invoked the iconic slogan "Power to the People" to illustrate the potential for self-determination and autonomy afforded by the advent of personal technologies. Leary delineates the anthropological shift that ensues from transitioning from a print-based society to one that is telematically networked, thereby creating an access disparity amongst those who possess and those who lack the requisite technologies.[64] In order to maintain citizens connected among them, it was crucial, from his point of view, that the right to possess digital data processors, was enshrined as an inalienable fundamental right, alongside the constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech and press. [65]

The digital revolutions of the personal computers and the three Ws (word processing, web browsing, and wireless communication) brought about a profound transformation in 1990s society. These devices' development challenged traditional top-down, linear power dynamics and relations.[66]

As posited by L. Felsenstein, computers distributed to people "would spread the hacker ethos in society by giving people not only power over machines, but also over political oppressors" [67]. The global information networks had an interjurisdictional character that could have challenged even the most solid and well-established forms of national sovereignty. The effective development of the Internet's potential in decentralising power, empowering a growing number of actors and progressively expanding its use, gives it a major political charge in contemporary societies. The Internet is, thus, not only a medium of communication and commerce, but also a place where political power is created, shaped, diffused and, not least, contested. This is the Foucauldian vision, ontologically experienceable. In societies based on interactive networks, the source of power is also transformed. Information becomes the main building block and dominant resource of power, as well as currency of exchange. [68]

This marks the advent of the newly born information age, which is not so much to be identified with the widespread adoption of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) on a large scale, but

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[64]Timothy Leary, "Personal Computers/Personal Freedom," *Atariarchives.org*, 1984. https://www.atariarchives.org/deli/personal_freedom.php.

[65] Leary, "Personal Computers/Personal Freedom."

[66] Jordan and Taylor, *Hacktivism and Cyberwars*, chap. 1

[67] Levy, *Hackers*, 185.

[68] Vasileios Karagiannopoulos, *Living With Hacktivism*, (2018; repr., Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): chap.1. https://www.perlego.com/book/3483322.

rather with the systemic reorganization that these technologies induce at the social level. Instead of the "Information Society", the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells prefers to write in terms of the "Network Society", a social construction in which information is not merely a content of society, but, rather, it defines its very nature.[69] Multinational social actors deliberately engage with virtual communities by contributing resources and beliefs, with the expectation of receiving similar benefits. This synergy disrupts the centuries-old vicious cycle perpetuated by fear of the Other. The Network Society is, thus, developed around the *do ut des* of knowledge, based on the common belief in the power of connections.[70]

Nevertheless, despite the ideal of openness and free flow of information that characterised the advent of the Internet, efforts to harness the empowering potential of information technologies have concomitantly increased. This is due, in part, to the increasing commercialization and enormous spread of the digital medium, which has attracted the attention of companies, governments and international organisations interested in gaining economic advantage or power by influencing the creation, flow and management of information. In other words, "now capital has wings" [71]. Governments have become increasingly active in regulating information, both through extensive regulation and indirectly by conditioning digital companies that have significant control over information, such as Internet Service Providers (ISPs), content providers and software developers. However, in applying the law of equilibrium of levers to our complex machines, technology would be placed between power and resistance. In a form of artificial counterbalance, technology not only regulates online behaviour, but also enables forms of deregulation of externally imposed constraints that are incompatible with itself.

Thus, for every technological innovation designed to control and limit the production and distribution of information, tools emerge that are able to circumvent such restrictions, such as the TOR (The Onion Router) network.[72][73] The ongoing normative and counter-normative confrontation in Network Society

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[69] Castells, "Informationalism, Networks, and the Network Society."
[70] Castells, "Informationalism, Networks, and the Network Society."
[71] New York financier Robert A. Johnson quoted in Jordan and Taylor, *Hacktivism and Cyberwars*, 31.
[72] Karagiannopoulos, *Living With Hacktivism*, chap.1.
[73] **Tor** is a free overlay network for enabling anonymous communication. "We believe everyone should be able to explore the Internet with privacy. We are the Tor Project, a 501(c)(3) US nonprofit. We advance human rights and defend your privacy online through free software and open networks," quoted in *Tor Project*, https://www.torproject.org/

is reflective of Castells' observation that no power elite can unilaterally control the establishment of norms and goals for networks, without these being challenged.[74]

It can be reasonably argued that, as Terranova states, network culture is more like a perpetual battlefield than a neo-socialist utopia; this is because, in a competitive environment, there is a constant struggle for influence, as all parties seek to gain and retain power and control.[75]

In this context, hacktivism emerged as a natural manifestation of counter-vailing power, opposing perceived injustices, using a language in tune with information networks and adopting norms and values rooted in the very history of the medium.

1.4 *Enough is Too Much:*[76] the Rise of Hacktivism

> *Transgression is not immoral.*
> *Quite to the contrary, it reconciles the law with what it forbids;*
> *it is the dialectical game of good and evil*
> - *Jean Baudrillard, Symbolic Exchange and Death,*

Hacktivism, in its most general sense, can be defined as a set of social and communicative practices, values and lifestyles that are in open conflict with the values of dominant thought, namely individualism, profit, private property, authority, delegation and social passivity. While those who engage in hacking activities from a purely technical perspective remain constrained within the boundaries of computer code, hacktivists seek to synthesise the abstract and the concrete, combining their technical expertise with a specific political or social objective that is either coordinated in, or concerns, cyberspace. For hacktivists, cyberspace is not only an arena for civic engagement but also a contested space. [77]

The phenomenon of hacktivism, being strongly intertwined with contingent factors, has been subject to a natural evolution over the course of its history, the beginning of which can be traced back to the mid-1980s, even before the widespread diffusion of the Web. In the early days of hacktivism, the actions of its pioneers can be seen as a series of explicit assertions of digital rights. These actions

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[74] Castells, "Informationalism, Networks, and the Network Society," 51.
[75] Karagiannopoulos, *Living With Hacktivism*, chap.2.
[76] Cult of the Dead Cow's Motto
[77] Olivia Guntarik and Victoria Grieve-Williams, *From Sit-Ins to #revolutions*, 1st ed. (2020; repr., Bloomsbury Academic, 2020): 68. https://www.perlego.com/book/1310707.

were driven by the principles of hacker ethics and were designed to break down the superimposed boundaries of the electronic frontier. Consequently, prior to pursuing actions with the objective of effecting socio-political change, the initial hacktivists were primarily focused on facilitating the unhindered movement of information, ensuring access to data and computing resources, promoting the use of open-source software, and advocating for the absence of ownership within the shared digital domain.[78]

The practice of circumventing copyright and proprietary software, which counters the high costs associated with commercial hardware and software, can be traced back to the days of phone-phreaking, as previously mentioned. The underlying reasons of these practices were purely political in nature, focusing on issues such as equal opportunities, citizenship income, and the rights of the teleworker.[79] The German Computer Chaos Club, established in 1985 with the slogan "Information WANTS to be free," serves as a case in point here, representing the forerunners of digital-rights-activism.[80] Nonetheless, hacktivism, as the marriage between hackers and political activism, acquired its specificity with the emergence of three notable collectives: the Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), the Electronic Disturbance Theatre (EDT) and the Cult of the Dead Cow (CDc).

The former was established in 1987 in Tallahassee, Florida, by Hope and Steve Kurtz, Steve Barnes, Dorian Burr, Beverly Schlee, and described itself as a collective of artists dedicated to investigating the intersections between art, technology, radical political activism and critical theory.[81] Although, strictly speaking, not technically a hacktivist group, they exerted considerable influence on the evolution of the movement as a whole, particularly in two pivotal areas: the constructive critique of conventional political activism, which they perceived as flawed by the pursuit of a universal consensus within large, centralized, and bureaucratized activist organizations; and the conceptualization of Electronic Civil Disobedience (ECD).[82]

The ECD will be a prominent tactic for contemporary digital activism, as it combines an understanding of the decentralised nature of power with a tool capable of striking it at its nodal points.

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[78] Tom Sorell, "Human Rights and Hacktivism: The Cases of Wikileaks and Anonymous," *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 7, no. 3 September 22, 2015: 391–410. https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huv012.

[79] Di Corinto and Tozzi, *Hacktivism: La Libertà nelle Maglie della Rete*.

[80] Jordan and Taylor, *Hacktivism and Cyberwars*, 14.

[81] "Archive," Critical Art Ensemble, n.d., http://critical-art.net/.

[82] Critical Art Ensamble, *Electronic Civil Disobedience,* (1994). http://critical-art.net/books/ecd/ecd2.pdf.

The underlying theory is that power has now assumed a nomadic form, being a flow rather than a physical place; its "real seat" is therefore no longer the street, the palace, or the capital city, which the CAE considers "dead capital" for the ruling elite, but cyberspace, where information flows and resides.[83] Therefore, it is precisely in this terrain that it must be addressed. From this starting point, the concept of ECD was developed, which involves the transfer of traditional civil disobedience tactics, such as blocking and trespassing, to the Internet.

The aim is to disrupt the flow of information that constitutes the lifeblood of modern institutions, be they governmental, military or corporate, by a new vanguard that knows how to combine the historical politicisation of civil and human rights militant groups with technological expertise.

The CAE therefore proposes a model of occupation of key spaces in the common cybernetic space, such as research databases, internal communication systems and information distribution channels, in a manner emulating the *modus operandi* of power.

As a result, they put forth a decentralized organizational structure, comprising autonomous cells akin to those seen in anarchist collectives. [84]

Such a structure would, in fact, render the ECD more challenging to infiltrate and repress. Indeed, the CAE itself advocates an acknowledgement of the possible illegality of the practices of illicit occupation of virtual spaces used by institutions but is a staunch supporter of the principle of equal punishment. The ECD should be equated with traditional forms of non-violent civil disobedience, instead of being reduced to a demonising cybercrime. [85]

While this movement laid the ideological foundations for the subsequent hacktivist movements, its reluctance to operationalise its theories, coupled with the inherent elitism in the theoretical conceptualisation of the "new avant-garde", which can be defined as nothing more than a technocracy with white males with computer skills at the upper echelons, gave rise to a cadre of disillusioned hackers. Among them, there was Ricardo Dominguez, who co-founded in 1998 the other pioneering collective of hacktivist groups, the Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT).[86]

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[83] Critical Art Ensamble, *Electronic Civil Disobedience,* 20.
[84] Critical Art Ensamble, *Electronic Civil Disobedience,*23.
[85] Critical Art Ensamble, *Electronic Civil Disobedience,*29.
[86] Samuel, "Hacktivism and the Future of Political Participation," 74-89.

In a relatively short period of time, Dominguez has gained recognition as an "apostle" of the digital Zapatismo movement, particularly for his collaboration with the Federation of Random Action on a series of virtual protests in support of the Mexican Zapatistas.[87] These campaigns employed the development of digital tools for electronic disruption of government surveillance and paternalism. The most known one is the Floodnet, an evolution of Netstrike, the telematic march conceived and theorised by Tommaso Tozzi of Strano Network, which was initially created to protest against those responsible for starving the indigenous Zapatistas.[88] The software was designed specifically to impede a web server's ability to respond effectively to requests, without causing irreparable damage. Instead, it floods the server with an excess of connection requests, thereby slowing it down. FloodNet is a Java applet that automates the process of reloading web pages. The participants in the "virtual sit-in" establish a connection to the "The Thing" site and retrieve FloodNet, which refreshes the pages at an interval of 6-7 seconds. This approach allows for the transmission of approximately 600,000 pulses per minute when a collective of ten thousand individuals is connected simultaneously. This volume of data is typically sufficient to impede access to the website, as Dominguez himself has elucidated.[89]

As with the Netstrike, the total blocking of the site is merely a collateral consequence of the protest, which is primarily intended to heighten awareness among online communities about a problem that has been either overlooked or misrepresented by official information outlets and media. In Floodnet, the key objective is the communication of the motives and objectives of the collective action, in order to raise awareness among people.[90] It is the reversal of the CAE paradigm; whereas the latter aimed at destroying information, as an instrument of power, the EDT aimed at constructing it, as an instrument of empowerment.

The EDT's decision to forego anonymity was an attempt to establish the legitimacy of its actions and portray themselves as responsible and reliable political actors, on a par with the activists engaged in street protests. However, it should be noted that the doctrinal hacktivism does not emerge in the light of day; rather, it more frequently grows in in those grey zones of the Net where institutional control

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[87] Ricardo Dominguez, "Digital Zapatismo," *www.thing.net*, June 17, 1998.
https://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/DigZap.html.
[88] Di Corinto and Tozzi, *Hacktivism: La Libertà nelle Maglie della Rete,* 92.
[89] Di Corinto and Tozzi, *Hacktivism: La Libertà nelle Maglie della Rete*, 92.
[90] Karagiannopoulos, *Living With Hacktivism*, chap.1.

becomes increasingly difficult to exert. It is precisely in these gnoseological gaps that Hacktivismo is consecrated, understood as the proper name of the subgroup with which a conspicuous component of the hacker collective Cult of the Dead Cow (cDc) identified itself. [91]

In 1999, Oxblood Ruffin, the nickname of the cDc's "Foreign Minister", first conceptualised the notion of hacktivism. Indeed, he immediately perceived a distinctive opportunity to make a substantial contribution to the group's evolving identity. Among the cDc members, Ruffin was particularly drawn to the revolutionary concept of hacktivism.

In an interview, he stated that the term had fascinated him, but that its definition required elucidation. Although the term "cyberwar" may be vaguely appropriate, it was easily associable with the warmongering U.S. government and the military defence industry, having been coined by two researchers at the RAND Corporation in 1993. [92]

Ruffin felt that a truly distinctive term was needed, one that represented something completely new and denoted the group for the peaceful, techno-liberal goals they proposed, rather than the subversive means they would use to achieve them. It was cDc hacker Reid Fleming who introduced a fundamental idea to the discussion by founding the website hacktivism.org, a domain whose homepage featured a quotation from Article 19 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR). The article in question is as it follows: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers". [93] Ruffin was profoundly affected by this principle, immediately discerning that it encapsulated the core of their mission: to integrate technology with the pursuit of human rights. [94]

Ruffin's concept of hacktivism began to take shape at the 1999 Defcon hacker convention in Las Vegas. In that occasion, together with other cDc's members, they conceived the idea of developing a tool to circumvent state-sponsored firewalls that restricted Internet access in nations such as Saudi

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[91] Cult of the Dead Cow, "CDc Communications | Hacktivismo | Ninja Strike Force," *cultdeadcow.com*, n.d. https://cultdeadcow.com/.

[92] Interview with Oxblood Ruffin quoted in Samuel, "Hacktivism and the Future of Political Participation," 16.

[93] United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," *United Nations*, December 10, 1948. https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

[94] Oxblood Ruffin, "The Longer March," *Cultdeadcow.com*, n.d.. https://cultdeadcow.com/cDc_files/cDc-0356.html.

Arabia, Cuba, Tunisia and Peoples Republic of China.[95] These firewalls act as gatekeepers between local users and the Internet in general, and in heavily censored countries, its access is exclusively mediated by these governmental software.

Upon inputting a website's URL into a browser, the request is initially directed to digital intermediaries, who then ascertain whether the site is included on the government's blacklist. The counter-software developed by the hacktivist collective was designated "Peeakabooty"; in accordance with hacker style, the *goliardia* of the name should not distract from the conceptual power of such a tool. The afore-mentioned "malware" enabled any individual to publish their information on the Internet, circumventing the controls implemented by law enforcement agencies on national servers and at Internet service providers that provide access to the general public.[96]

In heralding Peeakabooty release in 2001, the group drafted and published its own Declaration of Hacktivismo (Annex I).[97] This conceptualisation of the hacktivist movement, as proposed by those who dared to identify as hacktivists in first place, has led to a period of flourishing exploration among hackers interested in counter-power activities. During this time, digital activists have developed software that enables them to engage in practices that are otherwise prohibited by repressive measures, rather than focusing on personalised or public attacks on those in power positions. In general, cDc aspired to facilitate the emergence of open code and the distribution of network access resources as a unifying language for a hacktivism that espouses the value of aggregation and unity, rather than disunity and monadism. [98]

This aspiration is actualised in two distinct ways through the Hactivismo movement, both as an objective and as the structural framework of the group.

These phenomena cannot be fully explained without first introducing the concepts of rhizomatic networks and organisations. In this context, the reference to the book Rhizome, written by the two French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari in 1976, is explicitly invoked. In fact, they proposed an ontological model that employed the metaphor of the peculiar shape of the roots of potatoes, which

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[95] Ruffin, "The Longer March."
[96] Samuel, "Hacktivism and the Future of Political Participation," 90-95.
[97] Cult of the Dead Cow, "Hacktivismo Declaration," July 4, 2001. https://cultdeadcow.com/news/declaration.html.
[98] Oxblood Ruffin, "Waging Peace on the Internet," *web.archive.org*, May 13, 2011, https://web.archive.org/web/20110513234055/http://www.hacktivismo.com/public/tfiles/wagingpeace.txt.

are in a reticular structure. One can read in it, prophetic statements about the forms of contamination through which the rhizome develops and apply them to an idea of the decentralisation of meaning, i.e. the dependence of meaning not on a pre-established code or order, but on an interconnected multiplicity. In accordance with the principles of connection and heterogeneity, any point on the rhizome can, therefore, be connected to any other, without the need for the existence of a pre-established ordered structure.[99]

This principle finds evident application in the primordial hacktivism techniques of the cDc, whose existential goal is to create interconnections between dissident, individuals and groups, bypassing the restrictions imposed by authoritarian regimes. Through open-source codes and the creation of platforms that mimic the inclusive nature of democratic discourse, the cDc embraces a strategy that aims to increase points of access and resistance, enabling a dissemination of knowledge that is not reliant on a single central hub. In their communitarian vision, this distributive activity will serve to demonstrate that hacktivists are engaged in the advancement of peace, rather than the perpetuation of conflict. Similarly, the rhizomatic idea can be conceived as an alternative organisational structure and process, with the aim of formulating an effective social resistance with a strong detoticising quality. Their decentralised, inclusive and multifaceted approach will provide the theoretical and operational backbone to the Golden-Age hacktivist collectives.

1.5 The Acme of Hacktivism: Anonymous and Wikileaks

A dead thing goes with the stream,
but only a living thing can go against it.
- Gilbert K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man

At this juncture in the dissertation, the various elements introduced in the preceding paragraphs begin to prove instrumental to the narrative. We have just demonstrated how hacktivism, as a manifestation of countervailing power, operates within and against the structures of the Network

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[99] Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Vázquez Pérez José, *Mil Mesetas : Capitalismo Y Esquizofrenia* (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2015): 9–33, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1judSFnF1XpQug2xxD8lf9h0Yn63d3xh1/view

Society, adopting forms of resistance that reflect the very nature of the information medium. If the cDc sowed the seeds of a hacktivism that was aware of itself and its potential, then Anonymous and Wikileaks reaped the fruits thereof, becoming the paradigmatic symbols of digital resistance in the new millennium, with remarkable rapidity.[100] Although this section will examine the operational divergences between these two groups, it is important to note that they are two sides of the same coin. Since the early 2000s, they have flourished as decentralised, adaptive and combative networks, capable of mobilising globally to challenge authority, denounce injustice and advocate radical transparency. To assume a more informal tone, we might characterise them as digital bandits, the Robin Hoods of generation 2.0. The type of activism they propose is unprecedented, to the extent that they have coined the contradictory neologism of the "politics of No-One"[101] to explain it. I consciously employ the adjective contradictory, since the action is promoted for everyone, but the ownership of the initiative is not claimed by anyone. The "politics of No-One" allows new forms of virtual protest that do not necessarily require physical mobilisation or public visibility. E-bandits can disseminate confidential information and deface websites, while cozily remaining in the shadows.[102]

This type of neo-activism can therefore be particularly effective and pervasive, especially in contexts where physical protest is risky or impractical. The anonymity of e-bandits makes them difficult to detect and counter, allowing them to openly challenge the power of governments and corporations in a more direct and effective way. However, this same anonymity also makes it difficult for them to be designated as trustworthy actors among the public spheres. [103]

Their creative destruction applied to global network structures aims straight at the heart of autocracies but does not shy away from striking at representative democracy as well. The hacktivists of the new millennium, thus, consecrate the ethics of contemporary digital activism,

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[100] Guntarik and Grieve-Williams, *From Sit-Ins to #revolutions*, 68.

[101] Wendy H. Wong and Peter A. Brown, "E-Bandits in Global Activism: WikiLeaks, Anonymous, and the Politics of No One," *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 4 (December 2013): 1015–33, https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592713002806.
[102] Wong and Brown, "E-Bandits in Global Activism."
[103] Samuel, "Hacktivism and the Future of Political Participation," 214.

which consists of empowering those who do not have the privilege of knowledge and exposing the weaknesses of the powerful; no matter where you are, no matter who you are.

1.5.1 From Lulz to Outrage: A Historical Overview of the Anonymous Movement

The phenomenon of Anonymous emerged in 2003 as a spontaneous and amorphous aggregate on 4Chan, an incensed and anonymous imageboard platform. Initially, it was configured as an online community mainly dedicated to playful and provocative cyber jokes and attacks, in line with the trolling culture of the time. [104] The motif of interactions between users was the "Lulz"[105], which in hacker jargon represented "unbridled fun".[106]

Over time, the content of the chats shifted from anti-Semitic and racist memes, towards a proactive discussion of how to guarantee the free flow of ideas without fear of surveillance or coercion.[107] From 2006 onwards, there was a growing awareness of political issues among the group, which led to the formation of distributed communication nodes, including Internet Rely Chats (IRC)[108] and forums. These included Anonnet, AnonOps, VoxAnon and AnonPlus, as well as related groups such as the People's Liberation Front (PLF), LulzSec and AntiSec.[109]

The inaugural notable action undertaken by the Anonymous collective occurred in 2006. At that time, a group of users coordinated an incursion into the Habbo Hotel online community, resulting in considerable disruption due to their concerted efforts.[110] In the same year, Anonymous initiated a campaign against Hal Turner, a controversial US radio host, by interrupting the broadcasts of his program with prank calls, in adherence with the tradition of the phone-phreakers. However, the

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[104] Cole Stryker, *Epic Win for Anonymous* (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2012), https://archive.org/details/epicwinforanonym0000stry/page/104/mode/2up?q=Anonymous.

[105] Deformation of L.O.L. (Lough Out Loud).

[106] Parmy Olson, *We Are Anonymous* (Random House, 2013): chap. 4 https://books.google.it/books?id=ucE1AAAAQBAJ&pg=PT43&hl=it&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false.

[107] Olson, *We Are Anonymous,* chap. 4.

[108] Internet Relay Chat, or IRC, is an early form of real-time communication that was favoured by Anonymous due to the ease with which it enabled users to conceal their IP addresses.

[109] Daniel Trottier and Christian Fuchs, *Social Media, Politics and the State*, 1st ed. (2014; repr., Routledge, 2014): 90. https://www.perlego.com/book/717436.

[110] Olson, *We Are Anonymous,* 49-50.

pivotal moment in the collective's history can be situated in 2008, with the inception of Operation Chanology, whose intended target was the Church of Scientology.[111] The *casus belli* was an attempt by the Church to censor a critical video posted on YouTube, with Tom Cruise as the sect's sponsor.[112] The reasons behind this substantial attack were twofold: pride and prejudice.

As for the former, a cult whose dogma claimed privileged access to science and technology, going so far as to declare itself "the only group on Earth that has a workable technology which handles the basic rules of life itself and brings order out of chaos"[113], was particularly insulting to hackers. As previously anticipated, the Calvinist ethos of hacker culture does not conceive of intermediaries in the intimate relationship between man and machine.

As for the second reason, in addition to censorship and misinformation, Anonymous publicly denounced Scientology's coercive practices, such as mind control, financial exploitation and persecution of former members. Operation Chanology, thus, has turned into a campaign to expose the human rights violations perpetrated by this religious sect. "By now you have certainly become aware of us and our actions"[114], the robotic Anonymous' voice said in its "declaration of war" on Scientology video; by then, it was certainly difficult not to be.

Those who thought Chanology was too tame rejoiced; the media response to this operation was a sign of the success of the Anonymous project. From this point on, Anonymous completed its rebranding without branding, moving from goliard actions to structured campaigns, using IRC channels to coordinate and plan its next movements.[115]

The practice of Anonymous activism has on occasion, demonstrated an intersectional approach and a supportive stance towards causes championed by their collective colleagues. This was evidenced in 2010 when they initiated "Operation Payback", and the subsequent "Operation Avenge Assange" a series of cyberattacks against companies such as MasterCard, Post Finance, PayPal, Visa, and Bank

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[111] Cybernews, *Interview with Gregg Housh: I Was There When Anonymous Really Started,* YouTube video, 46:32, June 23, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVnY0NF4wVo.

[112] Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy*, chap.2.

[113] Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy*, 60.

[114] Anonymous, *Open Letter to Scientology*. Video, posted on Bing.com, May, 14, 2008. https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=open+letter+to+scientology+by+anonymous&mid=A47280AAEF9C43795FC5A47280AAEF9C43795FC5&FORM=VIRE..

[115] Olson, *We Are Anonymous,* 52.

of America, in response to their decision to block payments to WikiLeaks.[116] Among all the Ops, this is undoubtedly the most sentimental one. On this occasion, the collective showed its most sincere human trait, promptly coming in support of an ally. It is yet a virtuous example of the fair web, where there is no room for competition, but only for cooperation.

Subsequently, beginning in the early 2000s, a subset of activists, affiliated with the AnonOps subgroup, increasingly dedicated their efforts to addressing matters pertaining to civil and international conflicts. They organized themselves through the private IRC channel #InternetFeds.[117] In contrast to previous instances, such as the attacks on the Malaysian government and the creation of platforms to circumvent restrictions during the Iranian protests in 2009, AnonOps did not act exclusively against government censorship. The most striking series of attacks were those that resulted in the defacement of government websites in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Syria during the Arab Spring. By creating a safe space for dialogue between Arab dissidents, Anonymous has shown once again that the Net knows no borders, except those that are superimposed. Thus, "even those who approach issues of political freedom and democracy from very different perspectives and experiences, can have a common cause".[118]

Another notable instance was the recent operation targeting the Kremlin, following the Russian declaration of war on Ukraine on 24 February 2022. In their open letter of hostility to the Russian government, they did not shy away from reiterating their core principles as the blue helmets of the web:

> "#Anonymous is currently involved in operations against the Russian Federation. Our operations are targeting the Russian government. There is an inevitability that the private sector will most likely be affected too. While this account cannot claim to speak for the whole of the Anonymous collective, we can in fact report the truths of Anonymous' collective actions against the Russian Federation. We want the Russian people to understand that we know it's hard for them to speak out against their dictator for fear of reprisals. We, as a collective want only peace in the world. We want a future for all of humanity.

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[116] Nate Anderson, "Anonymous Revives Operation Payback, Wages War on 'Copywrong,'" *Ars Technica*, March 9, 2011. https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2011/03/anonymous-revives-operation-payback-targets-copywrong/.

[117] Olson, *We Are Anonymous,* 425–426.

[118] Yasmine Ryan, "Anonymous and the Arab Uprisings," *Al Jazeera*, May 19, 2011. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/5/19/anonymous-and-the-arab-uprisings..

So, while people around the globe smash your Internet providers to bits, understand that it's entirely directed at the actions of the Russian government and Putin. Put yourselves in the shoes of the Ukrainians being bombed right now. Together we can change the world, we can stand up against anything. It is time for the Russian people to stand together and say "NO" to Vladimir Putin's war.

We are Anonymous.

We are Legion.

Expect us"[119]

The objective is, once again, to raise public awareness through sensationalist gestures, disturb the Russian government's unilateral propaganda dissemination and gain access to the Kremlin's intelligence networks, thereby exposing the vulnerabilities of their security systems to the global community.

Concurrently, Anonymous exhibited a dedication to social and anti-capitalist causes. In 2011, the group identified Wall Street as an optimal target for action, given its elevated status as a symbol of financial power and privilege. The masked collective perceived the excessive control of global financial institutions as antithetical to the principles of transparency and equality they espoused. They not only promoted demonstrations in front of the physical palace but also conducted a series of cyber-attacks, including the sabotage of websites associated with financial institutions.[120] These acts were designed to underscore the deficiencies in the resilience of major corporations and to draw media attention to their responsibility in the economic crisis.

Although, unfortunately, it is not possible to detail all of the collective's intrepid exploits here, I felt it necessary to start at the beginning of the story to emphasise that Anonymous did not begin as an inherently political movement. In borrowing Gabriella Coleman's words, we find out that "there are definitely people involved who don't care about politics, but who want to create a kind of space where people can do politics"[121]. Despite its playful nature, Anonymous has gradually embraced and built

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[119] @YourAnonNews, "X.com," *X* (formerly Twitter), February 24, 2022, https://x.com/YourAnonNews/status/1496954233492541444.
[120] Sean Captain, "The Real Role of Anonymous in Occupy Wall Street," *Fast Company*, October 18, 2011, https://www.fastcompany.com/1788397/real-role-anonymous-occupy-wall-street.
[121] Gabriella Coleman quoted in Ryan, "Anonymous and the Arab Uprisings."

its own virtual Agora, turning the "doing it for sheer of amusement"[122] into a fight for Internet freedom and the civil rights of its netizens.

1.5.2 Anonymous: the Rhizomatic Legion

The rhizomatic nature of Anonymous is evident in its operational model, which is characterised by a network of independent nodes (individual members or groups) that are constantly interconnected, contributing to collective actions without the imposition of hierarchical decision-making.[123] The actions undertaken by the collective are typically of three types: legal, extra-legal and illegal, and rarely irreversible. The operations most frequently attributed to Anonymous are, arguably, of the second category, depending on the context. These include the famous Denial of Services (DoS) attacks and Distributed DoS (DDoS), which is the temporary defacement of a web server due to an overload of access request packets, and doxxing, which is the non-consensual disclosure of personal information about a user.[124]

It would be a simplistic interpretation to view anonymity as merely a shield of protection from legislative consequences or a hiding place for one's identity from prying eyes. Rather, it could be seen as a symbol of equality and guarantee of fluidity, as espoused by the Anonymous collective.[125] Indeed, one could scarcely find a better definition than that provided by one of its activists, who, when asked who Anonymous is, replied "everyone who says they are" [126].

No individual or entity can assert legal ownership of the domain, let alone its icons and images.[127] Such a claim would be an oxymoron. The collective identity of Anonymous, as embodied by its Guy Fawkes mask and "We are Legion" motto[128], is characterised by a mutability that renders it difficult to identify a recognisable centre, demonstrating in this way a notable resilience to the dynamics of centralised repression. In contrast to the cDc, which could ultimately be defined as a circumscribed

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[122] Gabriella Coleman, "Is Anonymous Anarchy?" *Social Text*, August 20, 2011. https://socialtextjournal.org/is_anonymous_anarchy/.

[123] Trottier and Fuchs, *Social Media, Politics and the State*, chap.4.

[124] Ray Pompon, "Doxing, DoS, and Defacement: Today's Mainstream Hacktivism Tools," *F5.com*, April 12, 2017. https://www.f5.com/content/dam/f5/downloads/ARTICLE-doxing_DoS_Defacement_Mainstream_Hacktivism.pdf.

[125] Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy*.

[126] Gregg Housh quoted in Cybernews, *Interview with Gregg Housh*.

[127] Trottier and Fuchs, *Social Media, Politics and the State*, chap.4.

[128] Anonymous, "YAN," *Youranon.news*. https://youranon.news/.

group of pioneers, Anonymous is, in fact, a pure rhizome, a reticular movement devoid of boundaries, wherein any individual can serve as a node, provided that they adhere to the ethical guidelines that are intrinsic to the group.[129]

In other words, its constitution is based on a "strongly anti-leader and anti-celebrity ethos", decentralised modes of interaction and interchangeable, unconstrained participation, among which everyone can be substituted. [130]

The combination of these elements rendered the masked collective highly prone to unpredictability. In the absence of a clearly defined philosophy and coherent political program, it was challenging to anticipate the timing and nature of Anonymous' actions, the emergence of new nodes, the success of a campaign, or the group's potential shifts in direction or tactics.[131] Its ubiquity and intelligibility could be the successful mix that made Anonymous an existential threat to governments and large multinational corporations. Its fame, or rather infamy, has helped it to establish itself and spread throughout the world, making it impervious to "arrest" the idea behind it.[132] Anonymous is heterogeneous, projected towards the search for internal consensus, discussion and, therefore, fundamentally *politikós*. It is the phenotype of the democracy-of-doing, also known in the world of geeks as "do-ocracy", in which those who act, decide.[133] This operational model not only allows for extraordinary flexibility, but also reinforces the rhizomatic character of the collective, ensuring that ideas grow from the bottom up and spread horizontally. However, for the avoidance of any plausible doubt, Anonymous is far from being an anarchist-socialist organisation.[134]

However much we might have deduced a reference to Marxist philosophy from their anti-capitalist and anti-globalist matrix in tracing their exploits, we could hardly overlay it and expect the masked philosophy to adhere entirely to it. As in any self-respecting glorious collectives, there are many frictions between the ideal and the pragmatic work; to ignore them would be to risk beatifying the group, even when the values that drive hacker activists' action conflict with general morality.

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[129] Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy*.
[130] Coleman, "Is Anonymous Anarchy?"
[131] Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy*, 17.
[132] "You cannot arrest an idea" by Topiary (an Anonymus activist) before his arrest, quoted in Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy,* 16.
[133] Community Wiki, "CommunityWiki: Do Ocracy," *communitywiki.org*, April 29, 2021. https://communitywiki.org/wiki/DoOcracy.
[134] Trottier and Fuchs, *Social Media, Politics and the State*, chap.4.

Furthermore, conflicts within the IRCs itself were daily. A fortiori, following its notoriety for the Chanology operation, the diversification of ideas and cultures in a space devoid of identity, necessitated an internal recognition process. The umbrella term represented by Anonymous possessed three distinctive qualities. Firstly, it offered social groups an instrument of mutual identification and recognition. Secondly, it gave voice and symbolic power outside of traditional institutions to those who normally lack it. Thirdly, it facilitated the expression of processes of subjectivation through the proliferation of differences.[135] From this perspective, the "mask" of Anonymous represented a kind of legitimising, inclusive title for netizens wishing to interact with a politically active collective of users, without having to adhere to hierarchical structures or rigid party rules.[136]

On the model of the league, the variance of Anonymous' purposes, broadens the possibilities of political participation, while assuming that participants are responsible for their actions in an environment characterised by significantly reduced supervision and coordination, a condition that cannot always be guaranteed in practice.[137] In fact, the numerous internal conflicts dictated by an open environment, tolerant of dissent, threatened to overburden the decision-making process, to the point of immobilism. Therefore, as Graeber conceptualises anarchism[138], the collective may be perceived as fully encompassed by the category.

Nonetheless, the reality of the facts aligns more closely with the application of the Deleuzian model. Indeed, it has been argued that within AnonOps, there was an internal coordination centre that directed the legion towards specific goals.[139] In addition, most of the attacks were supported by botnets, i.e. networks that, although controlled by a single actor, allow remote control of users' computers by means of malware injected into them without their knowledge in the form of downloads or viruses. As a result, in some Ops, the thousands of activists using software tools simultaneously and

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[135] Marco Deseriis, "Improper Names: Collective Pseudonyms and Multiple-Use Names as Minor Processes of Subjectivation," *Subjectivity* (2012), https://www.academia.edu/1927892/Improper_names_Collective_pseudonyms_and_multiple_use_names_as_minor_processes_of_subjectivation.

[136] Karagiannopoulos, "A Short History of Hacktivism," 63–86.

[137] Karagiannopoulos, "A Short History of Hacktivism," 63–86.

[138] "Anarchism is the commitment to the idea that it would be possible to have a society based on principles of self-organization voluntary association and mutual aid. Anarchism is acting as you were already free" quoted in Savician, *A Conversation with Anarchist David Graeber*, YouTube video, (November 25, 2011). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVDkkOAOtV0.

[139] Olson, *We Are Anonymous,* 113–122.

voluntarily were only a fraction of the computers involved, but around 90% (e.g. in the PayPal attack) of the "firepower" came from botnets.[140]

Consequently, Anonymous did not have, and probably did not aspire to have, the intellectual honesty that presupposes the implementation of a genuinely anarchic model. The rhizomatic one, thus, comes to the rescue of the collective, without looking with suspicion at the coordination centre or the technological joke of botnets, because, in the end, they are irrelevant. What is relevant, instead, is the multiplicity, as a concept antagonistic to the unity and Oneness of Western ontology.[141]

In a system of interconnected multiplicities, it is not sufficient to simply add dimensions; rather one must subtract the dimension that would unify and absorb the multiple.[142] In the mode of relation in which "all individuals are interchangeable, defined only by their state at a given moment"[143], such as the one of Anonymous, there is no room for a totalising unity, but only for the universalisation of multiplicities. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome, when considered as an organisational system, differs from the majority of other forms of self-organisation in that it is a self-referential system. This is based on the assumption that change in itself is due to the fluid, intra-connected and mutable nature of its spontaneous order.[144]

Moreover, in examining the purely ideological aspect, the political hacking of Anonymous illuminates the continued relevance, as well as the inherent contradictions, of the liberal tradition in the digital age. Even Anonymous is not immune to the inherent contradictions that characterise anti-system movements in the real world.

Although it espouses certain liberal values, it is primarily a practical and immanent critique of liberalism, elucidating its inherent contradictions within the context of 21st-century capitalist reality.[145] Anonymous, while advocating for individual liberty, grapples with the question of collective entitlements to information and technology. Its stance, frequently aligned with a liberal understanding of freedom of expression, confronts the socialist notion of equitable and universal

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[140] Trottier and Fuchs, *Social Media, Politics and the State*, chap. 4.
[141] Deleuze, Guattari, and Vázquez Pérez, *Mil Mesetas*, 9–33.
[142] Deleuze, Guattari, and Vázquez Pérez, *Mil Mesetas*, 9–33.
[143] Gilles Deleuze, "Desert Islands: And Other Texts, 1953-1974," *Philpapers.org*, (2004): 19. https://philpapers.org/rec/DELDIA-3.
[144] Shih-wei Hsu, "At the Critical Moment: The Rhizomatic Organization and 'Democracy to Come,'" *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 38, no. 4 (December 1, 2022): 101-232, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2022.101232.
[145] Trottier and Fuchs, *Social Media, Politics and the State*, chap.4.

access to knowledge and the means of production. This is exemplified by the internal discourse surrounding Operation Facebook, where the assault on the corporation was blocked and highly critiqued by certain user activists for its potential curtailment of individual autonomy with regard to information.[146]

Nevertheless, if we were to ascertain the fundamental reason why the most significant digital movement of the last century has failed to become firmly established in civil society as a liberating instrument, it would undoubtedly be its ontological inadequacy in formulating a transcendental critique of liberalism.

While the collective has denounced the contradictions inherent in the capitalist-global system, it has yet to propose a concrete and viable alternative. At the same time, it is also positively noteworthy that this force has never been co-opted within traditional systems of power.

In conclusion, it is hard to know whether its omnipresence, the impossibility of classifying it in canonical political categories, the depersonalisation of its participants and the ambiguous promotion of unfettered freedom of expression, should make the average citizen rejoice or shudder. The material legacy of the latest generation of hacktivists is undoubtedly that of a digital world that is more aware of the limitations imposed on it, while the immaterial one remains open to a dangerous secular interpretation that may, in its final judgement, disregard their revolutionary, mocking and esoteric characters.

1.5.3 Wikileaks and the Democratisation of Information: A Critical Analysis

If we were to draw a family analogy between all hacker movements, we might posit that Anonymous and Wikileaks would be considered cousins, situated on the more politically engaged branch of the family. If the former can be considered the progeny of the union between the Cult of the Dead Cow and the prankster-phone-phreakers who contributed to technical journals in the 1970s, the latter can be viewed as the descendant of the emerging information culture, which is exemplified by

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[146] Parmy Olson, "Why the Anonymous Facebook 'Plot' Was a Dud," *Forbes*, August 11, 2011, https://www.forbes.com/sites/parmyolson/2011/08/11/why-the-anonymous-facebook-plot-was-a-dud/.

whistleblowing and *parrhesia* (truth-telling) [147]. However, its roots are firmly embedded in the core tenets of hacker ethics, particularly the belief that all information should be accessible without charge. Wikileaks, as a collective of people, was established in 2006 by a group of global activists who were committed to the ideal of a free press. Approximately 1,200 individuals, including journalists, engineers, and programmers from around the globe, independently aligned themselves with the figure and project of Julian Assange, an Australian hacker-journalist, who believed he could create a more just global society through the use of radical transparency as a means to achieve it.[148] From this truth-digging activity, the Wikileaks platform was born as a repository of information, described as a "giant library of the world's most persecuted documents"[149]. Over a three years period, activists collated a collection of classified documents, including military documents, diplomatic cables and internal communications of private companies, and made it partly accessible to the public, as well as disseminating it in the world's major newspapers.[150]

The motives behind their inquisitive action are better explained by Wikileaks itself:

"Publishing improves transparency, and this transparency creates a better society for all people.

Better scrutiny leads to reduced corruption and stronger democracies in all society's institutions, including government, corporations and other organisations. A healthy, vibrant and inquisitive journalistic media plays a vital role in achieving these goals. We are part of that media. Scrutiny requires information. Historically, information has been costly in terms of human life, human rights and economics.

As a result of technical advances particularly the Internet and cryptography—the risks of conveying important information can be lowered. In its landmark ruling on the Pentagon Papers, the US Supreme Court ruled that 'only a free and unrestrained press can effectively expose deception in government'. We agree.[151]"

In analysing his 'literary' collection, one is assailed by an existential doubt: can the *Ragion di Stato* therefore coexist with whistleblowers? The succinct response would be an unequivocal negative. The more comprehensive answer would entail a subsequent question: once the information has been

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[147] Pramod K Nayar, "WikiLeaks, the New Information Cultures, and Digital Parrhesia" 45, no. 52 (December 25, 2010). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266040502_WikiLeaks_the_New_Information_Cultures_and_Digital_Parrhesia.

[148] Wikileaks, "WikiLeaks," *Wikileaks.org*. https://wikileaks.org/.

[149] WikiLeaks, "About," *Wikileaks.org*. https://wikileaks.org/What-is-WikiLeaks.html.

[150] Wikileaks, "Partners," *Wikileaks.org*. https://wikileaks.org/-Partners-.html.

[151] WikiLeaks, "About," *Wikileaks.org*. https://wikileaks.org/What-is-WikiLeaks.html.

disseminated by the leaders, how should it be received for it to effectively constitute a weapon of counter-power?

Consequently, we could argue that the nation-state cannot coexist with the constant threat of national security being jeopardised, but it can survive it. This is especially true if it can easily identify, and consequently eliminate, the most troublesome dissidents.

Therefore, it can be reasonably claimed that Wikileaks has been a worthy ally of Anonymous, an orthodox believer in freedom of information and a questionable role-model. The coexistence of these essences within it, makes it challenging to navigate the jumble of contradictions that constitutes it. However, it is precisely these that make Wikileaks a noteworthy source of critical reflection, especially concerning its relationship with the democratic states.

From the release of the "Collateral Murder" video in 2007[152], to "Operation Cablegate" in November 2010, passing through the publication of the Afghanistan and Iraq war diaries, completed in (respectively) July and October 2010[153], Wikileaks has been a rollercoaster of successes and failures. Even its most notable operation, "Cablegate"[154], was overshadowed by such ambivalence, namely the simultaneous arrest of the group's leader. The judicial odyssey of Assange, which has seen him accused of rape and espionage, threatened with extradition and facing the possibility of the death penalty, creates a unique intersection between the virtual and the human being.[155] If we consider the argument put forth by Chris Hables Gray, the creator of the Cyborg Bill of Rights[156], that the advent of political change depends on a body that can testify the truth of the protest, can we also assume the opposite to be true? Can Assange's body serve as a sacrificial victim to stem political change? Again, the answer is negative. As we already know, "you cannot arrest an idea"[157].

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[152] The most notable among this released materials is a classified video of the US military, which depicts a helicopter attack in Baghdad in 2007. The footage shows the killing of 12 civilians, including two Reuters journalists. It is accessible at: WikiLeaks, "Collateral Murder," *Wikileaks.org*, 2010. https://collateralmurder.wikileaks.org/.

[153] Wikileaks, "WikiLeaks War Diaries," *Wikileaks.org*, 2010. https://wardiaries.wikileaks.org/.

[154] Operation "Cablegate" consists of the publication of 251,287 US diplomatic dispatches from 1973 to 2010. These documents offered an unprecedented glimpse into US international relations and foreign policies, revealing sensitive information on several countries and world leaders [(including Berlusconi), for the curious, they can be found here: Full-text search].

[155] Pramod K Nayar, "WikiLeaks, the New Information Cultures, and Digital Parrhesia."

[156] Chris Hables Gray, *Cyborg Citizen : Politics in the Posthuman Age*, (New York, N.Y. ; London: Routledge, 2002): 44. https://archive.org/details/cyborgcitizenpol0000gray.

[157] Topiary quoted in Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy,* 16.

Nonetheless, what I will argue here, is that Assange's arrest has, indeed, had a chilling effect on the dissemination of the ground idea of Wikileaks. Not so much because of the imprisonment of its founder *per se*, but because of the subsequent exposure of the collective's internal contradictions. These inconsistencies have the inadvertent effect of undermining the credibility of the project, which is based on the principle of free circulation of knowledge as an instrument of political and social emancipation. They have also eroded public confidence in the idea of a plausible success of the "democratisation of information", understood as the breaking down of barriers that prevent the user of information from accessing the communicative abundance of the Net. [158]

I will therefore try to classify them into three macro-areas: structure, transparency, and responsibility. Regarding the first contradictory standpoint, their techno-libertarian campaign openly clashes with the internal structure of the collective. One of the fundamental tenets of democracy is shared responsibility and diffuse control of power. However, the highly centralized management of WikiLeaks around the figure of Assange is at odds with this principle. His arrest brought to light the extent to which the platform relied on him, both in terms of publication strategies and public image. This undermined WikiLeaks' credibility as a decentralized entity, exposing the collective to accusations of internal authoritarianism and personalization of power.[159]

Secondly, in a curious irony of fate, an organisation founded on the pledge of radical transparency has frequently been criticised for its internal opacity. [160] The very concept of transparency, which forms the cornerstone of WikiLeaks' mission, has consequently been undermined by allegations of impropriety in the organisation's internal management. The non-publication of information regarding the organisation's funding sources, the selection of materials to be disclosed and the obfuscated decision-making process reflect a discrepancy between the collective's promises and practices. [161]

In a democratic context, transparency is a crucial element in the establishment of public trust. The lack of it within WikiLeaks not only fostered mistrust but also raised questions about the legitimacy

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[158] John Keane, "Democracy in the Age of Google, Facebook and WikiLeaks," March 9, 2011. https://www.johnkeane.net/democracy-in-the-age-of-google-facebook-and-wikileaks/.
[159] Athina Karatzogianni, "WikiLeaks Affects: Ideology, Conflict and the Revolutionary Virtual," *Academia.edu*, (February 28, 2013): 15-16. https://www.academia.edu/2765902/WikiLeaks_Affects_Ideology_Conflict_and_the_Revolutionary_Virtual
[160] Karatzogianni, "WikiLeaks Affects: Ideology, Conflict and the Revolutionary Virtual," 15-16.
[161] TVO Today, *Birgitta Jonsdottir: Inside WikiLeaks*, YouTube video, (January 12, 2011). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6QSsBETGff0.

of the entire project. This suggested the possibility of the instrumentalization of transparency for purposes that are not aligned with hacktivism, such as personal or ideological agendas. In addition, the quantity of classified documents acquired by Wikileaks was so considerable that it became necessary for impartial third parties to oversee and regulate its activities. To provide a quantitative overview of the extent of the material acquired, the operation to declassify diplomatic documents of the United States of America and its allies, alone, yielded the following figures: for the "Kissinger Cables" were published 1,707,500 diplomatic cables from 1973 to 1976; for the "Carter Cables" were published 1,399,276 diplomatic cables from 1977 to 1979; for "Cablegate" were published 251,287 diplomatic cables, nearly all from 2003 to 2010.[162] In light of the considerable amount of information that has been leaked and made available, it is now possible to gain a better understanding of why the only two options for international governance were either to supervise the organisation or to attempt to suppress it at all costs.

Finally, the approach taken by WikiLeaks to the disclosure of sensitive information has been the subject of criticism due to the perceived lack of balance between the public's right to know and the protection of individuals and institutions that may be exposed to risks. The absence of shared ethical criteria and a transparent process for assessing consequences has led to a perception of irresponsibility. [163]

In order to implement a genuine redistributive work of power, it is necessary to not only guarantee the right to information, but also to ensure that this information is used in a responsible manner.

A comprehensive summary of the issue is kindly offered by the journalist Janet Daly:

"So there is nothing democratic about this at all. It is an arrogant, defiant provocation of international conventions by a tiny handful of unidentifiable people that involved no consultation or popular mandate. Who are they? Apart from their self-publicising editor, Julian Assange, they are nameless and faceless. To whom could a society or an electorate – even if it was overwhelmingly opposed to such actions – protest or present its arguments?"[164]

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[162] Wikileaks, "Public Library of US Diplomacy," Wikileaks.org, 2016, https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/?qproject.

[163] Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Leaking Superpower: WikiLeaks and the Contradictions of Democracy," *Third World Quarterly* 33, no. 10 (November 2012): 1909–24, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2012.728324.

[164] Janet Daly, "WikiLeaks Is Delinquent and Anti-Democratic," *The Telegraph*, December 11, 2010. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/janetdaley/8196566/WikiLeaks-is-delinquent-and-anti-democratic.html?msockid=1c20be0068e162390e1baad769866346.

In essence, WikiLeaks represents a significant challenge to authoritarian regimes and governments that rely on the dissemination of false information and the perpetuation of conspiracy theories to maintain their legitimacy.[165] However, it presents a more ambivalent challenge to representative democracy.

On the one hand, WikiLeaks undermines the ability of governments to function and maintain power through secrecy. [166] In fact, it strives to promote the functioning of a healthy representative democracy, intending to forge the most informed version of the rational voter. Moreover, if we then take into consideration that, in the first decade of the 2000s, the international context was moving towards a process of advanced globalisation, the information released did not only serve to potentially strengthen the national systems of electoral democracy; the Wikileaks activists believed that the democratisation of information could accelerate the process of active global citizenship, enabling individual citizens to control power and influence collective global decision-making processes. [167]

On the other hand, although critical analysis and radicalism play an invigorating role in democratic processes, Assange's early anarchist writings and his organisation's practice of publicly disclosing sensitive information seem to go beyond the simple watchdog role of good governance. Conversely, these actions appear to be directed at undermining and impeding governance itself. [168]

Furthermore, WikiLeaks" activities have the potential to elicit the opposite effect, paradoxically justifying governments to take more stringent measures against whistleblowers and to make their deliberative processes even more secret. [169]

Certainly, every kind of revelation, even if it goes beyond the boundaries of the traditional normative code of liberal democracies, promotes the process of democratisation. Assange's message, however, seems almost uneducational for liberal democracies. Information wants to be free, not it must forcibly be.

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[165] Julian Assange, "Conspiracy and Governance," *web.archive.org*, (December 3, 2006). https://web.archive.org/web/20070129125831/http://iq.org/conspiracies.pdf.
[166] Assange, "Conspiracy and Governance."
[167] Robert E. Goodin, "Global Democracy: In the Beginning," *International Theory* 2, no. 2 (July 2010): 175–209. https://doi.org/10.1017/s1752971910000060.
[168] Frank Furedi, "Wikileaks: Recasting Betrayal as a Democratic Virtue," *Spiked-online.com*, March 9, 2011. https://www.spiked-online.com/2011/03/09/wikileaks-recasting-betrayal-as-a-democratic-virtue/.
[169] Simon Chesterman, "Wikileaks and the Future of Diplomacy," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, (2011). https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1864661.

1.6 Conclusion: "And Now, You Have Got Our Attention"[170]

What we call the beginning is often the end.

And to make an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from.

-T. S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding', Four Quartets

The Internet, more than a meeting place, is a space for confrontation. This is why the spread of this technology was, from its very beginnings, regarded as a political phenomenon. Its pioneers believed it would invigorate and give free rein to a global debate, which would have known no territorial barriers. The epigenetics of the hacktivist phenomenon confirms the spontaneity of this need for dialogue. The evolution of forms of social activism and political militancy that required the effective use of communication tools, especially computers, has, over time, favoured adopting ideas and techniques typical of hacker culture by environmental and pacifist movements for human and civil rights. Thus, counter-politics means and places, have shifted, respectively, from leaflets to DDoS, and from street demonstrations to electronic sit-ins.

As it has been already widely explored in the previous paragraphs, this is the result of two closely related facts. The first one is the virtualisation of forms of democracy, economy and power. The second one is the recognition of communication technologies as a conflictual field, capable of producing specific effects in "real life". Indeed, early digital activists perceived the Internet as a valuable resource, which undoubtedly furnished their militancy with cutting-edge tools, yet remained a separate entity from the tangible space where their political concerns would ultimately be addressed and resolved.

If the conjunction of the terms "hacking" and "activism" is indicative of adherence to the principles of hacker ethics and the adoption of associated practices by social movements, then the opposite is also true; hacktivism is, in fact, illustrative of the growing politicisation and socialisation of the hacker core *ethos*. In an environment conducive to mutual growth, the unprecedented relationship between coders and conventional movements has led to an expansion of the early hackers' perspective that

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[170] Anonymous, *Dear Fox News*, YouTube video, (July 29, 2007).
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFjU8bZR19A.

technologies were designed to facilitate human collaboration; this union, conceptualised them into concrete instruments with the potential to drive social transformation.

The advent of the first hacktivist movements marked a pivotal shift in the way politically engaged individuals interact with the Internet. While previously they accessed the digital realm as mere users, they now do so as citizens. In embracing this point of view, computers and networks cease to be merely productive technologies and, at the same time, they become instruments of new conflicts between civil society and power. To prevent the latter's encroachment into a virtual community space, which is designed to be unaware of fences, hacktivists essentially adopt a twofold approach.

Firstly, they produce independent information "from below" and sabotage the models and symbols of dominant communication. Secondly, they design the places and fabricate the tools of free, horizontal and independent public communication. Leaks, botnets, dark web, open-source software, ToRs and other analogous tools, which are employed by political hackers to circumvent and challenge superimposed restrictions, were, thus, designed to stimulate societal "Maieutic". These alternative telematic networks operate on the principle of packet switching, which allows information flows to pass through the various nodes on the way to their final destination. In the event of obstacles or blockages at any of the network points, these systems automatically redirect the data, thus ensuring the continuity of the communication flow. [171]

It is precisely this pervasive and resilient capacity of knowledge circulation that drove some visionaries to imagine scenarios of political change, fuelled by rhizomatic networks. In the Network Society era, concepts such as virtual communities, global citizenship, virtual protests and electronic governance find their *raison d'être*. The concept of a digital democracy is therefore gaining traction, with the utilisation of communication technologies being employed to facilitate or transform democratic processes. This model incorporates mechanisms to enhance citizen participation, transparency and accountability in governance, thereby fostering a more inclusive and participatory public sphere. [172]

Consequently, the alchemical element of the interrelationship between the utilisation of technologies and forms of democracy becomes the culture of technology use; following a hacktivist dialectical

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[171] Keane, "Democracy in the Age of Google, Facebook and WikiLeaks."
[172] Trottier and Fuchs, *Social Media, Politics and the State*, 69.

approach, technologies evade total determination and can be transformed into both instruments of emancipation and repression. The experience of this latter culture of Internet use, by authoritarian states and despotic governments, has enabled hackers to evolve into their most resolute form of political coders. This has resulted in the transformation of the "counter-cultural politics of resistance" of the early 1970s in the US and Europe into a true "counter-hegemonic politics of popular mobilisation".[173]

Upon becoming aware of the weight of the power relations that permeate the world, the hacktivists of the first hour, including the previously discussed CAE, EDT and cDc, positioned themselves as defenders of the freedom of the Net as a quintessential space of democracy, where "we exist without skin colour, without nationality, without religious bias"[174]. In this historical phase, their actions of civil disobedience or the development of software to circumvent oppression from above were employed as means of providing the public with ideological and political education. However, the establishment of the New World Order, the expansion of globalisation and the implementation of post-9/11 security measures, have significantly disrupted the dynamics of international power, as well as the reach of hackers.[175] As a result, with the emergence of Anonymous and Wikileaks in the early 2000s, we are witnessing a renewal of ideology and a shift in methodology within the field of hacktivism. The latest generation of political hackers adopt a dystopian perspective of digital democracy and seek to act in order to awaken the passive indifference of citizens in Western representative democracies.

The narrative surrounding the initial hacktivist wave has undergone a reversal, transforming virtual subversive actions, from a pedagogical tool for the community, into a counter-narrative geared towards persuasion. In the era of mature hacktivism, we observe a transformation of the rhetoric accompanying destructive actions towards a pro-populist key, which "forces people to pay attention" in times when the "attention span is a minute".[176]

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[173] Paolo Gerbaudo, "From Cyber-Autonomism to Cyber-Populism: An Ideological Analysis of the Evolution of Digital Activism," *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 15, no. 2 (May 29, 2017): 477–89. https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v15i2.773.
[174] The Mentor, "The Conscience of a Hacker," *Phrack.org* (January 8, 1986). https://phrack.org/issues/7/3.html#article.
[175] Samuel, "Hacktivism and the Future of Political Participation," chap.5.
[176] Samuel, "Hacktivism and the Future of Political Participation," 212.

Both Anonymous and WikiLeaks can be seen as two populist anti-system forces that have used technology to mobilise and address "the people", reject traditional standards of accountability, promote radical transparency and appeal to a widespread anti-establishment sentiment. While their operations are controversial, they have constituted a point of no return in redefining the landscape of political activism in the digital age; their alacrity has stimulated public debate towards demands for a more "biodegradable" power, understood as more sensitive and responsive to the needs of communities and less oppressive.[177] This debate reflects an enduring, unresolved tension between two opposing systems: one based on the sovereignty of States and the other on the desire for global solidarity and justice. Finding a definitive response to this is still one of the most significant challenges facing contemporary activists. They are compelled to act in an increasingly interconnected society that is, nevertheless, characterised by profound power imbalances and systemic inequalities.

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[177] Keane, "Democracy in the Age of Google, Facebook and WikiLeaks."

Part Two: The Development of the 5-Star Movement

2.1 From the Firmament to the Parliament: The Rise of the 5-Star Movement in the Italian Historical Context

The peculiarity of the Italian state machine is shown

by the connection,

if not the union,

between the personnel of the state apparatus,

the personnel of finance and industry,

to a greater extent than in other bourgeois states,

and the basis of clientelism, transformism, inefficiency at all levels.

- PCd'I, 4th Congress of the Communist International, 1922

The Five-Star-Movement (*MoVimento 5 Stelle*, in this thesis FSM or M5S) is commonly defined as the crasis between Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio. Metaphorically speaking, it was the souls and visions of the two founders of the Movement that combined to shape what was, in its own way, a true revolution in the Italian political landscape. Originally, to this bizarre pairing, the former contributed with his irreverent spirit and radical ecologism, while the latter brought digital technology and the exhumation of the Athenian dream of direct democracy. This joint intellectual contribution to the project can be found in the branding of the 5 Star Movement itself; indeed, 4 of the 5 stars referred to environmentalist themes: Public Water, Environment,

Sustainable Mobility and Development, while the last star corresponded to Connectivity, a clear contribution from the other soul of the project, G. Casaleggio.[178]

Prior to his emergence on the Italian political stage as a co-founder of the 5 Star Movement, Beppe Grillo had a distinct history. Known to the general public as a satirical comedian, Grillo embarked on a circuitous journey that led him to cultivate a heightened civic awareness and a progressive commitment to social and environmental issues. During the 1990s, Grillo progressively distanced himself from television, a medium in which his incisive satire had begun to encounter resistance and political pressure. This shift in platform enabled him to cultivate a more authentic relationship with his audience, articulating an increasingly forthright critique of authority and environmental degradation.

The advent of the new millennium saw Grillo further his commitment to supporting civil and ecological campaigns, participating in events and initiatives promoted by associations and movements, and voicing his opposition to the excesses of globalised capitalism, the risks of biotechnology, and against neo-liberalism, while also advocating for environmental protection. He assumed the role of spokesperson for numerous environmental initiatives, including the 2003 referendum campaign against electromagnetic pollution promoted by the Greens.

In addition, he engaged in several battles in defence of consumers, notably against prominent corporations such as Telecom[179] and Parmalat[180], and campaigned for the elimination of mobile phone charging costs[181], aligning himself with the ideological tenets of the first *phone-phreakers*. His growing popularity led to him becoming a point of reference for organisations such as *Rete Lilliput*, which provocatively put him forward as a candidate for the presidency of the World Trade Organisation. The objective of this candidature was to transform the institution into one that would guarantee the environment, social rights and fair trade.[182]

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[178] Movimento 5 Stelle, *Carta Di Firenze*, Archive.org, March 8, 2009. https://web.archive.org/web/20180227034912/https://www.movimento5stelle.it/listeciviche/documenti/carta_di_firenze.pdf.

[179] Beppe Grillo, "Telecom: Una Storia Italiana," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, September 26, 2006. https://beppegrillo.it/telecom-una-storia-italiana/.

[180] Beppe Grillo, "PARMALAT: Vota NO!," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, June 25, 2015. https://beppegrillo.it/parmalat-vota-no/.

[181] Piergiorgio Corbetta and Elisabetta Gualmini, *Il Partito Di Grillo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2013): 10.

[182] Beppe Grillo, "Un Comico a Capo Del WTO?," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, May 18, 2005. https://beppegrillo.it/un-comico-a-capo-del-wto/.

His own definitive entry into the political arena coincided with the inauguration of his blog, www.beppegrillo.it, an innovative communication instrument conceptualised and administered by Gianroberto Casaleggio, the "Web guru" and proprietor of a web marketing enterprise, the *Casaleggio Associati*.[183] The blog functioned as a conduit through which Grillo disseminated his message, mobilised consensus, and cultivated a distinct political entity, with the objective of ensuring its survival in the face of the inevitable obsolescence of the political class.

The dynamism of the Five-Star-Movement, inherent in its very name, poses quite a number of challenges for the historiographical research concerned with it. The first problem arises in placing its actual emergence in a timeline. One potential approach is to trace the Movement's origins back to the date of its formal establishment as a political party, on the 4 October 2009.[184]

However, this could be met with resistance from the Movement's founder, Beppe Grillo, who could contest the reliability of this temporal and factual reference. At the official launch of the Movement, he reiterated his aversion to establishing a conventional party, an apparatus or an intermediary structure, opting instead for a "movement in the first-person plural: We, the citizens".[185] Indeed, a distinctive attribute of this political current, with which we will soon become acquainted, is its pronounced "anti-partyism"[186], characterised by the persistent rejection of the designation of political party and the celebration of its self-proclaimed "people's movement". Consequently, it claims to be a "democratic encounter outside of party and associative ties and without the mediation of directive or representational organisms, recognising

[183] Associazione Rousseau, "Gianroberto Casaleggio: Web Ergo Sum" *Il Blog delle Stelle*, May 14, 2021. https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2021/05/gianroberto-casaleggio-web-ergo-sum.html.

[184] Beppe Grillo, "4 Ottobre: Nasce un Nuovo Movimento" *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, October 4, 2009. https://web.archive.org/web/20091008105134/http://www.beppegrillo.it:80/iniziative/movimentocinquestelle/index.php.

[185] Beppe Grillo, "Grillo - Noi: I Cittadini," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, August 4, 2009. https://beppegrillo.it/grillo168-noi-i-cittadini/.

[186] A Political Atlas-Demos & Pi Institute poll conducted in 2014 sought to ascertain the reasons for the success of the M5S. At the time, the M5S had received a significant number of votes in the previous elections. The poll posed the following question to participants: In your opinion, did this happen mainly... (% values), 59.1% of the voters of the 5-Star Movement in September 2013 answered "because it expresses protest against the parties generally" or "because it expresses protest against the government"; data in Fabio Bordignon and Luigi Ceccarini, "Protest and Project, Leader and Party: Normalisation of the Five Star Movement," *Contemporary Italian Politics* 6, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 54–72, https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2014.881015.

to all users of the Internet the role of government and direction that is normally attributed to a few".[187]

Nevertheless, classical studies in political science, including the one of Sartori (1976), provide an operational definition of a party that is congruent with the M5S: "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".[188]

At the same time, however, the other peculiarities of the Movement, especially in its early days, are not easily accommodated within the conceptual models and classical political theories of representative democracy.

Consequently, academic publications, intrigued by the distinctiveness of this phenomenon, have focused on analysing the characteristics of the 5-Star Movement embodiment; conversely, its founder and its adherents, from the inception, have been engaged in delineating the characteristics that the Movement would not have embodied. Beppe Grillo, with good reason, could be defined as a counter-trend politician, an atypical "No-Man": no headquarters, no offices, no congresses, no executives, no officials, no membership cards, no positioning in traditional right/left cleavages, no hierarchy (at least in theory).[189]

Since the publication of the "non-statute" in 2009, the 5-star "non-association" became, in the 2013 national parliamentary elections, the second most voted "non-party" in Italy. This event signifies the most momentous electoral debut for a political formation in the post-Second World War era of Italy's history, a fact that is even more remarkable when one considers its origins in the form of a modest online blog. [190]

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[187] Movimento 5 Stelle, *Non-Statute*, December 10, 2009. https://www.politicalpartydb.org/wp-content/uploads/Statutes/Italy/IT_M5S_2009.pdf.

[188] Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976):Chapter 3.2 the minimal definition. https://archive.org/details/partiespartysyst0000sart/page/n3/mode/2up.

[189] Beppe Grillo, "Il M5S Non è Di Sinistra (E Neppure Di Destra)," *Blog di Beppe Grillo*, May 19, 2013. https://web.archive.org/web/20140707163402/http://www.beppegrillo.it/2013/05/il_m5s_non_e_di.html.

[190] Filipe Campante, Ruben Durante, and Francesco Sobbrio, "Politics 2.0: The Multifaceted Effect of Broadband Internet on Political Participation," *Journal of the European Economic Association* 16, no. 4 (December 12, 2017): 1094–1136. https://doi.org/10.1093/jeea/jvx044.

2.1.1 From the TV to the Blogosphere

The *Anthropocene* of the Five-Star Movement can be traced back to a pivotal encounter between Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio in 2004.

Thus, for the purposes of this thesis, the commencement of the blog activity, on 26 January 2005, constitutes the inaugural point in the FSM adventure. The topics freewheelingly addressed by the Genoese comedian in his virtual community are the most disparate; from criticism of precarious employment (a conversation in which the Nobel Prize winner Stiglitz also joined in)[191] to the ones of Italian finance, from attacks on parliamentarians (both *ad personam* and on the parties they represent) to those against the President of the Italian Republic (addressed as the "Morpheus Napolitano")[192], from the critique of the partisan press to advocacy for free information.

Following a tentative beginning, in 2008 the digital demanio named after its founder, was recognised by Time as one of the 25 most influential blogs on a global scale which had been established three years earlier.[193] Such a precipitous ascent to success is rarely fortuitous; rather, it is the consequence of the convergence of two contingent factors: a motivated disillusionment among the Italian populace with traditional politics and the ascendance of the Internet as their preferred medium of information.

With regard to the first element, it is evident that over the two decades preceding 2009, there was a growing distrust of traditional political parties in Italy, which were perceived as corrupt, inefficient and unresponsive to the needs of citizens.[194] The 1990s saw the collapse of the so-called "First Italian Republic", precipitated by the *Tangentopoli* scandal and the *Mani Pulite* judicial operation[195], which led to the disintegration of the traditional political parties, including the Christian Democrats and the Italian Socialist Party. However, the transition to the "Second Italian Republic" failed to address the underlying issues, resulting in the emergence of corruption

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[191] Beppe Grillo, "Il Patto Col Diavolo, Di Joseph E. Stiglitz," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, January 10, 2007. https://beppegrillo.it/il-patto-col-diavolo-di-joseph-e-stiglitz/.

[192] Beppe Grillo, "Napolitano Imperiale," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, December 3, 2009. https://beppegrillo.it/napolitano-imperiale/?print=pdf.

[193] Corbetta and Gualmini, *Partito di Grillo,* p.45.

[194] Corbetta and Gualmini, *Partito di Grillo*, chap.1.

[195] A term, sometimes translated as "Bribesville", coined to describe pervasive corruption in the Italian political system exposed in 1992–96 by the "Clean Hands" (*Mani Pulite)* series of judicial investigations.

and clientelism as structural and systemic within the institutions and their constituent parties.[196] The electorate's realisation of the endemic nature of the problem resulted in a participation *vacuum*, which subsequently led to a growing demand for the renewal of the trust pact between representatives and citizens.[197] This generalised disillusionment was further exacerbated by the global economic and financial crisis that began in 2008, which led to austerity measures and an escalation in the already high level of social discontent. The latter proved to be an indispensable element in the success of the nascent "*grillino*"[198] project. [199]

In this context, the harangues typed on the blog readily gained traction in the public opinion of the expanding web, thereby creating a daily source of antagonists to challenge, and a means of venting frustration.[200] With intrepid assessments and ostentatious ambushes, each blog post became a battleground, in which Grillo's "soliloquy" invariably prevailed.[201] In blog entries, such as "Let's nationalise the banks"[202], "Clean Stock Exchange"[203], and "The banks and waffle politics"[204], Grillo identified the major financial institutions of the country as the adversary, accusing them of introducing "toxic poisons" into the financial system, such as derivatives and junk bonds, thus promoting a "capitalism without capital". In this instance, the proposal is for the nationalisation of the banks with a view to removing them from the control of "inadequate people"[205] and returning them to the community.

However, the theme that has gradually become more and more present between the lines of the blog, to the point of becoming its undisputed protagonist, is the open criticism of the political "castes", which can be summed up with the slogan "Clean Parliament!"[206].

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[196] Lorenzo Mosca, "The Five Star Movement: Exception or Vanguard in Europe?," *The International Spectator* 49, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 36–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2013.875821.

[197] Corbetta and Gualmini, *Partito di Grillo*, chap.1.

[198] It is the name given to followers of Grillo's movement and to its voters

[199] Mosca, "The Five Star Movement," 45.

[200] Mosca, "The Five Star Movement," 45.

[201] Corbetta and Gualmini, *Partito di Grillo*, 36.

[202] Beppe Grillo, "Nazionalizziamo Le Banche," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, March 15, 2012. https://beppegrillo.it/nazionalizziamo-le-banche/.

[203] Beppe Grillo, "Borsa Pulita," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, October 14, 2008. https://beppegrillo.it/borsa-pulita/.

[204] Beppe Grillo, "Le Banche E La Politica Cialtrona," Il Blog di Beppe Grillo, October 8, 2008. https://beppegrillo.it/le-banche-e-la-politica-cialtrona/.

[205] Beppe Grillo, "Appello Del Blog Beppegrillo.it," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, August 25, 2005. https://beppegrillo.it/appello-del-blog-beppegrillo-it/.

[206] Beppe Grillo, "Condannati in Parlamento," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, February 15, 2006. https://web.archive.org/web/20060215140828/http://www.beppegrillo.it/condannati_parlamento.php.

"…Class conflict has been replaced by caste conflict, or rather the battle between those who produce wealth and social services and the parasite class, the caste. The castes are everywhere. The political caste, the caste of the newspapers, the caste of the bureaucracy, the caste of the public administration, the caste of the useless entities, the caste of the companies partially owned by the State, the caste of the companies managing concessions, the caste of the golden pensions. Infinite castes that strangle the citizen like a boa constrictor. The power of the caste does not stem from the control of the means of production, but from the control of the media. The battle against the castes is the true political battle…"[207]

Thus, in consideration of the second contingent element referenced above and in continuity with the latter citation, the particular impact of information and communication technologies on the Italian political landscape, which, due to contextual factors, underwent a distinct evolution compared to other Western democracies, also exerted an influence on the popularity of the blog. Indeed, the Italian media system is historically characterised by a strong political parallelism, i.e. the correspondence between the structure of the media system and that of the party system.[208] This correlation was evident in the content disseminated by the media and in the institutional connections between information outlets, political parties and journalists.[209] Furthermore, at the turn of the new millennium, the Italian media landscape was characterised by a dual factor: the first of these was Silvio Berlusconi's monopoly on the main private television channels, so much so that we can speak of a new type of "disfigured democracy"[210] or "telecracy"[211]; and the state management of the public broadcasters (Rai1, Rai2 and Rai3), whose board of directors is directly

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[207] Beppe Grillo, "Lotta Di Casta," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, July 7, 2013. https://beppegrillo.it/lotta-di-casta/.

[208] Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, "The Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model," in *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 89–142. https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/comparing-media-systems/mediterranean-or-polarized-pluralist-model/38F9E34BDE32482DE76E925873754446.

[209] Hallin and Mancini, "The Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model."

[210] Cathy Elliott University, review of *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*, by Nadia Urbinati, *Choice Reviews Online* 52, no. 02 (September 22, 2014): 141-144. https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.52-1103.

[211] Bernard Stiegler, *La Télécratie Contre La Démocratie* (Paris: Flammarion, 2008): 19. https://excerpts.numilog.com/books/9782082105699.pdf.

influenced by the parties, even enjoying a parliamentary commission. This process of *lottizzazione* of the public media environment gave rise to a communicative model, whereby journalistic information and political communication frequently converged, thereby reinforcing and perpetuating pre-existing power dynamics.[212]

In this highly polarised environment, Beppe Grillo's blog emerged as a pioneering platform that challenged the conventional top-down system of mass information, effectively capturing the prevailing discontent with the media and the political monopoly on information. Utilising an inquisitorial approach and a pronounced anti-establishment critique, his blog intercepted a public disillusioned not only with the ruling class, but also with the traditional mass media communication, perceived as inextricably linked to the party system. Grillo envisioned that the parallelism between political parties and the mass media not only oriented public discourse, but also constrained informational pluralism.[213] Consequently, the Italian blogosphere presented a conducive environment for the articulation of alternative narratives, wherein ordinary citizens, political milieu, and intellectuals could engage with issues that had been marginalised by the mainstream media. This facilitated the establishment of constructive resistance to official information, when perceived as a vehicle for government propaganda.

Beppe Grillo, for his part, was well-suited to the role of a figure who could transcend the prevailing unilateralism in Italian media, partly due to his own intolerance of contradictory views, and partly because of the archetype he embodied in the common Italian imagery. Indeed, Grillo had already gained a degree of public recognition as a comedian in the 1990s and had previously encountered exclusion from mainstream media due to his satirical critiques of the political leaders of that era.[214] Following his expulsion from public television, he transitioned his performances to the streets and theatres, fostering a direct connection with the audience.[215] The subsequent evolution of his communication strategy, characterised by the launch of his blog, entailed a blend

[212] Hallin and Mancini, "The Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model,"108.

[213] Beppe Grillo, "#DittatuRAI," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, October 21, 2015. https://beppegrillo.it/dittaturai/.

[214] Filippo Tronconi, "Introduction," in *Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement*, 1st ed. (Reprint, Routledge, 2016): 1-5. https://www.perlego.com/book/1632906.

[215] Tronconi, "Introduction."

of political satire, social, environmental and economic concerns, alongside the strenuous defence of citizens' civil liberties.

This format garnered a substantial and heterogeneous audience, thereby establishing the blog as the prominent platform for independent public discourse in Italy.[216] This success demonstrated the potential of digital technologies to overcome the barriers imposed by media monopolies, whilst also reflecting a growing demand for information spaces that are free from political conditioning.[217]

However, this request soon evolved into an aggregative drive that went beyond mere virtual interaction. The realisation of this need to meet was facilitated by the Meetup platform, a social networking portal adopted by Casaleggio Associati to facilitate offline meetings between like-minded people with shared interests.[218]

This approach, as acknowledged by its promoters, was inspired by the model of MoveOn, an American progressive advocacy organisation that used digital technologies to promote collective action from below. Through Meetup forums linked to the site [219], the movement's sympathisers formed local groups that initially campaigned on specific issues, such as opposition to the privatisation of municipal water resources, high-speed trains (No-Tav) and the construction of incinerators. These collectives, dispersed throughout Italy, constituted the foundational nodes for the subsequent network organisation of the Movement, thereby metamorphosing a digital base into a movement with national ramifications.[220]

2.1.2 From the Blogosphere to the Streets

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[216] Alberto Pepe and Corinna Di Gennaro, "Political Protest Italian-Style: The Blogosphere and Mainstream Media in the Promotion and Coverage of Beppe Grillo's V-Day," *First Monday* 14, no. 12 (December 6, 2009). https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v14i12.2740.

[217] Pepe and Di Gennaro, "Political Protest Italian-Style."

[218] Beppe Grillo, "Incontriamoci: MeetUp - Il Blog Di Beppe Grillo," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, July 16, 2005. https://beppegrillo.it/incontriamoci-meetup/.

[219] MeetUp login page: http://beppegrillo.meetup.com - Page for creating a group with Beppe Grillo http://beppegrillo.meetup.com/create - Registration page for the first group created: http://beppegrillo.meetup.com/1.

[220] Giuseppe Ieraci and Ruggero Toffoletto, "From Movement to Party. MeetUp Groups, Policies and Conflict in the Organisational Development of the Italian Five Stars Movement (2008-2014)" 25, no. 3 (January 1, 2018): 399–422.

The point of no return was reached on 8 September 2007, with the first "V-Day" (Bugger off-Day), a mass demonstration organised through MeetUp channels and held in Bologna, as in 200 other Italian and 20 abroad cities, on a deferred basis. This event can be regarded as the material manifestation of an increasingly radical critique of representative democracy.[221] Indeed, the protest was intended to serve as a collection point for signatures in support of a popular law that called for the prohibition of convicted individuals from holding positions within Parliament, the reform of the electoral system to facilitate direct candidate selection, the imposition of a limit of two parliamentary terms of office, and the prohibition of the accumulation of more than one elective office.[222] The collection achieved a significant success, assembling over 336,000 signatures, well in excess of the 50,000 required.[223]

In 2008, Beppe Grillo repeated the initiative with "V2-Day", this time focusing on the issue of press independence and freedom of information. This second event promoted a referendum to eliminate public subsidies to newspapers, repeal the Television Frequencies Act and abolish the Order of Journalists, which were held responsible for the strong political parallelism that characterised the Italian media system.[224] This second event also experienced an encouraging consensus: 50,000 people took part in the demonstration in Turin and more than one million signatures for the petition were collected around the squares of Italy.[225] It is well recognized that the success of V-Day should be attributed primarily to the support of other peer-bloggers and small local newspapers, underscoring the pivotal role of the grassroots in fostering the movement.[226]

Building on this enthusiastic popular response, Grillo presented to the public the "Florence Charter" at the first national meeting of the Five-Star Civic Lists, in Florence, in March 2009. The

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[221] Pepe and Di Gennaro, "Political Protest Italian-Style."
[222] Ilvo Diamanti, "The 5 Star Movement: A Political Laboratory," *Contemporary Italian Politics* 6, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 4–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2014.881016.
[223] Pepe and Di Gennaro, "Political Protest Italian-Style."
[224] Al Jazeera – *People and Power with Beppe Grillo.* YouTube video, interview with Beppe Grillo, 23:45. (October 2, 2008). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xAn74F5rjgo..
[225] Al Jazeera – *People and Power with Beppe Grillo.*
[226] Pepe and Di Gennaro, "Political Protest Italian-Style."

12-point programmatic manifesto emphasised issues such as environmental sustainability, transparency in decision-making processes and the participation of local activists.[227]

This embryonic phase as an active political actor highlights the horizontal and anti-ideological nature of the Movement, which attracts the support of independent figures such as Sonia Alfano and Luigi de Magistris, later elected to the European Parliament under the *Italia dei Valori* lists.[228] The local electoral success of the Civic Lists, with the election of 23 municipal councillors in 2009, consolidated the Movement's legitimacy as an emerging political actor to be aware of. [229]

2.1.3 From the Streets to the Parliament

At this juncture, we are reunited with the fictional beginning of the Movement's history, previously mentioned, with the announcement of its official founding as a political force in October 2009 at the Smeraldo theatre in Milan.[230] Once formalised, the 5-Star Movement achieved its first significant successes in the 2010 local elections, succeeding in electing regional councillors in Emilia-Romagna and Piemonte.[231] This result reinforced the M5S's image as an autonomous movement deeply rooted in territorial instances and aimed at overcoming conventional politics.

In 2012, the M5S reached a turning point with the municipal elections, winning four mayors, including Federico Pizzarotti in Parma, and achieving significant results in several cities in northern and central Italy.[232] The movement's anti-system approach and sharp criticism of the *partitocrazia* were confirmed also in the Sicilian regional elections of the same year, where it

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[227] Beppe Grillo, "Dieci Anni Fa Il Futuro Con La Carta Di Firenze," *Il Blog Delle Stelle*, March 8, 2019. https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2019/03/dieci-anni-fa-il-futuro-con-la-carta-di-firenze.html.

[228] Beppe Grillo, "L'Europa è Lontana, Più Lontana Della Luna," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, May 28, 2009. https://beppegrillo.it/leuropa-e-lontana-piu-lontana-della-luna/.

[229] Beppe Grillo, "Comunicato Politico Numero Ventitre," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, July 4, 2009. https://beppegrillo.it/comunicato-politico-numero-ventitre/.

[230] Movimento 5 Stelle, *Carta di Firenze*."

[231] Beppe Grillo, "2010: L'anno Dell'elmetto," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, December 31, 2009. https://beppegrillo.it/grillo168-2010-lanno-dellelmetto/.

[232] Silvia Bia, "M5s, Il Lungo Addio Di Federico Pizzarotti: Dal Trionfo Di Parma al Mancato Invito a 'Italia 5…,'" *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, October 3, 2016. https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2016/10/03/m5s-il-lungo-addio-di-pizzarotti-dal-trionfo-di-parma-al-mancato-invito-a-italia-5-stelle/3072138/.

became the most popular political force [233], strengthening its image as the advocate of popular demands on citizens' disputes. Indeed, the field research by Ieraci and Toffoletto (2018) confirmed that the promotion of a novel civic-minded vision of politics was the key to the Movement's success in this particular phase; the environmental issue, expressed in different forms, represents the core of the policies put forward by the 5 Star Movement.[234]

This priority is accompanied by a strong emphasis on the fight against corruption and the active involvement of citizens, as well as the accountability of parliamentary spokespersons. Moreover, principles such as transparency, integrity and meritocracy in political selection processes, together with the MeetUp's bottom-up control over institutional representatives, are the fundamental pillars of this renewed conception of politics elaborated by the FSM.[235]

Increasingly brazen and unstoppable, in the 2013 national elections, the 5-Star Movement openly challenged the *status quo*, refuting traditional channels of communication for conducting their electoral campaign, such as televised debates, in favour of a direct approach to the public, though, for example, the "Tsunami Tour".[236] With 25.55% of the vote in the Chamber of Deputies and 23.79% in the Senate, the M5S emerges as the second political force in Italy, embodying a clear break with the traditional party system.[237] In Parliament, the movement adopts a rigid opposition line, rejecting alliances with other political forces, as the interpretation of the non-statute forbids, and promoting an approach based on a case-by-case assessment of legislative proposals.[238] As a matter of fact, "Beppe Grillo and the MoVimento 5 Stelle have a monogamous relation with the people, and there are loyal to them".[239]

This abnegation of the traditional party dynamics that the system had imbued itself with also manifested itself at Palazzo Chigi, in the consultations for the formation of the government, when

[233] Divisione Stampa Nazionale, "Sicilia - Elezioni Regionali 28 Ottobre 2012," *la Repubblica.it*, October 28, 2012. https://www.repubblica.it/static/speciale/2012/elezioni/regionali/sicilia.html?ref=HREA-1#risultati

[234] Ieraci and Toffoletto, "From Movement to Party," 13.

[235] Ieraci and Toffoletto, "From Movement to Party," 13.

[236] Beppe Grillo, "Tsunami Tour - Il Blog Di Beppe Grillo," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, January 11, 2013. https://beppegrillo.it/tsunami-tour/.

[237] Senate of the Italian Republic, "Senato.it - Elezioni 2013: Riepilogo Nazionale," *www.senato.it*, October 28, 2013. https://www.senato.it/leg/17/Elettorale/riepilogo.htm.

[238] Beppe Grillo, "Il Mercato Delle Vacche Del Pd," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, March 2013. https://beppegrillo.it/il-mercato-delle-vacche-del-pd/.

[239] Beppe Grillo, "Stalking," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, October 3, 2010. https://beppegrillo.it/stalking-politico/.

the M5S rejected the Democratic Party's openings, emphasising its ideological and strategic autonomy.[240] This choice ultimately consecrated the Movement's image as the anti-political force par excellence, introducing a multitude of novelties in a stagnant contemporary Italian party landscape. The recently elected parliamentarians are predominantly *homines novi*, i.e. individuals with whom the activists are unfamiliar, and who almost invariably lack any prior experience of politics.[241] Their backgrounds include students, the unemployed, blue-collar workers, the self-employed, and professionals from a variety of sectors.[242]

Grillo thus comments on the election of the first MPs of the Movement's "Red Wave": "We take note that the people will enter in the Parliament for the first time in history; until now, the people delegated to the MPs who delegated to the governments who delegated to organised crime".[243] He then made the following ironic addition: "these guys maybe lack experience, they haven't yet learned how to rig a budget, or how to give contracts to their friends...".[244]

In conclusion, it could be easily asserted that the FSM has been able to channel popular discontent towards virtual platforms, first, and then towards the ballot box, and finally fuse them together into a consensual demand for perpetual voting through digital devices. The movement has skilfully positioned itself at the intersection of a desire for greater citizen involvement and the generalised rejection of political professionalism, interpreted by Grillo and his followers as a guarantee of impropriety. The outcome has been the institutionalised formation of a fluid congregation of disillusioned citizens, occupying a liminal space between a revolutionary social movement and a reactionary, *smoke-filled* room.

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[240] Marta Musso and Marzia Maccaferri, "At the Origins of the Political Discourse of the 5-Star Movement (M5S): Internet, Direct Democracy and the 'Future of the Past,'" *Internet Histories* 2, no. 1-2 (April 3, 2018): 98–120. https://doi.org/10.1080/24701475.2018.1457295.

[241] According to the previously mentioned study by the Political Atlas- Demos & Pi Institute, this factor had a considerable influence in the election results; to the question: "The reasons for the M5S's success. At the last elections, the M5S received many votes. In your opinion, did this happen mainly... (% values)", 32.8% of the 5-Star Movement voters interviewed in May 2012 answered "because its candidates were extraneous to the parties and closer to citizens' needs." in Bordignon and Ceccarini, "Protest and Project, Leader and Party."

[242] Bordignon and Ceccarini, "Protest and Project, Leader and Party."

[243] Beppe Grillo, "Il Parlamento Dei Cittadini - Il Blog Delle Stelle," *Il Blog delle Stelle*, February 26, 2013. https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2013/02/il_parlamento_d.html

[244] Beppe Grillo, "Il MoVimento 5 Stelle Sul New Yok Times," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, May 20, 2012. https://beppegrillo.it/il-movimento-5-stelle-sul-new-yok-times/.

2.2 Each One Counts One, Someone Counts Two: the Organisational Structure of the 5-Star Movement, from Ideal to Hypocrisy

If we remove the money and career from politics,

politics becomes a beautiful thing.

-Beppe Grillo, 2008

In the embryonic phase of an organisation's development, a number of crucial dilemmas inevitably arise, the resolution of which will have a profound impact on its future. These include the role to be played by the leadership, the control mechanisms to be put in place, the range of powers to be granted to ordinary members, the criteria for access to the organisation and, last but not least, how to maintain consistency with the organisation's founding principles over time. In the specific case of the 5-Star Movement, its internal structure should have reflected a concrete manifestation of its fundamental ideal of direct democracy.[245] While we await *Minerva's Nottola*, or, more pragmatically, the following paragraphs, to address the ideological drift and disregard for its founding principles, here we will commence by outlining the structure that the Movement adopted to embody its ideals in institutional venues at the dawn of its formalisation as a political party.

The organisation of the Movement was governed, broadly speaking, by what, in order to differentiate itself from the traditional parties was called the "non-statute".[246]

The document under scrutiny is comprised of a mere seven articles, which, due to their general nature, have been subject to a multitude of subsequent interpretations and reinterpretations of various kinds. It is noteworthy that, in defiance of the principles of political science, the M5s constitutes itself as a "non-association", thereby repudiating the hypothesis that it could ever become a political party in the conventional sense. [247]

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[245] Musso and Maccaferri, "At the Origins of the Political Discourse of the 5-Star Movement (M5S)."
[246] Movimento 5 Stelle, *Non-Statute*, December 10, 2009.
[247] Movimento 5 Stelle, *Non-Statute*, art.4.

According to this document, the Movement is simply "a platform and a vehicle for discussion and consultation that originates from and finds its epicentre in the blog www.beppegrillo.it. The headquarter of the *MoVimento 5 Stelle* coincides, therefore, with the blog domain.[248]

The M5S did not conceptualise the establishment of physical spaces for coordination and decision-making at the national or regional level; the sole recognised assembly framework was that of local MeetUps. The creation of an internal organisational structure was, initially, negatively considered, as the premise for the definition of hierarchies and the ossification of an internal debate polarised into currents led by leaders. These elements would have undermined the horizontal nature of the M5S, bringing it closer to the party-form. [249]

Actually, the slogan "each one counts one" encapsulates the approach that Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio summarised, and which is enshrined in Article 4 of the inaugural non-statute. There, the purpose of M5s is indicated in the desire to witness the possibility of an effective exchange of opinions and democratic confrontation outside the traditional binding associative and party ties and without the mediation of internal representative bodies, recognising for the totality of the net's users the role of government and direction normally attributed to a few. This rejection of "mediation" is reflected in the fact that, unlike the statutes of traditional parties, the M5s statutes did not originally set up a body to guarantee internal democracy but limited itself to indicating some general rules for the selection of candidates, explicated in article 7.[250]

Regarding participation in the movement, as art. 5 states, "it does not require any formalities other than registration on a normal Internet site"[251] and "there is no fee to join"[252]. Membership is therefore open to all "Italian citizens over 18 years old", but on condition that they "do not belong to political parties or associations whose aims or objectives conflict with those of the Movement".[253]

Finally, Article 3 states that the name and the logo of the Movement are "registered in the name of Beppe Grillo, the sole owner of the rights to use it".[254] This article is arguably the most

[248] Movimento 5 Stelle, *Non-Statute*, art.1.
[249] Roberto Biorcio and Paolo Natale, *Politica a 5 stelle* (Milan: Feltrinelli Editore, 2013): chap. 2.
[250] Movimento 5 Stelle, *Non-Statute*, art.7.
[251] Movimento 5 Stelle, *Non-Statute*, art.5.
[252]Movimento 5 Stelle, *Non-Statute*, art.6.
[253] Movimento 5 Stelle, *Non-Statute*, art.5.
[254] Movimento 5 Stelle, *Non-Statute*, art.3.

contested aspect of the document among party members, as it conceptualises the Movement as a commercial enterprise presided over by a "father-master", thereby accentuating the forms of personalisation of the party, which are already prevalent in the Italian political landscape.[255] Disputes over the utilisation of the Movement's name and logo ultimately led to the expulsion of certain members. The internal political structure of the M5S can be characterised, in Loris Caruso's terms, as a participatory oligarchy, a synthesis of Bonapartism and direct democracy.[256] Consequently, in the evolutionary trajectory of the M5S the blog precedes the organisation of the Movement at the institutional level, not only chronologically, but also structurally, given the central role it occupies even in the very act of constitution of it as non-party. In contradistinction to the pervasive plurality of leaderships that characterises social movements, the M5S forthwith adopted a monocratic structure, which subsequently evolved into a diarchy (considering Casaleggio as the Movement's co-founder) that was intended to embody and amplify the demands of activists. Although the Meetups, as connected microcosms, constituted the Movement's spinal element, they converged around a clearly defined centre of gravity.[257]

Beppe Grillo's dual political proposal was predicated on the one hand, on the notion of "total democracy" and, on the other, on the trust placed in a charismatic and highly recognisable figure, namely himself. This combination has attracted two distinct, and sometimes incompatible, groups of supporters to the movement, who held divergent conceptions of participatory democracy. One vision, in fact, limits itself to inclusive participation, while the other aspires to integrate deliberative elements. It is imperative to underscore the distinction between the concepts of participatory and deliberative democracy, which are frequently employed as synonyms. However, these concepts in fact represent historically distinct phenomena.[258]

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[255] Fabio Bordignon and Luigi Ceccarini, "Five Stars and a Cricket. Beppe Grillo Shakes Italian Politics," *South European Society and Politics* 18, no. 4 (December 2013): 427–49. https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2013.775720.

[256] Loris Caruso, "Digital Capitalism and the End of Politics: The Case of the Italian Five Star Movement," *Politics & Society* 45, no. 4 (October 3, 2017): 585–609. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329217735841.

[257] Francesca Veltri and Paolo Ceri, *Il Movimento nella rete*, (Rosenberg & Sellier, 2017): 20. https://www.perlego.com/book/1096408.

[258] Jan Van Dijk, "Digital Democracy: Vision and Reality," (2013). https://www.utwente.nl/en/bms/vandijk/research/itv/itv_plaatje/Digital%20Democracy-%20Vision%20and%20Reality.pdf.

Deliberative democracy, in its classical sense, is grounded on a discourse between equal actors, irrespective of the number of participants, and prioritises the quality of discussions over their inclusivity. This concept can be constrained to elected representatives, as observed in contemporary parliamentary democracies, or can be extended to all stakeholders, thereby achieving a synthesis of deliberation and participation.[259]

By contrast, participatory democracy is premised on inclusivity and the involvement of all relevant stakeholders in decision-making processes, though it does not inherently entail dialectical confrontation. Participants may limit their involvement to expressing a preference among the options put forward by a leader, without engaging directly with other members of the community.[260]

Notwithstanding, both forms carry with them the potential for certain risks: deliberation may lapse into elitism, while participation may be reduced to a plebiscitary dynamic.[261]

In the context of the M5S, the transition from the rhizomatic structure of the Meetups to the centralised structure of the Movement was driven by two key factors among many others: the desire to preserve the power and influence of and by its founders, and the progressive integration of the M5S into State institutions.[262] In the event of the democratisation process within the M5S proving successful, there was the possibility of the Meetups either becoming more cohesive, similar to social movements, or remaining autonomous interconnected groups on the federative model. However, both of these outcomes would have entailed a progressive detachment from the blog and from the central figure of Grillo. This evolution was met with opposition from those who regarded the political leader as an indispensable point of reference. Consequently, with the official establishment of the FSM, a transition was observed from a multipolar system of Meetup groups to a progressively more centralised structure. In this new structure, individuals registered on the portal form a virtual assembly devoid of direct contact or structured ideological cohesion. Any

[259] Jon Elster, "Deliberative Democracy," in *Deliberative Democracy*, ed. Jon Elster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998):1–18. https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139175005.002.

[260] Antonio Floridia and Rinaldo Vignati, "Deliberativa, Diretta O Partecipativa?," *Quaderni Di Sociologia*, no. 65 (August 1, 2014): 51–74. https://doi.org/10.4000/qds.369.

[261] Van Dijk, "Digital Democracy: Vision and Reality."

[262] Marilena Macaluso, "Attivisti 5 Stelle a Palermo: Un'analisi Esplorativa (Paper 6.1.1.)," paper presented at the *Italian Society of Political Science Conference*, April 2014. http://www.sisp.it/convegno/2014/paper/459/.

endeavour to establish stable subgroups was systematically impeded, thereby further consolidating the central role of the blog and the founder's leadership. [263]

Moreover, just in the first two years in Parliament, eight MEPs have been expelled from the Movement for publicly expressing disagreement with the Beppe Grillo's political line and internal management of decision-making processes. Meanwhile, twenty-seven MEPs have decided to leave the group autonomously, denouncing a lack of internal democracy, or in direct reaction to the expulsions of colleagues, or again for disagreements over individual political and programmatic choices.[264]

In the second case, however, the gradual institutionalisation of the Movement gave rise to a series of mechanisms for the control of the party's coordination centre, including online certification of members, the telematic selection of candidates, online voting on specific issues outlined by the centre, and the shared construction of electoral programs at local and regional levels.[265] Despite its partial institutionalisation, the Movement has not solved the organisational dilemmas of the M5S. A particularly salient issue pertains to the question of whether a political entity can successfully engage in a protracted national anti-system political struggle without being co-opted by the system itself.[266] A conspicuous contradiction inherent in the FSM is its failure to implement internal egalitarian management, thereby transforming the ideal of hyper-democracy into a systemic distortion, wherein the arithmetic average of political weight is weighted across the various decision-making levels.

The theoretical model developed by Katz and Mair is particularly efficacious in analysing the historical evolution of the movement from its origins as a blog to its institutionalisation in parliament.[267] This methodological approach enables a more profound examination of the

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[263] Lucia Montesanti and Francesca Veltri, "Un Partito in Trasformazione," *Meridiana*, no. 96 (2019): 39–62. https://doi.org/10.2307/26897701.

[264] Ilaria Giupponi, "M5S, Ondata Record Di Espulsioni Tra Attivisti Gli Avvocati Di Grillo Eliminano Le Voci Critiche," *Lespresso.it*, 16 December, 2023. https://lespresso.it/c/politica/2014/12/16/m5s-ondata-record-di-espulsioni-tra-attivisti-gli-avvocati-di-grillo-eliminano-le-voci-critiche/35757.

[265] Loris Caruso, "The 5 Star Movement and the End of Politics," *Rassegna Italiana Di Sociologia*, no. 2 (January 1, 2015): 315–40. https://doi.org/10.1423/80887.

[266] Ieraci and Toffoletto, "From Movement to Party," 20.

[267] Richard J. Katz and Peter Mair, "The Ascendancy of the Party in Public Office: Party Organizational Change in Twentieth-Century Democracies," in *Political Parties: Old Concepts and New Challenges*, ed. Richard Gunther, José Ramón Montero, and Juan J. Linz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 113–35. https://doi.org/10.1093/0199246742.003.0005.

movement's structure by considering three distinct organisational levels: the party on the ground, comprising members and militants active at the local level; the party in public office, encompassing elected members and figures holding public office; and the party in central office, represented by the leadership and the party's executive staff.[268] This functional articulation facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the movement's multifaceted nature and its transformations over time.

2.2.1 A Rhizomatic Movement? The Party On the Ground

The party on the ground level, comprising its members and militants dispersed throughout the national territory, is pivotal for an examination of the origins of the 5 Star Movement, particularly during the period between 2005 and 2012. The Movement's connection with its base constituted its distinctive and singular element, as well as a consistent reason for its electoral triumphs. The FSM has been able to assert itself in the Italian political landscape also thanks to a profound interaction with local protest movements, particularly those linked to environmental issues and opposition against the construction and/or functioning of large infrastructures.[269]

These activists' movements, which have been on the rise in Italy in recent decades [270], have provided fertile ground for the M5S, which has demonstrated a unique ability to channel the protest vote through alignment with local demands.[271] This closeness was reflected in the electoral programs, in the biography of many of its elected representatives, and the higher-than-national-average election results in the areas most affected by local conflicts.[272]

In addition to supporting pre-existing local groups involved in common causes, the 5-Star Movement initially also established itself through a grassroots mobilisation fostered by Meetups. The initiative, conceptualised by Beppe Grillo as virtual spaces to facilitate interactions between

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[268] Katz and Mair, "The Ascendancy of the Party in Public Office," 121-122.
[269] Caruso, "Digital Capitalism and the End of Politics," 599.
[270] Donatella della Porta and Gianni Piazza, *How Protest Creates Communities: An Introduction*, NEDNew edition, 1 (Berghahn Books, 2008): 1–30. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt9qd6bg.
[271] Mosca, "The Five Star Movement," 46.
[272] Caruso, "The 5 Star Movement and the End of Politics," 327.

his blog's readers[273], effectively functioned as a nexus for the formation of groups centred on hyper-local concerns. These MeetUps served a parallel aggregation role about extant territorial associations, fostering the development of localised communities. Notably, members of these groups engaged in regular in-person and online meetings, with weekly gatherings constituting the primary facet of their political engagement.[274]

This dynamic enabled the movement to temporarily fill the void left by the crisis of the traditional parties in Southern Europe, which had begun at the end of the 20th century, and which had lost their capacity for mobilisation and territorial rooting. [275] Consequently, the local MeetUps constitute the backbone of the movement's activism in its ascent into palace politics, even if these cannot be considered proper party organs. According to the data, in 2014, there were almost 3,000 Five-Star Meetup groups, totalling approximately 300,000 members.[276]

In this heterogeneous context, the party on the ground lenses of analysis make it possible to explain how the M5S has built a decentralised and fragmented militant base, but united by the internet, first on the blogosphere, then by the Movement's digital platforms. The grassroots cells in which the movement's activists congregate are both intra- and inter-connected, whilst maintaining a high degree of autonomy in both Cartesian axes. Local MeetUps, identifiable as peripheral nodes, have demonstrated their capacity to decide autonomously on local initiatives and modes of action, whilst sharing general guidelines.

 It is noteworthy that the interventions of Grillo in the affairs of the party's base are, at least in the beginning, predominantly indirect, concerning the general programmatic line presented in the blog. These actions are to a certain extent anticipated and accepted by M5s adherents.[277] In general terms, the decision-making processes within most of the Meet Up groups are characterised by independence and self-sufficiency. As with the rhizomatic mode of organization through the Web, each node is connected to every other node, without necessarily passing through an intermediary

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[273] Grillo, "Incontriamoci: MeetUp."
[274] Caruso, "The 5 Star Movement and the End of Politics," 328.
[275] Richard Gunther, José Ramón Montero, and Juan J. Linz, *Political Parties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 263. https://doi.org/10.1093/0199246742.001.0001.
[276] Fabio Bordignon and Luigi Ceccarini, "The Five-Star Movement: A Hybrid Actor in the Net of State Institutions," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 20, no. 4 (August 8, 2015): 454–73. https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571x.2015.1066112.
[277] As emerged by the interviews to 25 to 5-Stars Movement's activists, candidates, city and regional councillors quoted in Corbetta and Gualmini, *Partito di Grillo*, 139.

mediator. Similarly, the M5S MeetUps, thanks to their virtual connection, were able to communicate directly with each other, bypassing the management centre.

The financial autonomy of these local groups, as evidenced by their self-sufficient funding mechanisms, serves as a testament to their independence from external influences. This autonomy is further reinforced by their distance from the traditional parties those who benefit significantly from state funding, highlighting a clear ideological divide. In this sense, the organisational dynamism, the extensive use of digital technologies, the high level of political participation of M5s activists, the innovations introduced in the decision-making process and the originality of the forms of recruitment of political personnel serve to counterbalance the paucity of financial resources and the unavailability of real estate (in this case, venues for meetings).

In terms of the substantive operation of political action, it is possible to distinguish between the financing of the activities of local groups and the Grillo-led proposals. The central party, through personal actions and national campaigns promoted by the founder of the M5s, could self-finance itself, but it did not contributed to the financial endowment of the local branches of the party, nor does it support the territorial spheres, to avoid accusations of excessive "ingerings".[278]

On the other side of the coin, the self-financing enshrined in the "non-statute" was widely adopted by the organisation on the ground. The party on the ground mobilised autonomously and voluntarily to raise funds according to a scheme that is interpreted by activists as an extraordinary message of resourcefulness and as a distinctive element of their anti-political identity.[279]

The syntony between the M5S and the local movements, unified by the Web, was also based on a common ideological conception, centred on opposition and expressed by negation; in fact, the unifying element for this patchwork of collective actors with heterogeneous interests was projected towards resistance and action, rather than debate and negotiation. While the rhetorics of these movements may sometimes address broader issues such as democracy and development models, opposition remained the core identity, analogous to the M5S's categorical "No" to traditional parties' way of doing politics. This orientation can be defined, as "counter-

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[278] Corbetta and Gualmini, *Partito di Grillo*, 141.
[279] Corbetta and Gualmini, *Partito di Grillo*, 141.

democratic"[280], signifying a form of negative social sovereignty that is oriented towards control, veto and judgement of institutions. This approach manifests itself in an increasing "juridification" and moralisation of politics, emphasising the moral and civic accountability of institutions and advocating for greater operational transparency to reduce the distance between elected representatives and voters.[281]

Finally, the M5S and local movements both rejected the conventional political categories of left and right wings, instead favouring an issue-oriented pragmatism, a sense of citizen community and a hostility towards organised political mediators.[282] The proliferation of MeetUps was not driven by any predefined logic; rather, it is driven by local needs. The shared ideal that fortified their union is reminiscent of the geeks' "Do-ocracy", promoting an exaltation of immediacy, proximity and necessity of action.

Notwithstanding the organisational variability and the absence of official intermediate structures between the core of the party and its periphery, all local groups shared a reference to the MeetUp platform. This necessitated the delineation of specific operational roles, including organiser, co-organiser and assistant organiser, to ensure effective coordination.[283] However, as the 5-Star Movement's electoral consensus grew, the limitations of the digital platform became evident, prompting the more entrenched groups to establish physical locations, implement internal regulations and formalise a delineation of roles.

The period between 2012 and 2013 saw a sharp rise in the number of activists and local groups, further complicating the relationship between the party in public office, discussed in the next section, and the party on the ground, particularly in the absence of intermediary linking mechanisms. This necessitated the introduction of an initial internal regulation, which distinguished between web users, sympathisers and activists. The latter category, who were granted voting rights in the assemblies, were also responsible for selecting new active members. In fact, while the MeetUps in 2005, provided the necessary levity to counteract the weighting

[280] Pierre Rosanvallon and Arthur Goldhammer, *Democratic Legitimacy*, (Princeton University Press, 2011):7. https://www.perlego.com/book/735070.
[281] Corbetta and Gualmini, *Partito di Grillo*, 150-161.
[282] Corbetta and Gualmini, *Partito di Grillo*, 150-161.
[283] Ieraci and Toffoletto, "From Movement to Party," fig.1.

down of the "partyocracy", in 2013 they constituted a link too weak and fluid to be able to underpin a full-fledged palace party.[284]

2.2.2 Common People Elected in Uncommon Places: The Party in Public Office

The second level, that of the party in public office, facilitates understanding the transition of the M5S from a protest movement to an institutionalised political force.

In the elevation from the local to the institutional level, the movement needed a more defined internal structure. Consequently, commencing in 2010, local MeetUps began transforming themselves into civic lists to compete in elections, following "gentrification" procedures. These procedures included some criteria, such as the absence of criminal records and incompatibility with previous political offices, thus ensuring a stricter selection of candidates, than that which took place for the admission of activists.[285] A crucial moment for the party in public office was the December 2012 internal elections, the so-called *parliamentarie*, organised through an online platform to let the activists choose candidates for the 2013 national elections.[286] This process marked an innovation compared to traditional parties, as it combined the direct participation of members with the use of digital technologies, although it retained some evident characteristics of centralisation in the definition of rules.

The organisational evolution of the Movement is a particularly interesting point at which to observe the inevitable tension between the dynamics of the party on the ground, represented by nodes of organised activists, and those of the party in public office, i.e. the elected representatives.[287] This relationship is pivotal in comprehending the entire trajectory of the M5S, characterised by a complex intertwining of interdependencies, which has given rise to practices and narratives that are distinct to the Movement's historical evolution. The concept of control exercised by the grassroots over the elected has been formalised not only as a foundational

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[284] Corbetta and Gualmini, *Partito di Grillo*, 132.

[285] Beppe Grillo, "Liste Civiche, Si Parte," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, January 24, 2008. https://beppegrillo.it/liste-civiche-si-parte/.

[286] Beppe Grillo, "Le Parlamentarie," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, December 2012. https://beppegrillo.it/le-parlamentarie/.

[287] Katz and Mair, "The Ascendancy of the Party in Public Office," 116.

principle but also as an element of identity, to mitigate the risks associated with the so-called "iron law of oligarchy"[288]. As articulated by the two figures at the zenith of this chain of command:

"There are only spokesmen for citizens' demands, elected with the support of a network that helps them to make proposals. The elected person is a collector of thousands of people. What enters the city hall or parliament is both a terminal and an executor of the electoral body"[289]

For this to be realised, it was necessary to reintroduce forms of "imperative mandate" that binded the elected to grassroots control. In this context, the imperative mandate can be identified as the most significant instrument of the M5S decision-making model. Elected representatives were not only required to periodically submit their actions to the judgement of activists through dedicated assemblies but also to potentially practise constant accountability through virtual reporting.[290] In extreme cases, the revocation of their mandate from the electors was a possibility, with a sort of motion of no confidence, thus sanctioning a relationship that is hierarchically inverted in comparison to traditional party dynamics.[291]

However, the impact of these mechanisms appeared largely symbolic, more than substantive. Local assemblies, which frequently witnessed poor attendance and lack meaningful impact, often devolved into mere expressions of self-representation rather than genuine democratic control. This is further compounded by the absence of structured opposition factions and checks and balances capable of effectively countering any oligarchic tendencies.

In addition, although in the initial stages the interactivity tools offered by the network represented an effective instrument for the control and coordination of the Movement's activities, over time it began to reveal its weaknesses with respect to the dynamics of parliamentary groups. However, the sharing of actions within institutional arenas with the electoral base remained subject to the voluntary propensity of the elected to be the subject of party control on the ground. Given their

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[288] Corbetta and Gualmini, *Partito di* Grillo, 144.
[289] Gianroberto Casaleggio and Beppe Grillo, *Siamo in guerra*, (Chiarelettere, 2011): 11. https://www.perlego.com/book/3745747.
[290] 5-Star Movement, *Code of conduct for elected 5 Star Movement members in Parliament*, (2013). http://www.beppegrillo.it/movimento/codice_comportamento_ parlamentare.php
[291] Corbetta and Gualmini, *Partito di Grillo*, 143.

formal roles and the resources derived from their institutional positions, parliamentary groups have thus been able to develop an ever-greater detachment with respect to the MeetUps.[292]

The progressive institutionalisation of the M5S, has, therefore, also highlighted the limits of its original horizontal organisation. In several local contexts, some activists have denounced the existence of "groups and chordates" that informally support candidacies favoured by the Movement's leadership or individual MPs.[293] This has led to the formation of splinter groups, with many local groups experiencing divisions over the legitimacy of the results; when such fractures occurred in plenty of Meetups, the central office and parliamentarians were affected by them.[294]

In the absence of pre-defined official positions within the party structure, national and regional parliamentarians thus informally play an executive role. Grillo's decision, taken in November 2014, to be joined by a group of five deputies in the management of the Movement, appears to be a natural consequence of these processes, and at the same time an acknowledgement of the inadequacy of the organisation that the M5S had given itself up to that point.[295] This development can be regarded as a preliminary delineation of a steering group, the functions of which remain undefined. The tension between the absence of formalisation and the actual performance of leadership roles had consequences for slowly eroding the local level set of powers and freedom.[296] The divide between the movementist component and the institutional wing has given rise to significant frictions, culminating in emblematic episodes such as Giovanni Favia's 'off-the-record', which denounced the absence of internal democracy in the Movement.[297]

However, these conflicts were not confined to isolated episodes but represented the manifestation of a broader identity crisis of the M5S, whose "hybrid" nature – halfway between a social movement and a political party – seemed to make full organisational stabilisation difficult. The need to adopt a permanent and centralised structure, questionably indispensable for managing the

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[292] Ieraci and Toffoletto, "From Movement to Party," 21.

[293] Francesco Capuzzi, "Militanti a 5 Stelle," in *Gli Attivisti del Movimento 5 Stelle: Dal Web al Territorio*, ed. Roberto Biorcio (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2015), 59–76.

[294] Caruso, "The 5 Star Movement and the End of Politics," 320.

[295] Caruso, "Digital Capitalism and the End of Politics," 601.

[296] Caruso, "Digital Capitalism and the End of Politics," 601.

[297] Corbetta and Gualmini, *Partito di Grillo*, 129.

growing complexity of a party with national ambitions, clashed with the need to maintain its participatory vocation and its rejection of traditional party formulas.[298]

In this context, the direct democracy model, which used to function effectively at the local level, appeared to be less viable when implemented at a larger scale.[299] This is due to the interference of the decision-making centre, represented by the Grillo-Casaleggio duo, and the subsequent introduction of the Rousseau platform.[300] In consideration of the aforementioned factors, the development of the M5S can be understood as a persistent oscillation between instances of radical democratic innovation and pressures towards party standardisation. This dual trajectory gave rise to significant questions concerning the Movement's capacity to reconcile its original anti-systemic mission with the management and coordination demands that emerged from its increasing institutional entrenchment. The challenge, therefore, was twofold: to avoid the risk of "cannibalisation" by other political forces and to preserve the autonomy and effectiveness of its decision-making processes without renouncing the participatory utopianism that marked its origins.

2.2.3 The Leaders of the Leaderless: Party in Central Office

Finally, the party in central office is highly atypical when compared with that of traditional parties. The absolute novelty lies in the identification of the central office in the online platforms, designating a "post-bureaucratic" [301] party that, making use of new technologies, can carry out political activity without intermediate apparatuses and with low costs. The absence of formal governing bodies or a secretariat elected by congress is a distinctive feature of the M5S. The party identified itself entirely with Beppe Grillo's blog, owner of the symbol and *arbiter* of strategic decisions, including those concerning the certification of electoral lists or the exclusion of dissidents.

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[298] Bordignon and Luigi Ceccarini, "The Five-Star Movement," 469.

[299] Fabio Bordignon and Luigi Ceccarini, "Five Stars and a Cricket. Beppe Grillo," 446.

[300] Beppe Grillo, "Rousseau," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, July 17, 2015. https://beppegrillo.it/rousseau/.

[301] Bruce Bimber, *Information and American Democracy: Technology in the Evolution of Political Power.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 240. https://archive.org/details/informationameri0000bimb/page/256/mode/2up?view=theater&q=activism.

The 5 Star Movement (M5S) is predicated on the principle of radical equality, exemplified by the slogan "every citizen is his or her own leader" promoted by Beppe Grillo. However, this belief is simultaneously the Movement's greatest hypocrisy. In words, the 5 Star Movement would be the apotheosis of anarchy. Beppe Grillo's negative judgement of the 5-Star Movement has been harshly reiterated by him on several occasions, most notably below; although written in black and white, the choice of words is particularly dazzling:

"A nation needs citizens, not leaders. Leaderism is the highest form of career that an elected person who does not give a damn about the voters can aspire to. […] The leader is usually sensitive. He sees the votes of the electorate as a divine judgement, a sign of the glorious destiny that awaits him at the head of the Italians. Leaders are like shit, they attract flies, usually in the form of intellectuals, their inspiring muses. Fickle insects, always in search of fresh excrement. Leaderism is a social disease. It arises when citizens become disinterested in public affairs and abdicate their duty of leadership and control. If everyone is a leader, no one is a leader. Everyone is a leader. Each citizen is his own leader. If one of your elected representatives turns out to be a leader, ask him why he is absent from work and, with the utmost politeness - he is a sick person after all - tell him to fuck off."[302]

The web guru G. Casaleggio also weighed in on the subject, quoting the anarchist theorist David Graeber, mentioned earlier in this thesis:

"The M5S sees the word "leader" as belonging to the past; it is a dirty word, perverted. Leader of what? It means that you attribute to others intelligence and decisional capability; it means that you are no longer even a slave; you're an object … Behind the word 'leader' there is nothing. Let's take the case of Occupy Wall Street: a spontaneous demonstration against financial institutions was held in New York. The demonstrators dubbed themselves "Occupy Wall Street" and invaded the district of the American banks and stock exchange. The phenomenon then spread … but in the various demonstrations, no leader ever emerged: the important thing was the movement. David Graeber, who was among the organisers of

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[302] Beppe Grillo, "Il Leader," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, June 26, 2010. https://beppegrillo.it/il-leader/.

the movement, defined it as leaderless, meaning that it gathers together intelligences without having to look to a supreme head. This falls within the very concept of community.[303]

In spite of these ideal concepts, in terms of formalisation, significant inconsistencies emerge. Two fundamental antinomian issues emerge: the prominent role of Grillo within the organisational-decision-making structure and the dissonance between charismatic leadership and the much-touted direct democracy. Grillo publicly presents himself as an equal citizen, but simultaneously, as a father-founder, he assumes a leadership role. On several occasions, including the "Italia a 5 Stelle" events in Imola and Palermo, he has referred to himself as "the Elevated One", implicitly emphasising a position of supremacy, not subordinate to the Movement's positive law, which he himself promulgated.[304]

Whilst this status has attracted severe criticism from both within and without the organisation, it is perceived by activists as a source of inspiration and aspiration. A particularly controversial element concerns the exclusive ownership of the Movement's logo, held by Grillo from 2009 to 2016. Despite the fact that this issue has given rise to accusations of master leadership by political opponents, activists appear to downplay its importance, focusing instead on the symbolic and communicative contribution of Grillo, who is perceived as the megaphone of their demands.[305]

It is evident that, on the one hand, members are presented with the prospect of engagement through digital platforms, thereby portraying the Movement as a democratic and inclusive organisation. In contrast, it adopts the very logics of an oligarchically-led corporate party, resulting in the concentration of power in the hands of a privileged elite. Grillo, the proprietor of the symbol and of the primary participatory infrastructure, the Blog, and Casaleggio Associati, with its management and organisational role in the digital tools, embody a centralised structure that subordinates the voice of its membership to decisions, often, already oriented by the top.[306]

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[303] Gianroberto Casaleggio, Beppe Grillo, and Dario Fo, *Il Grillo Canta Sempre al Tramonto* (Adagio eBook, 2014): 10-11.

[304] Michela Serra, "Reinventare la Politica. L'esperienza del Movimento 5 Stelle sul web, nel territorio, nelle istituzioni" (PhD diss., Università di Roma Tre, 2017). https://iris.uniroma1.it/retrieve/e3835318-1eb9-15e8-e053-a505fe0a3de9/Tesi%20dottorato%20Serra.

[305] Biorcio and Natale, *Politica a 5 stelle*, chap. 2.

[306] Maria Elisabetta Lanzone and Filippo Tronconi, "Between Blog, Social Networks and Territory: Activists and Grassroots Organization," in *Routledge EBooks* (Routledge, March 9, 2016), 68–89. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315569062-9.

From this standpoint, Casaleggio Associati is regarded as a pivotal entity, superseding conventional internal party structures in key domains such as the conceptual and programmatic development of the software employed in online voting, the establishment of organisational guidelines, the identification of future leadership, and the administration of economic resources.[307] The participatory dynamics of activists, though present, were directed towards specific issues, predetermined by the centre and administered in accordance with criteria that curtail decision-making autonomy. This institutional arrangement, akin to the franchising model, as posited by Bordignon and Ceccarini (2014), ensures a measure of local autonomy, albeit predominantly in an executive capacity, constrained by directives and parameters established at the central level.[308]

Furthermore, the absence of a formalised leadership structure, including those held by Gianroberto Casaleggio and, subsequently, his son Davide, raised questions concerning the transparency of decision-making processes (a focal point of the Grillo's propaganda) and the plausible presence of power asymmetries, fuelled by conspiracy theories. The notion of Casaleggio as the "grey eminence" behind the Movement's operations was a conspiracy theory that gained traction, despite the Movement's leaders' repeated denials.[309] This seemingly informal and obfuscated organisational approach was, however, a deliberate strategy to formally maintain the movementist nature of the M5S. The initial reluctance to categorise the movement as a political party was part of an identity strategy that sought to differentiate it from traditional formations, emphasising horizontality and freedom of expression. Nevertheless, this narration proved unsustainable as institutional representation increased.

The 5 Star Movement blog has entered a new phase in its evolution, as evidenced by its resounding success in the 2013 general election. A marked shift in the blog's language and aesthetics is evident, with a more sober tone emerging in place of the previously employed irreverent rhetoric and colourful tones that were characteristic of Beppe Grillo's early days. The blog now features the most voted comments and contributions from guest authors, alongside the active participation

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[307] Lanzone and Tronconi, "Between Blog, Social Networks and Territory," 79.
[308] Fabio Bordignon and Luigi Ceccarini, "Five Stars and a Cricket. Beppe Grillo," 446.
[309] Alberto Di Majo, *Grillo for President* (Editori Internazionali Riuniti, 2012): 79.

of the Movement's elected members, as evidenced by the introduction of dedicated spaces such as "M5S Camera" and "M5S Senato". These developments suggest an effort to enhance the institutional legitimacy of the original participatory democracy project.

Concurrently, the Movement has undergone a pronounced centralisation of political communication, indicative of an escalating concern for narrative control and the indivisibility of the official line. This configuration has resulted in substantial restrictions imposed on candidates, who are prohibited from appearing on television to avoid statements that do not align with party directives. This communicative rigour is further evidenced by the management of internal dissent, as evidenced by the first expulsions of members found to be in violation of the established conduct rules. A notable instance of this is the case of MP Adele Gambaro, who was accused of publicly criticising the tone of her leader and consequently expelled through a vote on the blog.[310] This exemplifies a decision-making model that formally refers to an unmediated model of popular governance, yet simultaneously, allows the emergence of "despotic" dynamics, in which criticism of the leader turns into justified ostracism.

In 2015, Casaleggio Associati unveiled a substantial technological innovation: the Rousseau platform. This instrument, as will be examined subsequently, was conceptualised as a mechanism to enhance civic engagement, empowering citizens to propose novel legislative initiatives and to express their preferences on matters to be presented to the Movement's parliamentary representatives. In 2017, in anticipation of the 2018 general elections, the M5S pursued a comprehensive internal restructuring process. There was a gradual decrease in the offices held by Beppe Grillo, with a concomitant transfer of both visibility and decision-making power to other leading figures, in particular Luigi Di Maio, who was vice-president of the Chamber of Deputies at the time.[311]

This period is characterised by the transition from the original "non-statute" to an actual statute, which represents a formalisation of the party's organisational structures. This change was accompanied by the transfer of control over the symbol, the official blog and the Rousseau

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[310] Beppe Grillo, "Quando Uno Vale Niente," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, June 11, 2013. https://beppegrillo.it/quando-uno-vale-niente/.
[311] Musso and Maccaferri, "At the Origins of the Political Discourse of the 5-Star Movement (M5S)," 110.

platform from Beppe Grillo to a new legal entity called the "5 Star Movement Association".[312] This reorganisation entailed the introduction of an internal elective system for the selection of the guarantor, president and secretary, with the objective of further institutionalising the Movement's leadership. The new statute also stipulated that the "political leader of the Movement" – an office that coincides with that of candidate to become Prime Minister – would be chosen through the Rousseau platform. Despite the apparent openness of the electoral process, the selection of candidates remained opaque.[313]

This event signified a landmark in the transformation of the M5S from a protest movement to a centralised party, exemplifying the hallmarks of a classical party in central office. In this paradigm, the management of decision-making processes, the selection of leaders and the control of resources are centralised in formalised and professionalised structures.[314] This represents a profound departure from the Movement's original principles.

The relationship between the centralised party apparatus and the peripheral members and supporters of the movement was marked by a growing asymmetrical dynamic over time, and by a fundamental inconsistency in the ethical principles that underpin the use of aseptic virtual platforms.

This progressive centralisation of decision-making power has made the management of dissent difficult and has resulted in the severe deprioritisation of internal confrontation, which is often pre-emptively neutralised or tolerated at the price of public rifts. The evolution of the Movement within this framework reflects a constant tension between the vaguely fulfilled promises of digital democratisation and the inherent limits of a system organised as a participatory top-down system.

2.3 That Blurred Boundary between Being On the Net and Falling Into the Net: the Online Experience of the 5-Star Movement

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[312] 5 Star Movement, *Statute*, 2017. https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/associazionerous seau/documenti/statuto_MoVimento_2017.pdf
[313] Musso and Maccaferri, "At the Origins of the Political Discourse of the 5-Star Movement (M5S)," 111.
[314] Katz and Mair, "The Ascendancy of the Party in Public Office,"115.

Information on the Net can be true or false,
or both,
but on the Net, it is impossible to sustain a lie for long.
-Gianroberto Casaleggio, Aphorisms

The rise of the 5 Star Movement in the Italian political system is a paradigmatic and unprecedented example of the disruptive synergy between digital technology and socio-political transformation. Around the rise of the movementist phenomenon, everything is causal, nothing casual. Even the day of the Movement's official foundation as a political force competing for local elections is not aleatory; 4 October 2009, in fact, is the symbolic day dedicated to St. Francis of Assisi, the impersonation, according to Gianroberto Casaleggio, of the essence of the Internet: "The Net is Franciscan, anti-capitalist: on the Web, ideas and their sharing are worth more than money".[315]

The FSM has distinguished itself by an identity that intertwines the genetics of the Net with the phenotype of the anti-system party. The 5-Star Movement does not possess a defined ideology, an aprioristic positioning, or a programmatic list of points to respect in order to be faithful to an electoral line that is functional to the hoarding of votes; rather, it is made up of a sum of ideas, whether good or bad.[316] While, therefore, parties live "on money, on lobbies, on structures in the territory: headquarters, press offices, employees, newspapers", on the Net "all this is a disvalue, it is not needed".[317] This is why the Movement has chosen to focus on the immaterial potential of the web and not to accept earthly binding ties, due to the parties of the old guard, including electoral reimbursements, the opening of offices, the distribution of membership cards to its "loyalists". They even introduced a two-term limit for public office and an independent reduction in parliamentary salaries.[318]

They are not instrumental to the 5 Star Movement, which has on its side, instead, the plus-value *par excellence* that the Net offers, namely its Eternal Memory: "the credibility of the Net has an

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[315] Casaleggio and Grillo, *Siamo in Guerra*, 11.
[316] "An idea is neither left nor right. It is an idea. Good or bad" in Gianroberto Casaleggio, *Aforismi*.
[317] Casaleggio and Grillo, *Siamo in Guerra*, 11.
[318] Fabio Bordignon and Luigi Ceccarini, "Five Stars and a Cricket. Beppe Grillo, 446.

explosive value. It comes from example, from following words with deeds, from behaviour, from consistency."[319]

The butterfly beat that unleashed the revolutionary wave of the 5-star experience was undoubtedly rooted in the visionary thinking of Gianroberto Casaleggio, an emblematic figure in the elaboration of the non-party's digital communication strategy and in the technological development of e-democracy tools, once it became a party. In collaboration with Beppe Grillo, Casaleggio delineated a political paradigm that transcends the mere utilisation of the Internet as a conduit for communication, rather conceptualising it as a foundational space for inherently democratic participation. For the M5s, the Internet functions not solely as a vehicle to reach a substantial segment of the electorate by circumventing the mediation of the mass media; the network is also a significant amplifier of these contents, as it enables and facilitates the interpersonal communication of the Movement's adherents, who extensively utilised online information and political discussion environments to form and disseminate their opinions.[320] The web deployment of the M5s, thus, exhibited a widened reach, attributable to the collaborative efforts of users, thereby extending the audience of recipients of the transmitted message, through the rhizomatic nature of network communication. The message propagated through the network nodes readily took root in the Italian social landscape of the early 2000s, a period during which the party formations of the Second Republic were still perceived as obsolete and unfit entities to satisfy the prevailing demands. The M5S built its consensus through an anti-conventional approach aimed at attracting the disillusioned of politics and the curious of the Net. From this point of view, the blogosphere established by Grillo and Casaleggio was not an auxiliary tool for a traditional catch-all-party, but a prominent arena where, in theory, ideas and values could circulate freely. [321]The promise of the FSM was clearly defined; they would have promoted a structural change of traditional representative democracy:

"The Net is the future of politics. The new world will be post-ideological. The parties are lulled by the idea that everything will change so that nothing will change, that the centuries-old pyramid structure of

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[319] Casaleggio and Grillo, *Siamo in Guerra*, 2.
[320] Corbetta and Gualmini, *Partito di Grillo*, 21.
[321] Corbetta and Gualmini, *Partito di Grillo*, chap.1.

power will remain intact. But the informed masses no longer have the need or the will to delegate their

destiny to anyone".[322]

Casaleggio characterises the internet as "politics in its purest state".[323] By adapting the end to the nature of the medium, The M5S has been able to replace classical decision-making hierarchies with an approach based on the idealisation of collective intelligence and crowdsourcing.[324] This paradigm has revolutionised the relationship between elected representatives and citizens, transforming the politician into a "collector" of the aspirations of the people.[325]

Accordingly, the novel assumptions on which the Movement was constructed effectively reached a segment of the population, notably young people (15-29 years old). These individuals, no longer feeling represented by conventional political processes, exhibited a growing inclination to join fluid virtual communities rather than static partisan affiliations.[326] In this period, in which the influx of newcomers to the internet was growing exponentially, the Movement was thus configuring itself as a functional alternative model of "wikipolitics", capable of capitalising on the network's interactive features.[327] Through virtual platforms, such as Meetup groups and the Rousseau System, the M5S has enabled supporters of the Movement to engage proactively in the formulation of the political program and action. This process bears a striking resemblance to the collaborative model employed by hacktivist collectives, as will be subsequently demonstrated. Despite being subject to internal control mechanisms, this flexibility has notably contributed to the empowerment of citizens. Indeed, it has provided them with the capacity to propose ideas, establish connections, exert influence over internal decision-making processes, access information, and forge a sense of belonging to the project.

As it will be revealed in the following section, the M5S was built around a cyber-utopian ideal of digital participation (which, without making too many anticipations, it has never achieved).

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[322] Casaleggio and Grillo, *Siamo in Guerra*, 9.

[323] Gianroberto Casaleggio, "Le Prossime Elezioni Si Vincono in Rete," *Casaleggio Associati*, May 16, 2012. https://www.casaleggio.it/news/prossime-elezioni-si-vincono-in-rete/.

[324] Davide Casaleggio, "La Fine Del Lavoro Come Lo Conosciamo," *Casaleggio Associati*, January 15, 2019. https://www.casaleggio.it/news/idee/la-fine-del-lavoro-come-lo-conosciamo/.

[325] Casaleggio and Grillo, *Siamo in Guerra*, 10.

[326] Corbetta and Gualmini, *Partito di Grillo*, 21.

[327] Campante, Durante, and Sobbrio, "Politics 2.0," 25-26.

However, it is important to highlight that the Movement does not limit itself to this; a few research on the classification of the M5S's militants, demonstrated a complex interaction between the online and offline worlds: if on the one hand the network has broadened the possibilities of involvement, on the other one, the most active supporters online were often already engaged in territorial activities.[328] This phenomenon can be interpreted as indicative of a bidirectional digital transition, whereby online aggregation appears to be a precursor to, and a consequence of, the necessity to establish community in physical spaces for the purpose of reclaiming civil rights.

As a result, the M5S virtual experience will henceforth be argued not as a trivial example of a "digital party", but as a manifestation of a broader cultural transformation, linking emerging technologies to a renewed model of political participation.

2.3.1 Sons of Utopia: the 5 Star Movement's Techno-Utopianism

As previously stated, the M5S is not characterised by a distinct ideology; rather, it is grounded in two intertwined ideals, constituting a dystopian *unicum*: the implementation of a direct digital democracy. This conception exalts the emancipatory potential of digital technology, conceived as an instrument deterministically capable of engendering progress, both socially and politically.[329] As Beppe Grillo elucidated:

"Without utopia there would be no M5S. You are sons of utopia ... Utopia ... is a world where everyone can participate in public life without giving any proxy to the political class, where direct democracy is a reality"[330]

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[328] For a more in-depth analysis on this topic, I recommend the survey carried out in the field by Gianluca Passerelli, Filippo Tronconi and Dario Tuorto, in Corbetta and Gualmini in *Partito di Grillo*,123-167.

[329] Emiliano Treré and Veronica Barassi, "Net-Authoritarianism? How Web Ideologies Reinforce Political Hierarchies in the Italian 5 Star Movement," *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies* 3, no. 3 (June 1, 2015): 287–304. https://doi.org/10.1386/jicms.3.3.287_1.

[330] Beppe Grillo, "speech at the annual 'Italia 5 Stelle' event in Imola", October 17, 2015, in Lorenzo Mosca, "Visioni Democratiche E Pratiche Partecipative Online Nel Movimento 5 Stelle," *Academia.edu*, June 18, 2018.
https://www.academia.edu/36860668/Visioni_democratiche_e_pratiche_partecipative_online_nel_Movimento_5_Stelle.

The identity of M5S, therefore, is deeply rooted in its very personal conception of the Internet, understood not only as a tool to strengthen democracy, but as the very embodiment of the democratic principle.[331] Indeed, the fundamental objective of the 5-Star Movement is not to actively dismantle existing representative democracy; instead, it is the utilisation of the Internet's full potential that will render the latter an increasingly unattractive alternative.[332] Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio's rhetoric characterises the Web as an almost sovereign entity, endowed with its own logic and agency, capable of subverting traditional structures and leading society towards an ideal future. The Internet is conceptualised as a "supermedium"[333], endowed with the capacity to effect profound and radical transformations in established organisational processes.

This concept is defined by some scholars as "cyber-utopianism"[334] or, more simply, as "political digitalism"[335], understood as the marriage of the myth of the "digital sublime"[336] with a political program.

Three key elements form the core of this ideal construction: the Net as redemptive technology, "digital Calvinism" and the personification of the Web.

The first concerns the idea of the Internet as a "technology of liberation", to be understood as ontologically positive.[337] In this sense, the Internet becomes a generative engine of unavoidable social change, regardless of the contingency or the political and cultural contexts in which its use is implemented. In spite of this, the Internet is configured as an entity capable of promoting transparent, participatory, democratic processes that are averse to hierarchies. As noted by Grillo and Casaleggio:

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[331] Alessandro Dal Lago, *Clic! Grillo, Casaleggio E La Demagogia Elettronica* (Edizioni Cornocopio, 2014): 60.
[332] Sergio Battelli, "Open Democracy. Democrazia in Rete E Nuove Forme Di Partecipazione Cittadina," Radio Radicale, April 18, 2016, min. 00:00:30. https://www.radioradicale.it/scheda/472543/open-democracy-democrazia-in-rete-e-nuove-forme-di-partecipazione-cittadina.
[333] Casaleggio and Grillo, *Siamo in Guerra*, 7.
[334] Simone Natale and Andrea Ballatore, "The Web Will Kill Them All: New Media, Digital Utopia, and Political Struggle in the Italian 5-Star Movement," *Media, Culture & Society* 36, no. 1 (January 2014): 105–21. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443713511902.
[335] Marco Morosini, "L'utopia Digitale Del MoVimento 5 Stelle," Interview by Chiara Tintori, *ResearchGate*, October 30, 2018, 552–59. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328615017.
[336] Vincent Mosco, *Becoming Digital*, (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2017): chap.2. https://www.perlego.com/book/519908.
[337] Larry Diamond, "Liberation Technology," *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 3 (2010): 69–83. https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/385959/pdf.

"The concept of a "leader" for the network is blasphemy. There are only spokespersons for citizens' demands, elected to work in the councils with the support of a network that helps them to make proposals, prepare documents, check municipal acts."[338]

In this sense, the movement sees the Internet as a catalyst for the transformation of popular expression:

"Internet referendums without a quorum and without a proposal will become the norm. Countries' constitutions will be able to be rediscussed online... as happened in Iceland in 2011. Political programmes will be written by citizens, and every new item will have to be approved before being implemented."[339]

One of the central aspects of this perspective is the promise of a "re-moralisation" of politics, claiming that radical, web-enforced transparency can act as an antidote to corruption. Grillo, for example, claimed that digital monitoring of public funds would make web-based theft impossible.[340] At the same time, due to the permanence of its memory, the web imposes an unprecedented social discipline on public actors, where past actions are continuously accessible, binding individuals to the constant surveillance of those in positions of power.[341] The participatory approach and the continuous control over the elected citizens, made possible by the Internet, embody a new form of governance that has been described as a "monitoring democracy".[342]

As Casaleggio pointed out: "... anyone can check the actions of the elected spokesperson on a daily basis... such a tsunami immediately arrives on the net that this person has to explain, justify his actions".[343]

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[338] Casaleggio and Grillo, *Siamo in Guerra*, 10.
[339] Casaleggio and Grillo, *Siamo in Guerra*, 13.
[340] Casaleggio and Grillo, *Siamo in Guerra*, 54.
[341] Casaleggio and Grillo, *Siamo in Guerra*, 38.
[342] John A. Keane, "Monitory Democracy?," in *The Future of Representative Democracy*, ed. Sonia Alonso, John Keane, and Wolfgang Merkel (Cambridge University Press, January 1, 2011): 212–35. https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511770883.010.
[343] Keane, "Monitory Democracy?," 213.

The logical consequence of the liberalisation of digital technologies is therefore the principle of disintermediation between citizenship and power. This vision ascribes to the Internet the capacity to break down all forms of mediation, removing filters and intermediaries between citizens and their representatives. It is articulated on two fronts: on the one hand, for the founding fathers of the M5S, it translates into an organisation without traditional hierarchical structures that communicates directly with the grassroots, bypassing traditional mediators such as political parties and the media.

For citizens, on the other hand, it implies active participation, which imply the possibility of constantly monitoring elected representatives, producing information autonomously, and being indirectly involved in decision-making processes through instruments of *liquid democracy*.[344]

In this context, Grillo and Casaleggio express their contempt for the traditional role of parties, which they consider obsolete and harmful:

> "Parties are not necessary, that's what they want us to believe in order to stay alive. Parties are intermediaries with no added value for citizens, but with immense added value for themselves. ... Without our money, both parties and newspapers would go bankrupt. Journalists and politicians would flee like fleas from the carcass of a dead dog".[345]

The radical vision of the M5S was not limited to denouncing the uselessness of traditional intermediaries but it envisaged a future in which the entire political system would have been redefined by the Internet. In this view, the 5 Star Movement itself is conceived as a transitory entity, destined to become superfluous in the long run, as citizens take direct control of political decisions through the web. Consequently, as Grillo and Casaleggio stated: "We would like the parties to disappear radically... and that at the end of this process the MoVimento would no longer be necessary".[346]

The rejection of any kind of political mediation has been crucial in the M5S discourse, and in practice is refuted by the properties offered by the web. The representatives were seen simply as spokespersons and employees of the citizens, carrying out the will of the people, and, as such,

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[344] Fabio Bordignon and Luigi Ceccarini, "Five Stars and a Cricket. Beppe Grillo," 438.
[345] Casaleggio and Grillo, *Siamo in Guerra*, 9.
[346] Casaleggio and Grillo, *Siamo in Guerra*, 11.

they must be constantly scrutinised, monitored and removed if they do not act in accordance with the goals of the Movement.[347]

According to Grillo, Article 67 of the Italian Constitution, which prohibits the imperative mandate, basically meant that "the elected person {can do whatever he wants} without being accountable to anyone. For five years the parliamentarian, thus, lives in an Eden, in a world of his own, without obligations, without constraints, without having to fulfil commitments."[348]

Finally, the third distinguishing element of Grillo and Casaleggio's utopian vision is the process of personification of the Internet, which transforms technology into an autonomous subject, capable of understanding and willing.[349] This perspective is evocative of the concept of "autonomous technology"[350], which posits that technology is not shaped by social or political dynamics, but exists as an independent force, guided by its own, immutable rules. Beppe Grillo characterises the network as "a brain that sees, understands, communicates, acts".[351]

This standpoint is accompanied by a rhetoric of inevitability, which characterises technological progress as an unstoppable and non-reversible process.[352] As Grillo and Casaleggio state, "the repositioning of information on the Net is irreversible: a drop that carves stone, a continuous spillage, like that of grains of sand in an hourglass".[353]

The digital utopianism of the M5S is further evidenced by futuristic predictions inspired by the concept of the technological "Singularity", a perspective that imagines an exponential acceleration of technological development capable of transcending human limitations. According to Casaleggio, the web will amplify both collective and individual intelligence, solving issues such as global warming and desertification.[354]

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[347] Natale and Ballatore, "The Web Will Kill Them All," 112.

[348] Beppe Grillo, "Circonvenzione Di Elettore," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, March 3, 2013. https://beppegrillo.it/circonvenzione-di-elettore/; original language modified to make it suitable for an academic text.

[349] Casaleggio and Grillo, *Siamo in Guerra*, 11.

[350] Langdon Winner, *Autonomous Technology: Technics-Out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977). https://archive.org/details/don00lang.

[351] Casaleggio, Grillo, and Fo, *Il Grillo Canta Sempre al Tramonto*, 33.

[352] Bonnie A. Nardi and Vicky O' Day, *Information Ecologies: Using Technology with Heart*, MIT Press, January 1, 1999): 17. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/3767.003.0007.

[353] Casaleggio and Grillo, *Siamo in Guerra*, 146.

[354] Casaleggio and Grillo, *Siamo in Guerra*, 146.

This vision culminates in a compelling narrative, where the web is portrayed as a catalyst for human liberation and the conquest of collective destiny, as illustrated in the short film "Gaia, the Future of Politics".[355] Through these narratives, the M5S articulates a political ideology and constructs a futurology that draws back on the traditions of the early MIT hacktivists, cyber-punks and *electrohippies*. Nevertheless, this rhetoric obscures a form of technological "fetishism", in which technology is mythologised and decontextualised from its actual socio-political functionality. [356]

By claiming that "the Net is on our side"[357], Gianroberto Casaleggio has made an important confession: for him, the Networks are not neutral, but they are partisan. However, having by now, largely expressed the Internet's conception adopted in this thesis, it should be reminded to the reader that the Networks hardly ever "take sides", unless they are forced to do so.

The M5S's founders have constructed an image of the Movement as an organisation fully superimposed on the nature of rhizomatic networks; however, this representation stands in overtly contrast to the findings of the previous paragraphs, which have revealed that the internal political practices within M5S have frequently exhibited characteristics such as hierarchy, Bonapartism and other anti-democratic tendencies. These practices have involved the utilisation of digital tools that the early Californian cyber-utopians, who were the inspirational source of the cyber-populist rhetoric of M5S' directory, would have regarded as aberrant, including closed-source software and controlled horizontal dialogue spaces. The deletion by Casaleggio Associati staff of certain user comments under the blog posts named after its founder was in fact a recurring practice of deliberate intervention to steer the debate, reintroducing a treacherous form of mediation hidden from the eyes of the masses. Moreover, the process of moderating comments is opaque, as there is no clear code defining acceptable and inadmissible behaviour.[358]

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[355] Casaleggio Associati, *Gaia – The Future of Politics*, YouTube video, (September, 2008). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7BYRtpsBicE.

[356] David Graeber, "Fetishism as Social Creativity," *Anthropological Theory* 5, no. 4 (December 2005): 407–38. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499605059230.

[357] N.D., "Bruce Sterling Incontra Gianroberto Casaleggio," *Il Blog delle Stelle*, August 11, 2013. https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2013/08/bruce_sterling_incontra_gianroberto_casaleggio.html.

[358] Lorenzo Mosca, Cristian Vaccari, and Augusto Valeriani, "An Internet-Fuelled Party? The Movimento 5 Stelle and the Web," ed. Filippo Tronconi, *Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement*, March 9, 2016, 143–68. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315569062-12.

Taking up the concept of *complexio oppositorum* introduced by Carl Schmitt, Dal Lago interprets this strategy as a functional way of neutralising dissent: critical opinions are not included in a constructive dialogue but juxtaposed without mediation and subsequently eliminated when they take on the contours of "mass dissent".[359]

In this context, the M5S demonstrates, at the national level, a centralised organisational structure that subjugates elected representatives and their electors to unquestionable decisions, such as expulsions and censorship, taken by the "central node" represented by Grillo and his technical information staff. This approach is rooted in an "Internet-fuelled ideology"[360], whose intrinsically positive qualities are reinterpreted by the Movement's anti-leaders and symbolically transferred to the multitude of the Web. Paradoxically, these same dynamics, legitimised by the glorification and indipendence of technology, subtly mask their own deepest structural contradictions.

2.3.2 Dura Lex, Sed Rousseau: an E-Democratic Project

In logical continuity with the preceding paragraph, it is useful to explore how the technical directory of the Movement has sought to translate its expectations of the viability of digital direct democracy into practice. In the words of an elected M5S activist, "Direct democracy is not simply a part of our program; it is, in a way, the very precondition of our existence"[361]. Consequently, to justify the *raison d'etre* of the non-party, Casaleggio Associati worked diligently, and enterprisingly, to fulfil, at least on an intentional level, the promises of open-democracy, first, and e-governance, once M5S entered parliament.

At the national level, members were able to contribute to the day-to-day life of the non-party through the web, starting in December 2012; certified users were involved in a series of online votes (including the previously mentioned *parlamentarie*) through an Operating System made available on the "beppegrillo.it" blog and other social network platforms.[362]

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[359] Dal Lago, *Clic!,* 62.
[360] Fabio Bordignon and Luigi Ceccarini, "Five Stars and a Cricket. Beppe Grillo," 447.
[361] Fabio Massimo Castaldo, "Open Democracy. Democrazia in Rete E Nuove Forme Di Partecipazione Cittadina," Radio Radicale, April 18, 2016, min. 42:17. https://www.radioradicale.it/scheda/472543/open-democracy-democrazia-in-rete-e-nuove-forme-di-partecipazione-cittadina.
[362] Veltri and Ceri, *Il Movimento nella Rete*, 182.

However, following its electoral victories in 2013, the organisational complexity of the M5S experienced exponential growth, with 1,796 elected representatives serving in various institutional bodies at the European, national, and sub-national levels.[363] The increasing vertical dispersion of citizens rendered the Movement's collaboration in the Blogosphere inadequate. Consequently, since October 2013, registered users have been able to engage in legislative activity via the "Lex" platform. The objective of the "Lex Parliament" function was to facilitate a more participatory and bottom-up oriented legislative process, thereby creating direct interaction between elected representatives and the users of the platform.[364] The process involved parliamentarians publishing their bills online, inviting members to propose amendments and comments within a 60-day period after publication. [365]

The proposing MP then analysed the suggested changes, made any revisions to the text and published the final version on the platform, which was then formally tabled in Parliament.[366]

Despite the advances achieved, the platform remained excessively restrictive in terms of voter participation, permitting only the amendment of laws that had been already promoted from above.[367]

Although the Lex system was based on a mechanism that had already been tested on the Blog for the drafting of the Florence Charter and the Program of the Movement, it introduced a significant innovation that deserves attention: namely, the possibility for members to express an index of appreciation on the comments of others on a rating scale of 1 to 5. This mechanism aimed to make the contributions deemed most relevant by the community more visible, increasing their likelihood of being included among the proposals of elected representatives. [368]

However, this modality presented several critical issues. Among the most notable criticisms was the lack of security and the efficiency of the process, with Davide Barillari, one of the most vocal critics of the system, raising fundamental questions regarding the transparency and efficiency of

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[363] Grillo, "Rousseau."
[364] Lorenzo Mosca and Davide Vittori, "A Digital Principal? Substantive Representation in the Case of the Italian Five Star Movement," *European Societies* 25, no. 4 (December 12, 2022): 627–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2022.2144638.
[365] Mosca and Vittori, "A Digital Principal?," 639.
[366] Mosca and Vittori, "A Digital Principal?," 639.
[367] Mosca, "Visioni Democratiche E Pratiche Partecipative Online Nel Movimento 5 Stelle," 427.
[368] Veltri and Ceri, *Il Movimento nella Rete*, 185.

the evaluation process. Barillari's concerns included the number of votes cast, the identity of the voters, and the question of whether a quorum of interest had been reached. Furthermore, the grading system for comments has been criticised on the grounds that the scale from 1 to 5 is not considered sufficiently representative to make an articulate judgement of the users' contributions. In addition, the attention of subscribers tends to focus on comments that are already visible and have high ratings, creating a hoarding effect that penalises suggestions that are valid but located further down the ranking. This systemic bias limits the plurality of ideas and risks defeating the participatory purpose of the Operating System.[369]

The platform's dearth of multi-directional interactivity was further substantiated by the observable decline in engagement and participation in the discourse over time, as evidenced by the data. Indeed, in the context of a stable number of proposed laws being deliberated over the three-year period, the average number of comments per law declined from 446 in 2014 to 184 in 2015 and 144 in 2016.[370]

As a consequence, the pivotal upgrade that disrupted the habitus of traditional intermediation between citizens and delegates was, formally, the deployment of the Rousseau Platform on the web. Its first version, launched in March 2015, was the result of an ambitious initiative by Gianroberto Casaleggio and his web marketing company, with the aim of providing the Movement with its digital backbone.[371] This inaugural version augmented and refined Lex's functionality, incorporating novel features available for the certified subscribers. Notably, the full potential of the Rousseau System was realised in June 2016,[372] a development that can be interpreted as a posthumous accolade to Gianroberto Casaleggio.

The latest iteration of the Rousseau system incorporates three primary macro-areas of civil society participation, each with substantial ramifications for our historical comprehension of the futuristic political organisation model, conceptualised by the Movement's Web guru.

Firstly, as it has previously outlined, this system integrates the online voting functions that were already in place on the blog, through polls, acting as a digital ballot box. This function allowed

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[369] Veltri and Ceri, *Il Movimento nella Rete*, 185.
[370] Mosca, "Visioni Democratiche E Pratiche Partecipative Online Nel Movimento 5 Stelle," 427-432.
[371] Beppe Grillo, "Rousseau."
[372] Beppe Grillo, "Rousseau."

registered members to participate in online voting on a range of issues, from the selection of candidates for public office to the ratification of policy proposals and the election of the party's internal administration.[373] This innovation was purportedly designed to circumvent conventional representative frameworks, thereby enabling members to directly influence the party's future direction and programmatic agenda.

Secondly, Rousseau functioned as an auxiliary medium for Lex, facilitating the active drafting and promotion of legislative proposals or their revision, and the promotion of participatory politics. Members were able to present their legislative initiatives, discuss amendments, and engage in online discussions on practical and specific issues. This aspect sought to foster a sense of direct involvement in the policy and law-making process, moving beyond mere electoral participation towards an increasingly consistent form of civic engagement. This feature is consistent with the broader debates on deliberative democracy, set out in the previous sections, and the potential of online forums to facilitate informed, and consequently, empowered public discourse. However, this phenomenon has also given rise to concerns among scholars regarding the potential for the formation of echo chambers, the propagation of misinformation, and the challenges associated with the effective management of large-scale online discussions.[374]

Thirdly, Rousseau has functioned as an aggregation tool; indeed, this platform provided the M5S, in its heyday, with an independent community space in which to disseminate information, organise events and mobilise supporters. In support of this, thematic channels were set up to support the individual needs of militants. These include: "Activism" platform, in which to share support materials for M5S initiatives, both digital and explanatory leaflets and videos and/or photos; the "Sharing Channel", an archive where to find the different proposals, including, questions, resolutions, laws, etc. at municipal and regional level with a common taxonomy; "E-learning", a channel in which free lessons on political science were distributed; finally, we find the different working groups (MeetUps) and auxiliary information on and from the groups in the territory on ongoing initiatives.[375]

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[373] Mosca and Vittori, "A Digital Principal?," 636.

[374] Tommaso Federici, Alessio Maria Braccini, and Øystein Sæbø, "'Gentlemen, All Aboard!' ICT and Party Politics: Reflections from a Mass-EParticipation Experience," *Government Information Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (July 2015): 287–98. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2015.04.009.

[375] Grillo "Rousseau."

With regard to the various functions aforementioned, managers have been appointed from among the Movement's parliamentarians, with the exception of the functions in charge of Voting and Fund Raising, which Rousseau Association has taken over, thus maintaining exclusive control over the M5S internal election processes and financial operations.[376]

This latter aspect, along with all that follows from it, is pivotal to the formulation of the ensuing arguments. Indeed, any inconsistencies inherent in the Rousseau platform can be traced back to its privatisation by the company that originally developed it. Rousseau System was, indeed, built on proprietary software developed by Casaleggio Associati, rather than on open-source technology as initially suggested by Gianroberto Casaleggio. [377]

This has been the subject of repeated criticism from users, experienced programmers and geeks worldwide, including Richard Stallman, the "last true hacker" and creator of the GNU/Linux server, who drew attention to this fact and criticised the ownership of the software and hardware used by the Movement: "I think it is appropriate to criticize Grillo and M5S for using non-free software and nasty devices such as iBads. It could encourage them to reconsider their practies".[378]

A significant corollary flaw of Rousseau's proprietary system is its lack of transparency, primarily attributable to the restriction of public access to the platform's source code. Programmed by Casaleggio Associati utilising Movable Type, a content management system developed by Six Apart, Rousseau was founded on a closed and opaque version of the software. This choice limited the possibility for programmers and technically competent citizens to verify the integrity of the code, fuelling suspicions about the potential presence of algorithms intended for data mining or for marketing purposes.[379] The absence of transparency, therefore, not only erodes public confidence in the system, but also exposes the platform to significant vulnerabilities, as evidenced by the hacker attack in August 2017[380], which resulted in the compromise of sensitive data

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[376] Serra, "Reinventare la Politica," 128.

[377] Nicola Biondo and Michele Canestrari, *Supernova*, (Ponte alle Grazie, 2018). https://www.perlego.com/book/3749643.

[378] Richard Stallman, "Pirates and the 5 Star Movement," *Pirateweb.net*, 2013. http://lists.pirateweb.net/pipermail/pp.international.general/2013-March/013805.html.

[379] Nicola Biondo and Michele Canestrari, *Supernova*.

[380] Gavin Jones and Antonella Cinelli, "Hacking Attacks: A Pre-Election Setback for Italy's 5-Star Movement," *Reuters*, October 5, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/technology/hacking-attacks-a-pre-election-setback-for-italys-5-star-movement-idUSKBN1CA1TJ/.

belonging to users and even some members of the directorate, including Davide Casaleggio and Luigi di Maio.[381]

A further critical point pertained to the exclusive management of the membership database and voting records by Casaleggio Associati. The Rousseau operative mechanism did not implement an end-to-end (E2E) verifiable voting system, which is regarded as the most secure method of guaranteeing the integrity and anonymity of electronic votes. The deployment of an E2E system would have effectively empowered users to verify the accurate registration of their encrypted votes without compromising the confidentiality of their individual preferences.[382] While the absence of such a mechanism does not inherently imply manipulation, it is noteworthy that in a rare instance where voting on Rousseau was certified by a third party, the operations were repeated due to several inconsistencies.[383]

Concerns have been raised, moreover, regarding the possibility of user profiling through exclusive access to the database. However, the primary feature and significant asset of the M5S leadership is the ownership and management of servers and big data, i.e. a substantial amount of information on the party's media users, members and elected representatives.[384] Consequently, the M5S party can be regarded as having two principal functions in relation to digital technology: firstly, as a means of communicating with the outside world and, secondly, as a tool of power within the party itself. This control enables the tracking of members' and elected representatives' preferences, which may have consequences for the fairness of decision-making processes.

Indeed, as demonstrated by several internal testimonies within the Movement, including those of elected MPs, there are grounds for doubt concerning the possibility that the online primaries were manipulated to benefit specific candidates.[385] These episodes underscore the inherent challenges of a system designed to encourage fair democratic participation, yet one that has repeatedly eroded user trust due to its structural opacities and technological vulnerabilities.

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[381] r0gue_0, "X.com," *X* (formerly Twitter), August 2017. https://x.com/r0gue_0/status/1040345996365099008.

[382] David Ruescas and Marco Deseriis, "Agora Voting/NVotes," openDemocracy, 2017, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/agora-votingnvotes/.

[383] Marco Deseriis, "Direct Parliamentarianism: An Analysis of the Political Values Embedded in Rousseau, the 'Operating System' of the Five STAR Movement," *Conference Paper*, (May 1, 2017): 61. https://doi.org/10.1109/cedem.2017.32.

[384] Morosini, Interview, 554.

[385] Nicola Biondo and Michele Canestrari, *Supernova.*

In conclusion, the primary deficiencies of the Rousseau platform, including its lack of transparency, centralised control, limited independent verification, vendor lock-in and restricted community involvement, can be attributed directly to its reliance on proprietary software.[386] While proprietary solutions may offer certain advantages, such as dedicated support and potentially faster development cycles, the Rousseau system case demonstrated significant drawbacks, ultimately leading to its abandonment in 2021.

2.4 Conclusion: Falling Stars

And then we went out,
to see the stars again.
- Dante Alighieri, Inferno XXXIV

If the date of the official beginning of the 5-Star Movement's adventure was metaphorically linked to the day dedicated to the memorial of the *Poverello of Assisi*, St Francis, the date of its end could be traced back to the night of San Lorenzo, the time of year when, according to popular tradition, we can observe the greatest number of "falling stars" from the Earth.

In fact, scientifically speaking, stars do not fall, but follow a cycle of life, evolution and death that depends on their mass. The necrotic collapse of the 5-Stars around which the movementist constellation had formed was a long self-destructive process, followed by an implosion that has yet to be certified by political "astrologers".

Indeed, the plausible implosion of the 5-Star Movement has not yet been officially confirmed, as the light emanating from it, although dimmed, continues to shine in the galaxy of institutions. The FSM continues to wield considerable influence over representative institutions, as evidenced by its current occupation of 70 parliamentary seats (out of a total of 600) since the 2022 elections,

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[386] Deseriis, "Direct Parliamentarianism," 64.

representing a 15.43% share of the votes cast.[387] This, however, is only a glimmer, which does not exclude, or even could substantiate, the hypothesis of an implosion that took place some time ago.

Whether or not the Movement will die in 2024 is a matter for contemporary scientists, not for historians of the universe. The latter category, however, have the arduous task of analysing the relationships between nebulae and gravity, the process that gives rise to a star, and the nuclear reactions that take place within them, which determine their light, mass and, consequently, their evolution. The result of this type of research is therefore to understand whether, at the end of the life cycle of the star being studied, there will be the birth of a new star or the creation of a black hole.

The 5-Star Movement was already born as a political "supernova" on the Italian scene, following the gravitational collapse of the system of trust between parties and citizens, and between media and information.

We can imagine the Movement of its origins (2005-2012) as a proto-star, a cloud of gas and dust - popular discontent, the grassroots demand for participation, the increasing spread of ICTs - that thickens and ignites thanks to the gravitational force of a charismatic leader like Beppe Grillo. Like a young star, the Movement shines with its own light, fuelled by the nuclear fusion of techno-utopian ideas, radical environmentalism, the promise of substantial egalitarianism and the subversion of traditional systems of institutional representation.

Its electoral success in 2013 can be compared to the main sequence phase, the period of a star's maximum luminosity when the energy produced by nuclear fusion overcomes the force of gravity. With its anti-establishment message and populist appeal, the movement reached the peak of its brightness and became the second political force in Italy.

However, as is the case with many stars, the period of splendour does not last forever. Its entry into the institutions marks the beginning of a long period of instability, in which its strong anti-system identity begins to waver.

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[387] Ministero dell'Interno, "Eligendo: Camera [Scrutini] Italia (Esclusa VALLE D'AOSTA) (Italia) - Politiche 25 Settembre 2022 - Ministero Dell'Interno," Eligendo, 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20221231042506/https://elezioni.interno.gov.it/camera/scrutini/20220925/scrutiniCI.

The dispersive structure of the movementist nebula coalesces into the concentric structure of the party star. In it we find an identifiable centre, the nucleus. In it we find hydrogen and helium, Beppe Grillo and *Casaleggio Associati* respectively, identifiable as the party in central office. This is where the nuclear fusion takes place, the "engine" of the star, where the general programmatic lines of the Movement as a whole are outlined, to be then spread to the outer rings, through the use of the blog and by directing the operation of the other virtual platforms implemented. Around the core lies the radiant zone, the party in public office. The elected representatives, like the photons that carry the energy in this stellar belt, have the task of spreading the Movement's message, carrying out its battles and influencing political decisions in the places constitutionally designated for this purpose.

Finally, there is the convective zone, where energy is transported through turbulent movements; this area can be metaphorically associated with the "party on the ground", i.e. the basis of the Movement, where the MeetUps, made up of activists, spread the ideas of the M5S by downloading them into a local key, while the certified users participate in political life through the e-democracy software programmed by the core. Just as in the convective zone there are movements of matter that carry heat, in the party on the ground there are fermentations, debates and initiatives that help keep the Movement alive, or at least justify its denomination.

Despite this formal organisation, over the years it has shown a propensity to "nuclearize" the star formation. In fact, the need for compromise, the difficulties in constantly representing a fluid and changing base, the repression of internal dissent, act as an adverse gravitational force that begins to compress the movement from within. It is as if the fuel that drove its "ideological fusion" - namely the purity of its principles and its anti-systemic character - was in short supply as early as 2017, with the publication of the new statute consecrating the Movement as a party. This disregards the first fundamental precept of the non-association: "it is not a political party, nor is it intended to become one in the future". [388]

Still, the Movement's subsequent electoral success in 2018 signalled a shockwave that had not yet been felt. This last significant event was followed by the formation of a coalition government with two other traditional party formations, the Democratic Party and the *Lega*, definitively

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[388] Movimento 5 Stelle, *Non-Statute*, art.4.

compromising its promise of independence from the "caste" and further betraying the bond with its original supporters.[389]

However, in order to achieve the objectives of this thesis, it is necessary to consider the Movement as ceasing to be such only with the definitive abandonment of the Rousseau Platform in 2021. The failure of this tool, conceived as the fulcrum of digital direct democracy and disintermediation between the elected and the electorate, has undoubtedly influenced the progressive convergence of the Movement towards the traditional logics of politics, with its centralised power dynamics and the growing distance between the militant base and the leadership. This shift, therefore, cannot be viewed as a simple adaptation to the demands of *realpolitik*; rather, it signifies a profound break with the Movement's founding imaginary, ultimately leading to its demise as a truly alternative political project.

The disbandment of the Rousseau System can be attributed to a number of factors, including the proprietary nature of this software, the inherent limitations of the platform itself, and Casaleggio Associati's strategic decision to centralise decision-making, thereby marginalising the role of activists. The closure of the Rousseau network has had substantial implications, including the acceleration of the loss of consensus and the estrangement of numerous historical supporters, and even just historians, disappointed by the failure to realise the initial promises of wide involvement and radical transparency.

Notwithstanding the challenges faced, when situated within a research paradigm that is receptive to the concept of disenchantment, the case of the 5 Star Movement emerges as a quintessential case study. It exemplifies the complexity, if not the impracticability, of harmonizing the principles of direct democracy with mobilization in the streets, and the phenomenon of cyber-populism with the physical ballots cast by constituents within their respective electoral districts.

To conclude, the 5 Star Movement is currently in a state of flux, undergoing a final transitional phase. The precise nature of its ultimate form and fate remains still uncertain. And even if its destiny would be clearcut to the contemporary observers, I certainly won't be the "madman" who lit the candle and run at the "academic marketplace" announcing the Death of the 5 Star

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[389] Martin Bull, "Whatever Happened to the Italian Five Star Movement?," *The Loop*, July 4, 2022. https://theloop.ecpr.eu/whatever-happened-to-the-italian-five-star-movement/.

Movement. It is conceivable that the Movement will evolve into a neutron star, a celestial body characterised by a small size, high density, and a significant gravitational force, albeit with diminished luminosity in comparison to its past state. Alternatively, it could undergo a process of internal collapse, ultimately leading to its complete dissolution from the political landscape.

Part Three: A Critical Comparison Between the Two Case Studies Through Hyper-historical Lenses

3.1 Repositioning the Human Being in Hyper-history

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the selfhood of every one of its members.
The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion.
It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs. [...]
Who so would be a man must be a nonconformist.
-Ralph Waldo Emerson, in "Nature"

The history of information technologies is a tortuous journey into the complexity of the human species. To retrace it: it is to enter into the innermost desires of man as a social animal; it is to reposition humans in the cosmos as the only responsible beings; and it is to abandon once and for all biological evolution and to associate cognitive-linguistic evolution with progress, i.e. what is intended to be the much-vaunted co-evolution. Embracing this vision presupposes a logical-consequential shift in the study of anthropology, entailing the juxtaposition of the principle of mutual competition for the Earth's limited resources with that of communication, defined as the process of transferring information between two or more subjects.

Human society is thus characterised by conscious participation in a communal existence, realised through the use of language and recourse to a substratum of common symbols as means capable of giving meaning to informational messages. If, for millennia, this capacity was exclusively attributed to living species, it was Alan Turing who, in 1936, deprived man of his privileged position in the

capacity to process information and, exclusively, in the capacity to act intelligently. After creating the machine that bears his name, humans were no longer the undisputed masters of the infosphere.[390]

1948 marked a significant turning point in the evolution of computers with the publication of "A Mathematical Theory of Communication" by Claude Shannon. This essay is widely regarded as a milestone in information theory, as it demonstrated mathematically that all forms of communication could be expressed in digital format. In this theory, messages are treated as abstract entities, independent of their semantic meaning and the presence of a human sender or receiver.[391] In this view, messages become sequences of phenomena that can be transmitted and measured through a defined metric.

Shannon's insights paved the way for a new transdisciplinary view of reality, namely Cybernetics[392], theorised by Norbert Wiener in the same year. The systemic cybernetics approach to studying control and communication processes in living organisms and machines provided the conceptual framework for the computational sciences to develop. In his 1948 essay, Wiener enumerates the specifications adopted by John Von Neumann from August 1944 onwards for the modification of ENIAC and the completion of EDVAC, the so-called first modern computer. These requirements, which transcend Wiener's initial needs for solving differential equations, include delegating all logical decisions to the machine.[393] Therefore, Cybernetics, Shannon's information theory and Turing's conceptualisation of the machine provided the theoretical and technical elements necessary for von Neumann to assemble the first stored-programme computer. [394]

Until then, it was inconceivable that computational science could have concrete effects that would tangibly change the state of things and the nature of society.

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[390] Howard Rheingold, *Tools for Thought: The History and Future of Mind-Expanding Technology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Mit Press, 2000). https://www.rheingold.com/texts/tft/03.html.

[391] Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, "The Mathematical Theory of Communication," *The Mathematical Gazette* 34, no. 310 (December 1949): 312. https://doi.org/10.2307/3611062.

[392] The term "cybernetics" comes from the Greek word *kubernetes*- which it means pilot.

[393] Norbert Wiener, "Cybernetics or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine," *MIT Press*, (1948). https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11810.001.0001.

[394] Rheingold, *Tools for Thought*, chap.3.

Conversely, the combination of information and computational power was found to have the capacity for a disruptive effect on reality; the atomic bomb provided the first fatal example of how the union of quantum information and computation could profoundly change reality. [395]

However, the transition from the control of atoms to the control of people and societies was, at that time, yet to be realised. This will occur once the first computer networks and the extensive global telecommunications infrastructures have been established, a process which will reach its zenith with the widespread adoption of the Internet in 1993.

From this moment on, the cognitive-linguistic evolution of the human being amalgamates and merges with his interaction with hypertexts, giving rise to a parallel and integral temporal sequence of social evolution: "hyper-history."[396] Its unfolding has brought ancient promises of participation, cyclical hopes of revolution and unprecedented futuristic concerns.

The phenomena of hacktivism and the 5 Star Movement, which have been specifically outlined so far, represent two experiences of protest movements organised through the possibilities offered by the Internet. Each decline in its own way and embodies the three gnoseological variables characteristic of hyper-history mentioned above.

In line with this tripartite division, the online evolution of the M5S between 2005 and 2021 took place with the rhetoric of the exhumation of Athenian democracy, reviving the Roussonian dream and raising multiple doubts about the actual practicality of a fully-fledged digital direct democracy. Similarly, from the 1990s to the second decade of the 2000s, hacktivist movements established themselves on the virtual public scene, articulating their participatory-ism through the union of the imperatives "hands-on!" and "information wants to be free", actively modelling virtual space in a "do-it-yourself" manner, and arousing suspicion for the radicalism of their actions and their lack of accountability.

As previously argued, the techno-utopian matrix of the two phenomena is assimilable; both draw inspiration from the cyber-philosophical concepts of early observers of the rise of the Internet age, from Californian utopias to counter-cultural hacker communities. However, the divergence in modes

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[395] Paolo Benanti, *Il Crollo Di Babele: Che Fare Dopo La Fine Del Sogno Di Internet?* (San Paolo s.r.l., 2024).

[396] Luciano Floridi, *The Green and The Blue*, 1st ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2023): 57. https://www.perlego.com/book/4275284.

of action and desired outcomes merits further comparative study to develop general theories about the convergence of hyper-history and history between the increasing usability of the Web and the crisis of liberal representative democracies in the West.

3.2 The History of the Hyper-history

You can't really guess where mind-amplifying technology is going

unless you understand where it came from.

-Howard Rheingold, Tools For Thought

The 1960s represented a period of convergence of different instances: the Californian community utopias, the struggles for freedom of expression, the pioneering projects of time-sharing and computer interactivity, and the birth of the first telematic networks. In this fermenting context, individual liberty was conceived as intrinsically linked to the possibility of cooperating, communicating, participating and sharing experiences. The "mother of all demos", as Andries Van Dam called Douglas Engelbart's presentation on 9 December 1968, was the founding act of a new era.[397] In those ninety minutes, when Engelbart unveiled his On-Line System (OLS), he not only anticipated the key elements of the modern personal computer - windows, hypertext, graphics, mouse, videoconferencing, just to name a few - but also outlined a philosophy, a vision of the computer as a tool for intellectual emancipation and interpersonal connection.[398]

The idea of the "personal computer" and with it, "personal freedom" began to take shape in the collective Western imagination.

This revolutionary vision was not born in an aseptic vacuum but germinated in the fertile soil of the Californian counterculture of the 1960s. Silicon Valley, the epicentre of this techno-cultural ferment, became the cradle of a new way of conceiving the symbiotic relationship between man and machine, deeply influenced by the libertarian ideals, the yearning for the expansion of consciousness and the

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[397] Thierry Bardini, *Bootstrapping* (Stanford University Press, 2000): 138-139. https://books.google.it/books?id=CEc1OOGmA5IC&pg=PA15&hl=it&source=gbs_toc_r&cad.
[398] Bardini, *Bootstrapping*, 138-139.

intolerance of hierarchical structures, typical of the hippie movement.[399] Engelbart, an emblematic figure of this convergence of counterculture and innovation, embodied this spirit, being himself an exponent of the psychedelic movement of the 1960s.[400]

However, as discussed in the opening chapter, it would be a simplistic reduction to attribute the ideological underpinnings of technological advancement to a single countercultural framework. Alongside the utopian Californian strand, the development of computer technology was significantly influenced by the avant-garde hacker community that emerged from MIT laboratories in Boston. These individuals inhabited an autonomous and self-constituted sphere of values within Building 26, characterised by their own culture, dialectics, and a distinct ethos.[401] This phenomenon is evident not only in Levy's primary historical accounts but also in the software codes and hardware components underpinning the emergence of the first telematic networks.

The driving motivation of that group of brilliant outsiders devoted to programming was to enable non-programmers to take advantage of the potential of computers, constituting the physical and interfacial systems that would have provided a genuine attempt for the Californian utopias to become true. To sum up, the hacker community's unquestionable success was humanity's advancement in the cognitive-linguistic evolution.

The advent of the first personal computers (PCs) marked a pivotal shift in the machines' original function as tools for calculation, thereby prefigurating their emergence as instruments of individual liberation. The link between the first Macintosh and Woodstock, which might initially appear audacious, is revealed in this dissertation to be less shocking than expected, illustrating how the computer revolution, in its numerous aspects, was significantly influenced by the spirit of a unique era, characterised by a distinctive blend of anarchy and technological advancement.

This technical advancement was intricately intertwined with the communitarian spirit, cyberpunk and the resistance against the expropriation of collective knowledge from that period.[402] The struggles to defend the right to free speech rejected the notion that socially disseminated knowledge was a single thought formulated and distributed by an elite through the mass media. The "broadcast" model of

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[399] Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 110.
[400] Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 110.
[401] Levy, *Hackers*.
[402] Timothy Leary, "The CyberPunk: The Individual as Reality Pilot," *Mississippi Review* 16, no. 2/3 (1988): 252–65. https://doi.org/10.2307/20134179.

communication, characteristic of traditional mass media, was thus supplanted by a horizontal, anarchic model[403], where users were both consumers and producers of content (prosumers), thereby becoming active protagonists in the communication process.

Consequently, the first virtual communities came into existence. These communities were perceived by observers of the 1970s as inherently radical spaces, where individuals engaged in the process of constructing their own personal identities, encountering other individuals and engaging in a dynamic negotiation process that could result in the convergence of members towards a shared reference, defined as a collective identity.[404]

In this sense, virtual communities can be regarded as an original communitarian model, representing an environment in which collective intelligence is generated and spread, understood as a mutual exchange of ideas between a multiplicity of subjects and an emblem of co-evolution. Every individual, collective, territorial reality, social or cultural centre could have become an interconnected node in a network of non-hierarchical interaction. From this point of view, telematics was immediately recognised as a tool for political action, indeed the change of form and level in access to information indicates a change of form and level in power relations[405], and as a new form of rhizomatic communication, opening up unexplored frontiers of action, but above all, of human interaction. [406] It was not fortuitous that the first telematic systems were born as "open" systems, based on message spaces that were readable and writable for all and on source codes that anyone could access and improve.[407]

Therefore, the philosophy behind these first experiences of virtual communities was based on the conviction that technologies, if managed from below, can be powerful instruments of political revolution. Hence, the hacker imperative of "hands-on!" for guaranteeing free access to computers,

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[403] "The word anarchy is frequently used to describe Usenet, not in the sense of chaotic and disorganized, but in the sense that the whole enterprise of moving all these words from all these people to all these other people is accomplished with no central governing hierarchy on either policy or technical levels." In Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community : Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Cambridge, Mass.: Mit Press, 1993): 119. https://archive.org/details/virtualcommunity0000rhei/page/116/mode/2up.

[404] Rheingold, *The Virtual Community.*

[405] Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, 306.

[406] Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams, *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* (New York: Portfolio, 2006), 145–46. https://books.google.it/books?redir_esc=y&hl=it&id=-BXd7AHUIvYC&q=prosumer#v=onepage&q&f=false.

[407] Tapscott and Williams, *Wikinomics*, 145-146.

networks and information for everyone, regardless of their geographical location, sanctioned the universal right to participate in hyper-history unfolding.

As F. Guattari asserted when faced with the development of ICTs: "Intelligence and sensibility are now undergoing an authentic mutation brought about by the new computing machines (...). We are witnessing a mutation of subjectivity that is even more important than the one brought about by the invention of writing and printing" [408]. The eruption of what has been retrospectively defined as the "Fourth Information Revolution"[409] has been accompanied by a rhetoric of the technological sublime, which has revived ancient forbidden dreams, including that of the final realisation of Athenian democracy, and designated techno-libertarianism as the driving force of change.

3.3 From Digital Utopias to Political Realities: Techno-Utopianism and Techno-Libertarianism

> *We are at heart so profoundly anarchistic*
> *that the only form of state we can imagine living in is Utopian;*
> *and so cynical that the only Utopia*
> *we can believe in is authoritarian.*
> *-Lionel Trilling, 1985*

The decisive influence of techno-libertarian ideologies becomes evident when analysing the cultural terrain of San Francisco between 1968 and 1998. During this period, as Fred Turner demonstrated in his cyber-culture analysis, there was a profound intersection between countercultural discourses and the vision of computers as instruments of individual and collective emancipation.[410] This intertwining permeated the mentality of the technologists and hackers of the time.

A substantial proportion of contemporary social research is predicated on recognising the inextricable influence of cyber-libertarianism in forming the Internet and web technologies. In this regard, Mosco's work on the "digital sublime" elucidates how the Western fascination with technological

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[408] Di Corinto and Tozzi, *Hacktivism: La Libertà nelle Maglie della Rete*, 41.
[409] Bimber, *Information and American Democracy*.
[410] Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*.

innovation has given rise to a mythologisation of digital media, regarded as inherently democratic and capable of catalysing profound social transformations.[411]

As has been eventually demonstrated, hacktivists are the offspring of the hacker counterculture; consequently, cyber-libertarianism is an integral part of their identity. As it has been widely explored during this dissertation, hacking is not merely a series of actions. It is a philosophy, an art, an attitude, a playful, irreverent and creative way of dealing with technological tools. Above all, it is a mental habit. Given its origins in American university laboratories at the turn of the 1960s and its roots in the libertarian and anti-authoritarian sentiment that would subsequently give rise to the American countercultures of protest, it is challenging to categorise this phenomenon. Hacking represents an ethical and cooperative approach to the relationship between knowledge, its dissemination, and the machines facilitating this process.

Thus, the advent of hacktivism can be traced back to the pursuit of citizen liberation from a form of autocratic power that seeks to curtail the natural freedoms inherent to each netizen.

The historical backdrop to the emergence of this phenomenon is the latter half of the 1990s, with some scholars attributing its theoretical underpinnings to the publication of seminal works such as "Electronic Civil Disobedience", published in 1994.[412] This text is widely regarded as the first theoretical manifesto of hacktivism, and serves as a foundational reference point for comprehending the conceptual basics of this approach.

This work draws upon a broad spectrum of philosophical and intellectual influences, ranging from Deleuze and Guattari to Baudrillard, from Arendt to Foucault, to analyse the novel forms of power that characterised the age of the Internet and global communication networks. The central thesis of these writings is that power has assumed a "nomadic" form, manifesting as an electronic flow of capital that is in constant motion, seeking the most favourable conditions and minimising obstacles and resistance. Consequently, the traditional physical spaces (e.g. the street, the palace, the city) no longer represent the locus of power, which has moved into cyberspace. This perspective suggests that power dynamics must be addressed in this new locus.[413]

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[411] Vincent Mosco, *Becoming Digital*, chap.2.
[412] Critical Art Ensamble, *Electronic Civil Disobedience.* (Refer to section 1.4 of this dissertation for a more detailed discussion of this issue).
[413] Critical Art Ensamble, *Electronic Civil Disobedience.*

The concept of "electronic civil disobedience" is predicated on the premise that it is a form of political action carried out by a new vanguard capable of combining the politicisation of grassroots social movements (e.g. ecologists, pacifists, feminists, etc.) with the technical skills needed to operate effectively in the virtual realm. This vision gave rise to the figure of the hacktivist, a hybrid of hacker and political activist operating at the intersection of technology and social engagement. While the term "hacktivism" is a relatively recent development, the underlying idea can be traced back to the protest practices of the 1960s and 1970s, highlighting a historical continuity between more traditional forms of activism and new modes of political action mediated by technology.[414]

The ideology of cyber-libertarians initially took the form of an emphasis on individual rights online. Hacktivists are staunch defenders of the free flow of information and complete freedom of expression; many of them even believe that online speech should be freer than speech in the real world.[415] They are strongly influenced by the hacker romanticism of their predecessors, who see the Internet as the last frontier for truly free expression and as a generalised libertarian paradise. The hacker is, in fact, anthropologically intolerant of coercive power insofar as it limits the individual's initiative, collective intelligence and creativity. This is a fundamental distinction from the "droid", a term coined by the hacker community to define those who tend to be subservient to authority.[416]

A further leitmotiv of hacktivist techno-libertarianism is the battle against censorship, which hinders free access to the Internet. To defend the fundamental rights of cyberspace in 1999, the Cult of the Dead Cow established Hacktivismo, the first openly political hacker collective. Many authoritarian governments had already imposed restrictions on search engines in their countries or controlled access to specific sites by that time. However, the greatest threat to free access to the Internet would not only come from overtly autocratic governments but also from authoritarian institutions in democratic systems and from the business world.

Consequently, the proliferation of institutions detrimental to the emancipation of cyberspace has increased dramatically over time. Governments, traditional media outlets, major technology companies, banking institutions, and politicians have all become hacktivism targets in the context of

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[414] Jordan and Taylor, *Hacktivism and Cyberwars*.
[415] Samuel, "Hacktivism and the Future of Political Participation," chap.5.
[416] Eric Steven Raymond, "'The Jargon File,'" *Catb.org*, (2003). http://www.catb.org/.

a "war for information".[417] This phenomenon can be understood as a reflection of the increasing pervasiveness of digital technologies in all spheres of social life. Both public and private entities employ these technologies to superimpose forms of control, censorship, and the commodification of online content. According to the hacktivists' movements, this drift resulted in the loss of legitimacy from democratic institutions, aligning with Zygmunt Bauman's analysis that a genuine divorce between power and politics has occurred, characterised by a transfer of "real" power to unrepresentative entities that are not subject to democratic oversight.[418]

In this context, the evolutionary parabola of cDc hacktivism offers a fascinating insight into the phenomenon's transformations. Born in 1984 to defend the computer underground from the military forces of oppression and censorship, the cDc has progressively broadened its scope, launching a campaign against Google ("Goolag") in 2006 for its acquiescence to the Chinese government's censorship demands.[419] This development exemplifies an increase in the number of targets engaged with and a shift towards more ambitious modes of action, which has been evident since the early 2000s.

Indeed, since the new millennium, hacktivists have demonstrated an increasing level of precision and sophistication in the direction of their campaigns, thereby evidencing their capacity to operate within a complex and interconnected political arena and to circumvent traditional politics through their actions.[420] Consequently, cyberspace was no longer regarded as a mere technical and virtual dimension but rather as a space of transnational political engagement and, above all, contestation.

In addition to providing a direct critique of the degradation of the Western democratic-representative model, they have also initiated proposals for unravelling democratic-liberal hypocrisy through an immanent critique. Indeed, second-generation hacktivist collectives have been protesting the anti-libertarian character of democratic institutions, unmasking its contradictions through planned provocations.[421]

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[417]Wray, Stefan. "Electronic Civil Disobedience and the World Wide Web of Hacktivism": *Archive.org*, March 20, 2003. https://web.archive.org/web/20080510143851/http://switch.sjsu.edu/web/v4n2/stefan/
[418] Zygmunt Bauman and Carlo Bordoni, *State of Crisis* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017). https://books.google.it/books/about/State_of_Crisis.html?id=kcoOBAAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y.
[419] cDc, "cDc Launches Global Campaign Against Google," *Cult of the Dead Cow*, February 12, 2006. https://cultdeadcow.com/news/goolag20060212.html.
[420] Guntarik and Grieve-Williams, *From Sit-Ins to #revolutions*, 73-74.
[421] Trottier and Fuchs, *Social Media, Politics and the State*, 4.

The Anonymous collective is a pertinent case study in this regard. Its actions highlight the discrepancy between the proclaimed essence of liberalism, with its emphasis on individual rights and freedoms, and its actual reality, which is often characterised by limitations and violations of the very principles it claims to defend.

For instance, by supporting the Occupy Wall Street movement, Anonymous vindicates the liberal values of freedom of assembly and expression while criticising the violent repression of hacktivists and activists in front of the symbolic Federal Hall by law enforcement. In this manner, the masked collective functions within the framework of liberal ideology yet simultaneously highlight its contradictions, thereby demonstrating how, even within an established democracy such as the United States, which professes to be the bastion of freedom of expression, the combined actions of the state and economic institutions seek to *de facto* limit these freedoms, thereby pushing liberal values themselves *ad absurdum*.[422]

The prevailing tendency among hacktivists to emphasise immanent criticism is indicative of the Lulz spirit and is often accompanied by a pursuit of symbolic retaliation. Examples of this tendency include the so-called Public Interest Hacks (PIH).[423] One such example is the attack by Anonymous in December 2011, when the group hacked the security systems of Stratfor, a well-known intelligence company.[424]

In this occasion, Anonymous acquired the company's client list, along with the credit card details of many of its members. They procured a substantial amount of evidence to prove the agency's surveillance of activists seeking redress for the Bhopal eco-chemical disaster on behalf of Dow Chemical and exposing secret payments to government officials and insider trading to keep the secret on the responsibilities of the above-mentioned ecological disaster (they leaked around 5.5 million compromising e-mails supporting such allegations of corruption). [425]

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[422] Trottier and Fuchs, *Social Media, Politics and the State*, 4.
[423] Gabriella Coleman, "The Public Interest Hack," *Limn*, no. 8 (May 9, 2017): 18. https://limn.press/article/the-public-interest-hack/.
[424] Andy Greenberg, "WikiLeaks Tightens Ties to Anonymous in Leak of Stratfor Emails," *Forbes*, February 27, 2012. https://www.forbes.com/sites/andygreenberg/2012/02/27/wikileaks-tightens-ties-to-anonymous-in-leak-of-stratfor-emails/.
[425] Greenberg, "WikiLeaks Tightens Ties to Anonymous in Leak of Stratfor Emails."

Anonymous shared the e-mails with WikiLeaks, enabling the information they contained to reach a wider audience. Furthermore, reminiscent of Robin Hood, the hacktivists utilised the leaked credit card information to make charitable donations to environmental organisations.[426]

Therefore, for hacktivists there is a clear and consistent linkage between protests in the public square, contestations on the Net and social justice. The compatibility of their model of action with objectives of social equity and substantial democracy is contingent on the affirmation of rights of access to communication on the Net, on the defence of anonymity and encryption, on the technical accessibility of digital content for people disadvantaged by the use of the new media, on the liberalisation of information in the meshes of the Net, on the abolition of copyright on software and content, all of which converge in the "right to knowledge".[427] Consequently, while cyber-utopianism accompanied the birth of the Internet, the birth of hacktivism can be located at the end of the utopian dream of a Net without constraints, immanently liberating and congenitally democratic. Conceptually, it is placed at the moment of realisation on the part of the inter-generational hacker community that "the Internet is fast becoming a method of repression rather than an instrument of liberation".[428]

By contrast, the 5-Star Movement was constituted by reconciling the anachronistic Californian techno-utopianism and modern Italian techno-libertarianism.

The formation of the FSM can be situated in the historical timeline of 2005, a period characterised by pervasive distrust of conventional democratic institutions and the political class. The beginning of the new millennium in the European democracies is characterised by the inability of the traditional party formations to mobilise their electorate, thereby creating significant opportunities for the co-optation of new political actors and movements within institutions at the local, national and European levels.[429] In the hyper-history timeline, however, 2005 is significant as the transition year from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. This progression is more accurately represented as an upgrade in the capabilities of Web users rather than a software change. From a network technology perspective, Web 2.0 continues to utilise the same hypertext protocols that were first developed. The fundamental shift in the

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[426] Wong and Brown, "E-Bandits in Global Activism," 1022.
[427] Julian Assange, *When Google Met WikiLeaks*, (Editorial Clave Intelectual, 2016). https://www.perlego.com/book/1918516.
[428] See Annex 1; Cult of the Dead Cow, "Hacktivismo Declaration."
[429] Andrea De Petris and Thomas Poguntke, *Anti-Party Parties in Germany and Italy*, (LUISS University Press, 2015): 9.

paradigm has been characterised by the transition of the user from a passive recipient of content to an active producer of information.[430] This paradigm shift, characterised by horizontal communication, has led to a significant increase in the simultaneous interaction and sharing of information, ideas and values. The new applications brought about by the advent of the so-called "dynamic Web" are forums, chats, social media and, last but not least, blogs; the advent of Web 2.0 constituted the founding premise for the birth of beppegrillo.it, and consequently also of the 5 Star Movement, at least as we have come to know it.

Web 2.0 subsequently became the pivotal element around which the cyber-idealist doctrine of the 5 Star Movement unfolded, imbued with the values and beliefs of its two founders, Gianroberto Casaleggio and Beppe Grillo. For the M5S, the digital transcends the role of a mere external communication instrument, metamorphosing itself into an internal power apparatus within the party and, most significantly, as the epicentre of a distinct philosophical narrative that, in the second chapter of this dissertation, is proposed under the designation of "political digitalism".[431] This construct, characterised by a combination of mythopoeic and programmatic elements, is predicated on the illusory premise that the political emancipation of humanity could be achieved through information technology, as made explicit in the video Gaia.[432] The 5 Star Movement was not the first historical organisation to propose extensive use of ICTs for intra-communication, propaganda and political deliberation. However, while in the case of other historical examples, digital technology was a technique at the service of the organisations, with the M5S, it is the party that is at the service of the digital utopia.[433]

The M5S's techno-utopianism, therefore, aspires to constitute an electronic democracy, empowered by digital technologies and accessible to every citizen, exhuming Pericles' ancient model of democracy, in a post-modern key. In this perspective, the rhizomatic networks, with their seven essential properties (transparency, disintermediation, credibility, interaction, aggregation, structural

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[430] Benanti, *Il Crollo Di* Babele, 48.
[431] Casaleggio Associati, *Gaia – The Future of Politics.*
[432] Casaleggio Associati, *Gaia – The Future of Politics*
[433] Morosini, Interview, 554.

reorganisation and global access to information), would rise up as the new "temple columns" of direct democracy on the model of the Athenian one.[434]

Transparency was regarded as a fundamental attribute of the Internet, with the capacity to enhance the explicability of governmental and non-governmental institutions, thereby fostering enhanced accountability and the distribution of decision-making power and responsibility. In their ideological compendium, "We are at War", Grillo and Casaleggio asserted that "on the Internet, transparency is an obligation; you cannot lie"[435] . Therefore, according to the authors, those who disseminate false information online will consequently forfeit credibility, as collective intelligence would have inevitably prevailed in the online environment.

The political discourse of the 5 Star Movement is characterised by a pervasive and misguided belief that technological advancement is synonymous with a socio-political improvement, a notion further entrenched by the doctrine of supersession; this ideology assumes that each new medium would supplant and subsume its predecessors. [436] In the case of the Movement, the supersession of the spread of the Internet focuses on two main narrative threads: the setting aside of traditional media and the overcoming of representative proxy.

Regarding the former, the M5S founders predicted the imminent obsolescence of traditional media, forecasting the demise of newspapers, television, and books within a decade or two. In their vision, the Internet emerges as a preeminent "super-medium", eclipsing all other forms of media and heralding a transformative era for the press.[437]

The concept of supersession has also had a tangible impact on the emergence of the non-party as a movementist force, as evidenced by the second V-Day in 2008, which focused on collecting signatures for a referendum to abolish the professional register of journalists and public funding for publishing. This event demonised the figure of the journalist, depicting them as a "servant" of power. This viewpoint is further exemplified by Grillo's blog posts, which extol the virtues of the "blog revolution" in contrast to conventional journalism.[438]

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[434] Beppe Grillo, "L'intervento Di Casaleggio a Cernobbio," *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, September 13, 2013. https://beppegrillo.it/lintervento-di-casaleggio-a-cernobbio-2/.
[435] Casaleggio and Grillo, *Siamo in Guerra*, 142.
[436] Natale and Ballatore, "The Web Will Kill Them All," 115.
[437] Casaleggio and Grillo, *Siamo in Guerra*, 7.
[438] Treré and Barassi, "Net-Authoritarianism?," 294.

Concerning the second declination of the M5S's concept of supersession, the overcoming of parliamentary representativeness in favour of a model of continuous participation, it is an ideological strand that cyclically returns to the court of history. However, it is crucial to note that the observations of those who opposed the concept of direct digital democracy, in the process of ICTs development, were substantiated by a set of misplaced, and thus disillusioned, trusts in the information tools of the preceding Information Revolutions.

As J. Carey wittily observed at the dawn of the early 1990s, intellectuals contemporary with him continued to portray the new telematic technologies as anachronistic and apolitical forces, endowed with an inherent revolutionary potential and capable of solving social problems in an almost thaumaturgical way: "although town meetings, the newspaper, the telegraph, the radiotelegraph and television have failed to create a new Athens, proponents of technological liberation regularly describe an era of instant plebiscitary democracy by means of a computerised system of electronic polls and elections"[439].

While we could argue that such a digital plebiscitary model found its partial realisation with the 5 Star Movement, we could hardly claim that it was an exemplar of direct democracy. Indeed, an analysis of the 5 Star Movement's experience of e-voting and e-participation, as De Blasio's taxonomy would suggest, would indicate that the Rousseau platform is an instrument of electronic liquid democracy.[440] However, the opacity of its operating system, its ownership and instrumentalisation by Casaleggio's marketing company, and the unilateralism of the proposals on which only certified members could express preferences, means that the platform is probably more liquid than actually democratic.

Nevertheless, adopting again Carey's critique as a point of departure, it could be contended that Gianroberto Casaleggio is among the proponents of Italian technological liberation.

His techno-libertarianism, transposed into the identity of the 5 Star Movement, identifies in the network the possibility of a self-representation of citizens' demands that can be realised without mediation through forms of discussion and electronic voting.

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[439] Rheingold, *The Virtual Community,* 319-325.
[440] Emiliana De Blasio, *E-Democracy* (Mondadori University, 2019).

This line also advocates the dissolution of professional political mediators, with the exception of a caste of bureaucrats responsible for enforcing plebiscitary popular decisions, in order to achieve direct electronic democracy. Intriguingly, the Movement's techno-libertarianism is also expressed in its opposition to the "strategy of competence" described by Jacques Fontanille. While Fontanille's approach advocates for transparency, even a selective one, as a means to curtail the privileges of experts, the 5 Star Movement's vision entails a heightened level of transparency, accompanied by a redistribution of decision-making authority, thereby extending the capacity to engage in politics beyond the confines of technicians and insiders.[441] Grillo's stance against professionalism can be encapsulated by his assertion that "politicians wearing a tie can't understand people wearing a sweatshirt".[442] In this conceptualisation, the natural transparency of the Internet becomes directly instrumental in facilitating participation, positioning itself within a value hierarchy where participation occupies a paramount position.

This notion permeates all the primary proposals of the Movement, ranging from the participatory municipal budget to the anti-corruption efforts, from the citizenship income to the prioritisation of small-scale works across the territory, and extending to the utilisation of the Rousseau platform.[443]

The "final" version of direct democracy advocated by *grillini*, was thus configured as a replacement of the political class by the citizens, implemented through a set of rules aimed at transforming the elected into *ad tempus* public servants. These obligations included, among other things, significant reductions in parliamentary salaries, the abolition of electoral reimbursements and a strict limitation of terms of office.[444] At this juncture, it is imperative to draw a clear distinction between the two distinct meanings of techno-libertarianism that coexisted within the M5S discourse.

The first of these is more pragmatic in nature and is based on the implementation of participatory tools, such as referendums, blog surveys and the Rousseau platform, within a framework that admits

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[441] Edoardo Maria Bianchi, "La Strategia Della Partecipazione. Il Caso Italiano Del Movimento 5 Stelle," *Carte Semiotiche* 6, No. 12/2018 (February 28, 2020): 88–100. Https://Hdl.Handle.Net/11585/740164.
[442] Guido Di Fraia and Maria Carlotta Missaglia, "The Use of Twitter in 2013 Italian Political Election," in *Social Media in Politics: Case Studies on the Political Power of Social Media*, ed. Bogdan Pătruţ and Monica Pătruţ (Cham: Springer, 2014):67.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-04666-2.
[443] Di Fraia and Missaglia, "The Use of Twitter in 2013 Italian Political Election."
[444] Veltri and Ceri, *Il Movimento nella Rete*.

coexistence with forms of representative democracy and delegation. This conception has also found supporters outside the M5S, among academics and influential jurists in the public debate.

The second meaning, on the other hand, is reunited with the Rousseauian dream of disintermediation. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his celebrated 1762 treatise, "The Social Contract", expresses his conception of direct democracy, making sovereignty coincide with the "general will", which, by its nature, is inalienable, unrepresentable, and irreproducible. Accordingly, the concept of sovereignty is held to be best exercised when it is directly held by the citizenry, and any law, as an expression of the general will, should be aimed at the common good and not at the benefit of particular groups. The distinction between the "will of all", which is a mere sum of individual wills, and the "general will", which is prescriptive and oriented towards the common interest, is of crucial importance here, as it is reunited with the structure of rhizomatic networks and their property of universalising multiplicities. In this theoretical framework, Grillo and Casaleggio are regarded as self-proclaimed "prophets" of an inescapable, hyper-historical progress. This engenders a tension between a pragmatic and reformist vision of direct democracy and an eschatological and revolutionary vision that aspires to a radical transformation of the political system. This ambivalence is also reflected in the hybrid nature of the Rousseau platform, which oscillates between the ambition to become an advanced instrument of participatory democracy, while in the founder's rhetoric it is elevated to the embodiment of the propagated digital utopia. [445]

However, in reality, the platform has been fairly described as "software, technically shoddy, full of security flaws and probably developed by a programmer who is not an expert"[446], revealing itself to be "a decisive asset for a small digital marketing company, and at the same time indispensable for those who want to lead the Movement".[447]

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[445] Floridia and Vignati, "Deliberativa, Diretta O Partecipativa?"
[446] Nicola Biondo and Michele Canestrari, *Supernova.*
[447] Nicola Biondo and Michele Canestrari, *Supernova.*

Conclusion: Democracy Hacked: Netizenship, Power and Participation in the Digital Realm

The most significant conclusion reached during this writing is that the Internet is not a neutral space. Starting from this negative assumption, the vaunted attempt of this dissertation has been to combine the noun "space" with a single qualifying adjective that could precisely describe it. Paragraph after paragraph, I have repeatedly associated adjectives of various natures with the aforementioned noun (virtual space, contestation space, community space, just to name a few). Yet, none of them can be considered as all-inclusive and exhaustive. Taking note of the predictable failure of this project, I take it upon myself to define it as a vague, yet exhaustive in the new post-imposed boundaries of the research, "redefinition space". Taking into consideration the multifaceted case studies of hacktivism and the 5-Star Movement, this contribution has dealt with the Internet as an immaterial place where a profound redefinition of citizen identity, power relations and modes of political participation has occurred.

In considering the first element that is subject to redefinition, it is evident that the concept of citizenship has undergone a deep transformation with the advent of hyper-history, thereby transcending the conventional relationship between the individual and the territory. The large-scale dissemination of the Internet has come to signify the array of conditions that enable an individual to fully exercise fundamental rights and engage in the functioning of the political system. Consequently, while citizenship in Western democracies has traditionally determined how each individual is included in the democratic process, the Internet has emerged as a new public space with the potential to revitalise democracy itself and promote ever broader political participation. In this context, ICTs assume crucial importance for citizenship; the intersection of private and public spheres gives rise to a hyperbolic extension of the latter. The concept of the "netizen" was thus born, representing a virtual, out-of-body entity to whom the rights traditionally associated with physical citizenship should be innate. Defending these rights has been the primary objective of the hacktivists, increasing them that

of the 5 Star Movement. Netizenship is not merely a spatial expansion of citizenship but rather a change in its modalities. The network implies a continuous flow of information and relations, which not only amplifies the possibilities of individual and collective action but also challenges the notion of democracy being confined to voting, representation and by the *Raison d'Etat*.

In addressing the second element of redefinition, it has been acknowledged that the proliferation and ubiquity of the Internet have transformed it into a pivotal arena for power relations' negotiation. As Manuel Castells asserted, in the digital era, "the control of communication networks becomes the lever with which interests and values are transformed into guiding norms of human behaviour".[448] The Internet, as a semi-impermeable membrane, facilitates the pursuit of this osmotic balance between power and citizenship. Its different properties, particularly its capacity to support both "many-to-many" and "one-to-many" communications, have exponentially increased the access points for disseminating information and political messages.

For transnational activist movements, the rhizomatic form of networks and the free exchange of information are in themselves synonymous with power; the global dimension of the network facilitates the formation of international collectives, while its ability to connect strengthens the creation of cooperative ties. Thus, the values that permeate transnational activism – such as irreverence, egalitarianism and libertarianism – align with the Internet's very constitution. [449]

For the taxonomic sub-category of hacktivists, the Internet and the free flow of information are also synonymous with their very existence. The obstruction of information flow is perceived by hacktivists as a crime against humanity, as articulated in a 2010 Anonymous statement: "Without information, you cannot fight for any other cause. [...] Information is the lifeblood of society."[450]

If it is true that information is the currency of democracy, then hacktivists are its treasurers. The hacker imperative of free information, as espoused by Wikileaks, has been identified as the

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[448] Manuel Castells, "The Network Is the Message," in *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002):1–8.
https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199255771.003.0001.
[449] Pippa Norris, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) quoted in Samuel, "Hacktivism and the Future of Political Participation," 5.
[450] Anonymous, *Anonymous - Press Release*, YouTube video, December 16, 2010.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyGYiWps0KU.

organisation's *raison d'être*. The dissemination of classified information has been exposed, primarily highlighting government malfeasance, with the declared aim of promoting radical social change. Julian Assange, proposing a logical argument that drew on hacker ethics and Network Society power relations, believed that the diffusion of secret information could erode the power and trust in authoritarian organisations, even within democratic contexts, transferring a significant share of that "chamber" power to the interconnected global society. In this sense, WikiLeaks' whistleblowing can be conceptualised as a revitalisation of the cyberphunk motto "privacy for the weak, transparency for the powerful"[451], which is emblematic of the redistribution of power in the cyber context.

This principle, pursued with unwavering commitment, has resulted in instances of what might be termed "consistency for its own sake", as evidenced by the "Cablegate" case by WikiLeaks.[452] This revelation has elicited criticism from numerous human rights organisations, who have expressed concerns regarding the inadequate protection of civil sources and has given rise to accusations of cyber-terrorism. [453]

The 5-Star Movement, on the other hand, has been primarily concerned with redefining the power relationship between institutions and citizens, and, at least in theory, the M5S promoted a model of "monitoring democracy"[454], which promises to establish more transparent decision-making from within representative institutions. The Internet is presented as a monitoring tool *par excellence*, capable of guaranteeing the accountability of elected representatives and breaking the chain of imbalance in the Italian media system by offering its members a plurality of alternative voices and the means to listen to them.[455]

Consequently, the concept of democracy advocated by the Movement should have been complemented by the Internet. Digital platforms have emerged as the foundation for the transformation of the user/citizen into an integral component of the state apparatus, thereby progressively diminishing the role of delegation as a fundamental tenet of representative democracy.

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[451] Jacob Appelbaum et al., *Cypherpunks* (OR Books, 2012). https://archive.org/details/cypherpunksfreed0000assa/page/140/mode/2up?q=privacy+for.

[452] Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Leaking Superpower," 1909-1924.

[453] Mark Andrejevic, "'Wikileaks, Surveillance and Transparency,'" *International Journal of Communication* 8 (2014): 1673-1689. https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/2161.

[454] Damien Lanfrey, "Il Movimento Dei Grillini Tra Meetup, Meta-Organizzazione E Democrazia Del Monitoraggio," in *Nuovi Media, Nuova Politica?* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2011), 143-166.

[455] Damien Lanfrey, "Il Movimento Dei Grillini," 143-166.

The "each one counts one" formula, which echoes the peer-to-peer paradigm, is adopted as the guiding principle, entrusting the citizen with a supervisory and oversight role vis-à-vis the party in public office. According to this vision, politicians become "servants" hired by the people, their mandate is temporary, and their actions are subject to continuous bottom-up control facilitated by Web 2.0 digital tools.[456] As Gianroberto Casaleggio himself articulated:

"The Net redefines the relationship between the citizen and politics by allowing access to real-time information on any fact

and control over the processes activated by central or local government."[457]

Finally, the issue of participation in politics in the digital age poses a crucial challenge to contemporary political theory and the democratic-liberal model. Traditionally, politics has been confined to the physical spaces of government institutions, limiting participation to the elected or appointed. This exclusive conception, dominant in mainstream political science, denies the possibility of political action outside the official power structures. However, the actions of hacktivists and the 5-Star Movement demonstrate the necessity to redefine the very structures of power within a hyper-historical context.

The role of computers and networks in facilitating inter-relationships, experimentation with alternative social models, and the development of virtual spaces has been well-documented. In IRCs, chat rooms, newsgroups, mailing lists, blogs, and social networks, the hallmark of interactions is characterised by free participation, the disinterested exchange of information and knowledge, and the horizontality of communication. These virtual environments have been recognised as non-places, providing opportunities to experiment with alternative identities that transcend socially imposed roles. These virtual spaces have emerged as significant drivers of socio-political innovation and a medium for expressing dissent, both potential oilers of the democratic gears. In fact, as John Dewey elucidated: "democracy is not an end in itself, but a means by which people discover and extend and

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[456] Beppe Grillo, "Circonvenzione Di Elettore."
[457] Gianroberto Casaleggio, *Web Ergo Sum* (Milan: Sperling & Kupfer, 2004): 25. https://books.google.it/books/about/Web_ergo_sum.html?id=MtjeAAAACAAJ&redir_esc=y.

manifest their fundamental human nature and human rights. Democracy is rooted in freedom, solidarity, a choice of work and the ability to participate in the social order." [458]

However, the capacity to engage in democratic activities online necessitates the provision of substantial assurances of "invisibility" in various contexts and at diverse intervals, akin to those historically assured during the exercise of the voting right or the articulation of dissenting opinions in Western democracies.[459] The own governance of personal information, access to socially pertinent data, and the capacity for uninterrupted communication become fundamental factors for safeguarding individuality and collective action. The technological dimension, encompassing literacy and the reconstruction of democratic procedures, is integral to this process.[460]

Indeed, it is imperative to question and critically evaluate the tools and platforms employed in the context of political participation in the digital era, whether characterised by subversion and collective action or individual and deliberative expression; this critical effort is essential to avert the transformation of the promise of a more interactive democracy into an involuntary parody of democracy itself, or worse still, into authoritarianism masquerading as democracy.

The right to privacy in the virtual sphere cannot be regarded as a mere right to privacy or as a right "to be left alone".[461] Instead, privacy should be deduced from the opposite principle, i.e. the freedom to participate in a communitarian decision or action, without conditioning.

Thus, privacy is deemed necessary for active and conscious political participation, protecting the plurality of voices and preventing forms of exclusion based on orientations and affiliations.

Protecting the "electronic body", that is, all the digital information about an individual on the Internet, is crucial for safeguarding personal freedom. The proliferation of data collected on every aspect of our lives makes it clear that privacy is a fundamental tool to defend a society of freedom, counteracting the drift towards a society characterised by pervasive surveillance and discriminatory social selection.

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[458] Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander, *The Essential Dewey, Volume 1: Pragmatism, Education, Democracy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), ix–xiv, https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.18427186.4.
[459] Stefano Rodotà, *Tecnopolitica* (Edizioni Laterza, 2004): 150-153.
[460] Rodotà, *Tecnopolitica*.
[461] Rodotà, *Tecnopolitica,* XXX-XXXI.

Contemporary history, particularly the experiences of 20th-century dictatorships, has demonstrated the perils associated with the extensive and indiscriminate accumulation of personal data. Such regimes have illustrated how the systematic infringement of fundamental rights, including privacy, can result in pervasive and oppressive governance of daily life, effectively stifling all forms of dissent and significantly curtailing individual liberties. While the fight against terrorism is a priority, we must draw lessons from the past to ensure that the importance of a robust individual sphere as an inalienable element of a society that places human dignity at its core is not overlooked.

To ensure the protection of participation rights becomes a concrete reality, the technological environment in which we are immersed must maintain, or better, enhance, a character of full accessibility. Only through an inclusive and transparent digital architecture, which guarantees everyone the possibility to understand and control their data, will it be possible to build a Network Society in which technology is at the service of fundamental rights and not a means for their erosion.

In conclusion, Internet has redefined the traditional paradigms on which democracy itself is based. Democracy, in hyper-history, is probably not yet disfigured, as predicted by Nadia Urbinati[462], but it has been certainly transformed. We could argue that in the digital age, democracy has been hacked; indeed, its traditional tools have been repurposed through the innovative use of digital technology, originally conceived as a means of liberating minds, but soon reclassified as tools of bottom-up participation in global political life. This hacking of democracy has made the political system potentially more open, dynamic and accessible, encouraging new forms of grassroots participation, but not necessarily more egalitarian or secure.

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[462] A reference to Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured. Opinion, Truth, and the People*, (Harvard University Press, 2014).

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Annex I

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THE HACKTIVISMO DECLARATION
assertions of liberty in support of an uncensored Internet

DEEPLY ALARMED that state-sponsored censorship of the Internet is
rapidly spreading with the assistance of transnational corporations,

TAKING AS A BASIS the principles and purposes enshrined in Article 19
of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) that states,
_Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this
right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to
seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media
and regardless of frontiers_, and Article 19 of the International
Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) that says,

1. Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference.

2. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right
shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and
ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing
or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his
choice.

3. The exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 of this
article carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may
therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be
such as are provided by law and are necessary:

  (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others;

  (b) For the protection of national security or of public order, or of
public health or morals.

RECALLING that some member states of the United Nations have signed the
ICCPR, or have ratified it in such a way as to prevent their citizens
from using it in courts of law,

CONSIDERING that, such member states continue to willfully suppress
wide-ranging access to lawfully published information on the Internet,
despite the clear language of the ICCPR that freedom of expression
exists in all media,

TAKING NOTE that transnational corporations continue to sell
information technologies to the world's most repressive regimes
knowing full well that they will be used to track and control an
already harried citizenry,

TAKING INTO ACCOUNT that the Internet is fast becoming a method of
repression rather than an instrument of liberation,

BEARING IN MIND that in some countries it is a crime to demand the
right to access lawfully published information, and of other basic human
rights,

RECALLING that member states of the United Nations have failed to press
the world's most egregious information rights violators to a higher
standard,
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MINDFUL that denying access to information could lead to spiritual, intellectual, and economic decline, the promotion of xenophobia and destabilization of international order,

CONCERNED that governments and transnationals are colluding to maintain the status quo,

DEEPLY ALARMED that world leaders have failed to address information rights issues directly and without equivocation,

RECOGNIZING the importance to fight against human rights abuses with respect to reasonable access to information on the Internet,

THEREFORE WE ARE CONVINCED that the international hacking community has a moral imperative to act, and we

DECLARE:

*   THAT FULL RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS INCLUDES THE LIBERTY OF FAIR AND REASONABLE ACCESS TO INFORMATION, WHETHER BY SHORTWAVE RADIO, AIR MAIL, SIMPLE TELEPHONY, THE GLOBAL INTERNET, OR OTHER MEDIA.

*   THAT WE RECOGNIZE THE RIGHT OF GOVERNMENTS TO FORBID THE PUBLICATION OF PROPERLY CATEGORIZED STATE SECRETS, CHILD PORNOGRAPHY, AND MATTERS RELATED TO PERSONAL PRIVACY AND PRIVILEDGE, AMONG OTHER ACCEPTED RESTRICTIONS. BUT WE OPPOSE THE USE OF STATE POWER TO CONTROL ACCESS TO THE WORKS OF CRITICS, INTELLECTUALS, ARTISTS, OR RELIGIOUS FIGURES.

*   THAT STATE SPONSORED CENSORSHIP OF THE INTERNET ERODES PEACEFUL AND CIVILIZED COEXISTENCE, AFFECTS THE EXERCISE OF DEMOCRACY, AND ENDANGERS THE SOCIOECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONS.

*   THAT STATE-SPONSORED CENSORSHIP OF THE INTERNET IS A SERIOUS FORM OF ORGANIZED AND SYSTEMATIC VIOLENCE AGAINST CITIZENS, IS INTENDED TO GENERATE CONFUSION AND XENOPHOPIA, AND IS A REPREHENSIBLE VIOLATION OF TRUST.

*   THAT WE WILL STUDY WAYS AND MEANS OF CIRCUMVENTING STATE SPONSORED CENSORSHIP OF THE INTERNET AND WILL IMPLEMENT TECHNOLOGIES TO CHALLENGE INFORMATION RIGHTS VIOLATIONS.