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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### FROM DATA EXTRACTION TO DATA LEAKING

#### Data-activism in Italian and Spanish anti-corruption campaigns.

**Alice Mattoni**

*Scuola Normale Superiore*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article investigates how activists employ Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and engage with data-activism in grassroots struggles against corruption. Based on a comparative research design that triangulates three qualitative data sources — in-depth interviews, movements' documents and participatory platforms — the article analyses two campaigns: Riparte il Futuro in Italy and 15MpaRato in Spain. In so doing, the article casts light on how activists engage with digital data, revealing how their employment is connected to and consistent with the type of organizational structure and communication strategy of the campaign. Moreover, the article evaluates how activists engage with three specific digital data-related practices — digital data creation, data usage and data transformation. Finally, the article illustrates that grasping the features of digital data-related practices also reflects how activists perceive and enact distinct ideas of active citizenship and data transparency in their fight against corruption.

**KEYWORDS:** ICTs, accountability, anti-corruption, data-activism, social movements, transparency

**CORRESPONDING AUTHORS:** Alice Mattoni, email: [alice.mattoni@sns.it](mailto:alice.mattoni@sns.it)

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## 1. Introduction

16 April 2014, the Italian parliament reformed Article 416-ter of the Penal Code. While originally conceived to punish politicians for the trade of money and/or goods with the mafia in exchange for votes, the reformed article also stipulated less-traceable resources that politicians could grant to the mafia to increase their electoral support, such as reserved information on bids for competitive public tenders and other types of favours that would not include the exchange of money. Some years later, on the 23rd of February 2017, the Spanish High Court sentenced Rodrigo Rato to 4 years and 6 months in prison. Together with 64 other Bankia executives, the former International Monetary Fund chief and the chair of Bankia between 2010 and 2012 was found guilty of misappropriating funds through the misuse of company credit cards, up to 12 million euro in less than 10 years. Despite their differences, these two events share many features.

First, they have in common the contextual conditions in which they developed: in both Italy and Spain, citizens have experienced a harsh economic crisis and a severe round of austerity measures in the past decade that significantly lowered their satisfaction with representative democracies (Flesher Fominaya 2017, Quaranta and Martini 2017); at the same time, citizens of the two countries gave rise to a wave of anti-austerity protests, more intense in Spain and more fragmented in Italy, that framed the ruling elites as corrupt and colluding with economic and political powers operating not just at the national level but also at the transnational level (Andretta 2017, della Porta et al. 2017, della Porta 2015). Second, the reform of article 416-ter in Italy and the prosecution of Rodrigo Rato in Spain are not merely two relevant events in the sphere of institutional politics, since they are rooted in two long-lasting grassroots campaigns in which hundreds of thousands of citizens participated: *Senza Corruzione...Riparte il Futuro* (from now on simply *Riparte il Futuro*) in Italy, starting in 2013, and *15MpaRato* in Spain, starting in 2012. As such, they are both the outcomes of bottom-up efforts to activate institutional powers — the legislative in the Italian case and the judiciary in the Spanish case — to prevent or punish crimes that might be ascribed to the wide sphere of political corruption.

This article investigates these two campaigns as two case studies that are theoretically relevant to understanding how civil society actors might mobilize against corruption independently from the top-down initiatives of governmental institutions. In the past few years, scholars who investigate anti-corruption strategies have recognized the importance of civil society actors to limit corruption (e.g., Hough 2017, Rotberg 2017, Rose-Ackerman and Palifka 2016, Johnston 2014), with recent findings suggesting that

there is a positive correlation between high numbers of civil society actors and more effective control of corruption (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015). Along these lines, some studies have empirically investigated the characteristics of bottom-up efforts against corruption at the national level, showing their relevance in the production of contextual understanding of corruption linked to the territories in which they act (Walton 2017); the formulation of specific demands to increase anti-corruption policies (Hough 2013, Johnston 2005); the production of discourses against corruption linked to other contentious issues like environmentalism (Torsello 2012); and the experimentation with different forms of collective actions (Beyerle 2014). Activists involved in *Riparte il Futuro* and *15MpaRato* employ a diverse range of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs): they embed several participatory web platforms in the two campaigns, including social media, crowdfunding and online petition platforms, and they also make extensive use of less interactive digital communication channels like campaign websites. At the same time, they also integrate digital data in the two campaigns. In investigating these two case studies, this article thus aims to complement the literature outlined above from the specific angle of how activists employ ICTs in bottom-up initiatives to counter corruption.

The article is structured as follows. The next section discusses the theoretical framework that guided the analysis of the two campaigns. The section that follows discusses the comparative research design as well as the methods employed to investigate the two campaigns. The other three sections present the main findings with regard to the organizational structures, communication strategies and the use of digital data in the two campaigns. The conclusions further compare the two campaigns, linking the three dimensions explored in the previous sections, discussing what we can learn from the activists' use of digital data in anti-corruption campaigns, and suggesting further lines of investigation.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

Many studies underline that ICTs might be crucial in decreasing corruption, especially with regard to their ability to foster a culture of transparency. However, they do this mainly by examining top-down e-government initiatives (i.e., Bertot et al. 2010, Dias et al. 2008). Inspired by the work of Heald on varieties of transparency (2006), Davies and Fumega (2014) underline that the governmental uses of digital technologies to increase transparency might take two opposite directions: while "upward transparency" grants the state the ability to control their citizens, "downward transparency" should empow-

er citizens to monitor their representatives. Most of the time, transparency mechanisms are linked to the availability of data related to the phenomena that citizens want to scrutinize (ibid.: downward transparency is often dependent on the presence of regulations that allow citizens to access data, like the Freedom of Information Act, or to the creation of open data portals, like USAspending.gov, which show how the tax dollars of American citizens are spent. In this regard, the success of ICTs in increasing transparency and reducing corruption is also linked to the citizens' acceptance of e-government initiatives (Bertot et al. 2010), which should be citizen-centred in their development and implementation to be efficient and effective (Jaeger and Bertot 2010). Indeed, the presence of anti-corruption tools alone — either online or offline — is not enough if they are not appropriated by citizens, and in this regard, the role of social movement organizations becomes central in promoting the collective actions necessary to empower citizens' ability to monitor their representatives (Mungiu-Pippidi 2014). While taking citizens into consideration, studies on transparency in the field of corruption do not venture into the potential that ICT platforms and services have when they are created, not merely employed, by collective actors positioned outside the realm of institutional politics, such as in social movement organizations. The two campaigns on which this article focuses, however, illustrate well that downward transparency might also escape e-government initiatives when social movement organizations acquire a more prominent role in the production of digital data, enabling forms of transparency that are constructed from the bottom up in the context of their grassroots opposition to corruption. In doing this, citizens are not just recipients of transparency initiatives that come from top-down governmental institutions. Rather, they can explore their agency as citizens through practices of 'monitory democracy' (cfr. Feenstra et al. 2017, Keane 2009) in which many forms of extra-parliamentary and power-scrutinizing mechanisms play an increasingly pivotal role, also due to the growing employment of ICTs that augment the opportunity for appropriating otherwise secret information, as in the case of WikiLeaks (Feenstra and Casero-Ripollés 2014).

The use of data in social movements is not a novelty, and there is a long history of how data on specific, contentious issues can be used to foster mobilization, from activists employing statistical data to support their struggles in the framework of stactivism (Bruno et al. 2014) to the production of qualitative data in the context of the workerist co-research tradition (Roggero 2011) to the use of data to face specific, contentious issues, like the vigilante anti-speed associations that used stopwatches to produce and gather data in the framework of collective actions against the use of automobiles at the beginning of the twentieth century in the United States (Rao et al. 2000). Due to the recent interconnected technological innovations in the field of ICTs (Kitchin

2014, 98), today, scholars in different disciplines speak about the existence of big data as huge in volume, high in velocity, diverse in variety, exhaustive in scope, fine-grained in resolution, relational in nature and flexible (Kitchin 2013, 262). Scholars interested in political mobilization also focus on the rise of big data and suggest that civil society actors engage with big data either to resist the extraction of data on what people do in their daily lives by governments and corporations or to employ big data as an additional tool in the activists' repertoire of contention to sustain their mobilization (Milan 2017).

Social movements have enthusiastically embraced the potential of big data in the framework of anti-corruption from below, although with changing fortunes; for example, in the past few years, activists have attempted to exploit crowd-reporting platforms in many countries across the world to monitor corruption from below, asking citizens to report the extortion of bribes on platforms like *I Paid a Bribe* in India or *Not in My Country* in Kenya and Uganda (Zinnbauer 2015). However, activists fighting corruption might also embed data in their campaigns in less striking ways, nonetheless still using them as one of the relevant tools to support mobilization.

Despite this usage, we still have a limited knowledge of how digital data connect to grassroots campaigns against corruption. This article presents an exploratory study of this topic, examining two interlaced dimensions: the rationale behind the use of digital data, showing how their use is connected to and consistent with the type of organizational structure and communication strategy that activists employ to fight corruption; and the different ways in which activists can embed digital data into their struggles against corruption, attending to the mechanisms of digital data creation, usage, and transformation.

### 3. Case studies and methods

The explorative study presented in this paper is based on a comparative research design involving two case studies (Snow and Trom 2002) — the campaign *Riparte il Futuro* in Italy and the campaign *15MpaRato* in Spain — that are theoretically relevant with regard to the use of ICTs in grassroots opposition to corruption. Indeed, they are not merely interesting examples of how activists include digital data in their mobilization. Rather, they also speak to the recent debate on the prominent role of ICTs in changing the organizational patterns that support mobilization (Bennett and Segerberg 2013, Juris 2008), the repertoire of contention to which activists might recur when protesting, which is much wider than in the past (Earl and Kimport 2011), and the con-

struction of shared meanings and common identities in the context of social movements (Kavada 2015, Milan 2015). Much of this literature highlights the importance of individuals' acts of communication and the secondary role that traditional collective formations play in organizing and promoting protests; massive mobilizations today often rely on the efforts of solo activists connected with one another through social media platforms (Bennett and Segerberg 2013, Earl and Kimport 2011). In investigating *Riparte il Futuro* and *15MpaRato*, I will complement such literature by showing how activists' engagement with digital data in the struggle against corruption requires a collective effort to recombine and contextualize individuals' acts, voices, and claims that would otherwise remain dispersed digital traces with low political potential.

To investigate the two case studies, I employed semi-structured interviews with activists, one of the main methods to gather first-hand knowledge about how they organize their collective actions (della Porta 2014). To allow a precise reconstruction of the two case studies, the nine activists who were most involved in the organization of the two campaigns were interviewed. Since both *Riparte il Futuro* and *15MpaRato* were supported by a small number of core organizers, the number of interviewees is not high if compared to other studies on social movements, yet it is nonetheless an exhaustive sample of the core organizers involved in the two campaigns. In the Italian case, the roles of activists were rigidly distinct, whereas the core organizers of the Spanish campaign were considerably more interchangeable: for this reason more activists in Italy (N = 6) and less in Spain (N = 3) were interviewed. The in-depth interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were mostly collected via Skype with activists who were all very familiar with that platform and hence felt at ease in using it to speak about their work in the campaigns. I then combined in-depth interviews with two other sources to form a more complete reconstruction of the two case studies through a "triangulation of data" (Denzin 1975). First, I gathered materials produced by activists in the framework of their campaigns, mostly retrieving the relevant documents from the official websites of *Senza Corruzione* and *15MpaRato*, which included calls for action, reports and accounts on the campaign developments, as well as first-hand interpretations of activists' choices with regard to the two campaigns. Then, I also gathered information on the two campaigns through certain specific platforms that acted as the tools through which activists created, employed and transformed the data relevant for their campaigns, including *Change.org*, *BuzonX* and *CorreodeBlesa.com*. I analysed the three qualitative datasets thematically, paying attention to the three main themes on which I wanted to focus the investigation: the organizational structure, the communication strategy and the data-related practices.

#### **4. Two models of organizational patterns in bottom-up fights against corruption**

Riparte il Futuro started in January 2013, about two months before the general elections in Italy. Linked to the tradition of anti-mafia social movement organizations in Italy, the main organizers of the campaign were Libera, a well-known national association founded in 1995, and Gruppo Abele, a national association born in the 1970s that contributed to the foundation of Libera. While the ultimate goal of Riparte il Futuro was to change article 416-ter of the Italian Penal Code, it was also an opportunity to increase public awareness regarding corruption and its consequences for Italian society. Also for this reason, Latte Creative, a social communication company, was hired to manage the communication strategy of the campaign. To reach its main objective, the campaign addressed the political candidates of the forthcoming general elections: activists asked for their public commitment to the campaign by declaring their willingness to work towards the modification of article 416-ter. In this regard, Riparte il Futuro was also a “tool of active citizenship both for political candidates, who could show to the electorate their commitments against corruption, and for the electors, who could have more information on the political candidates” (Interview ITA\_01, Skype, April 2013). To further support the campaign and increase its publicity, activists asked citizens in the general electorate to sign an online petition that reached approximately 280,000 signatures in August 2013. Of the 878 political candidates that supported the campaign, 274 were elected in the general elections, including the two new presidents of the Chamber and the Senate. Amidst several attempts of obstructionism, the parliament eventually changed article 416-ter of the penal code on the 16th of April 2014. Meanwhile, Riparte il Futuro evolved and began to support other campaigns related to corruption, becoming an association in 2016.

As its very name also suggests, the 15MpaRato campaign is rooted in the broader 15-M or Indignados mobilization that reached its peak in the spring of 2011 and continued to mobilize in the subsequent years all over Spain, with hundreds of thousands of citizens mobilized against the austerity measures that their government was implementing to counter the economic crisis (Portos 2016). Similar to other protests in Southern Europe, the 15-M was also a mobilization against corruption, both with regard to concrete corrupt behaviours within political institutions and to the overall collusion between political, economic and financial powers (Taibo 2011). After the peak of protests, activists belonging to the XNet association — which was also involved in the 15-M mobilizations — wanted to exploit the indignation that had spread in the context of the 15-M, focusing on a concrete target (Interview ESP\_03, Barcelona, May 2015):

the bank Bankia, its former president Rodrigo Rato and its other managers, with their many links to the economic crisis, the real estate bubble, and supposed collusions with political elites, were an easy choice for activists. XNet then began to design the 15MpaRato campaign, which they rather considered a catalyst to trigger citizens' participation against corruption (Interview ESP\_03, Barcelona, May 2015). For the campaign to work, activists needed the relevant information and the material resources to begin a criminal proceeding against Rodrigo Rato and other Bankia managers. For this reason, between May and June 2012 they developed two main participatory devices: BuzonX, a platform to securely leak relevant information about the Bankia case, and a call for political crowdfunding on the GoTeo platform. Both devices were quickly successful: "in one month and ten days, we were able to gather all the information that we needed to start a lawsuit [...] and in doing so we broke a taboo, showing that the people can actually denounce the bankers" (Interview ESP\_01, Skype, March 2015). While the original lawsuit aimed to hold Rodrigo Rato and the other Bankia managers accountable for the economic crisis in Spain, during the campaign, activists also succeeded in another leak: "we did this leak, named *Correo de Blesa*, that included approximately 8000 email communications from Ricardo Blesa and other bankers, and this was probably the biggest leak ever done in Spain" (ibidem). These email communications unveiled the illegal use of Bankia's credit cards by its managers and other relevant political and economic figures in Spain and triggered another judicial investigation that then resulted in the recent condemnation of Rodrigo Rato, Ricardo Blesa and 64 other Bankia executives for the misappropriation of funds through the misuse of company credit cards.

When considering how activists organized their campaigns, the differences between the Italian and Spanish case are striking. Both aimed to mobilize citizens on the issue of grand political corruption schemes, then translate their collective action into the arena of institutional politics. However, *Riparte il Futuro* and 15MpaRato employed diverging organizational strategies to reach their goals, to the point where they might be seen as two opposite ideal-types in the continuum of grassroots opposition to corruption. In what follows, I draw on the definition of (social movement) organizational cultures proposed by Kavada (2013) in her study of Internet usage within the European Social Forum. Although I do not directly take into consideration the organizational cultures sustaining the two campaigns against corruption, the empirical materials I investigated allow me to differentiate two organizational patterns along four dimensions outlined by Kavada (2013): the degree of formality according to which activists define organizing roles and tasks of the campaign; the type of hierarchy that prevails in the organizational structure of the campaign; the degree of centralization that characterizes the organi-



zational flows of the campaign; and the degree of professionalization of the activists involved in the campaign. Table 1 below compares the two campaigns in a nutshell with regard to the dimensions listed above, revealing straightforward and strong differences between the two.

**Table 1 – The organizational structure of the two campaigns**

	<i>Riparte il Futuro</i>	<i>15MpaRato</i>
Formality of roles and tasks	High	Low
Type of hierarchy	Vertical	Mixed Vertical/Horizontal*
Degree of centralization	High	Mixed High/Low*
Degree of professionalization	High	Low

\* The campaign mixes different types of hierarchy and degrees of centralization according to its different stages.

In *Riparte il Futuro*, activists' roles in the campaign were rigidly defined, with a neat division of roles between activists focusing on communication strategies and activists who instead focused on the organizational side of the campaign, with the former working for Latte Creative, a social communication agency, and the latter employed in Gruppo Abele, an association traditionally engaged in the fight against organized crime. Additionally, the anti-mafia and anti-corruption association Libera was also fully involved in the campaign, providing logistical support and mobilizing their volunteers at the local level: "the local volunteers of Libera were key in organizing local events but also in double-checking the information that candidates sent us on themselves" (Interview ITA\_05, Skype, May 2013). In contrast, in the case of *15MpaRato*, activists' roles tended to be more interchangeable, with a fluid overlap between communication and organization strategies in the framework of the same social movement organization, Xnet, which provided a small group of dedicated activists who spent the majority of their time as volunteers on the campaign. Consistently, while *Riparte il Futuro* relied mainly on professional activists, *15MpaRato* was supported through the work of volunteers: this is another relevant difference distinguishing the organizational patterns of the two case studies. For the hierarchical structure supporting the two campaigns, *Riparte il Futuro* followed the same organizational pattern as Libera, relying on a small group of professional activists coordinating the campaign at the national level and providing instructions to the leaders of its regional chapters, which, in turn, mobilized volunteers at the local level. The leadership was therefore distributed across different territorial levels, with national professional activists making the most important decisions related to the campaign. In the case of *15MpaRato*, the hierarchical structure was more complex, with a small circle of activists belonging to XNet coordinating the cam-

paign, which became more (or less) horizontally organized depending on the tasks to be accomplished in its different stages. At times, the XNet activists released their leadership and organized national assemblies that became the decision-making bodies of the campaign. Other times, they resumed their leadership to make decisions judged critical for the future of the campaign. Therefore, if Riparte il Futuro is a clear example of a centralized campaign, the picture of the 15MpaRato campaign is more decentralized, although intermittently.

## 5. The communication strategy of the two campaigns between visibility and engagement

Although they are quite different with regard to their organizational structure, the two campaigns share more commonalities in the communication strategy on which they rely. Riparte il Futuro and 15MpaRato were both very much entrenched in digital technologies and attempted to exploit the participatory potential of social media platforms. Social movements usually rely on a “repertoire of communication” from which they select and perform certain activist media practices (and not others), designing a specific communication strategy. In this section, I focus on the communication strategy of the two campaigns, considering two separate functions: on the one hand, its capacity to bring visibility to the campaigns through the combined use of communication channels, and on the other hand, its ability to foster the participation of potential supporters in the campaigns through the deployment of specific communication platforms.

### *Communication channels for visibility*

As Table 2 shows, Riparte il Futuro and 15MpaRato were quite similar with regard to the communication channels that activists employed to foster their visibility.

**Table 2 – Communication channels for visibility**

	<i>Riparte il Futuro</i>	<i>15MpaRato</i>
Main tool	Campaign website	Campaign website
Social media platforms	Facebook and Twitter	Facebook and Twitter
Mainstream media	Newspapers, television news, popular television and radio programmes	Newspapers, television news

In both campaigns, activists devised a communication strategy centred on one staple communication tool: an official website that became the repository of all the materials produced in the framework of the mobilization, including factual information about and interpretations of corruption in both countries. Both campaigns also made use of social media platforms: Facebook and Twitter mostly functioned to further amplify the materials originally published on the official website to reach different audiences. In Italy, for instance, “Facebook had a relevant role in reaching out to the public since this is the online place where Italians spend most of their time. and it is thus good to sustain mass mobilizations” (Interview ITA\_02, Skype, April 2013). According to activists, moreover, the participatory and interactive potentials of Facebook gave them the opportunity “to develop a community of supporters because those more active [on the Facebook page of the campaign] began to spread the news about the campaign and in this way... well, they also became activists of Riparte il Futuro” (Interview ITA\_01, Skype, April 2013). The team of web professionals also included Twitter as a tool to target specific categories of users: “Twitter used approximately 10% of the communicative resources devoted to the campaign since it is a niche online space, mostly used by journalists and politicians...so we used Twitter mostly to follow and contact politicians” (Interview ITA\_02, Skype, April 2013). The use of the two social media platforms was less differentiated in Spain, where Twitter was also more broadly used due to the previous experience of the 15-M mobilizations in May 2011 and the following months (Micò and Casero-Ripollés 2014).

Another commonality between Riparte il Futuro and 15MpaRato was their focus on mainstream media coverage. In the case of 15MpaRato, activists aimed to develop stable relationships with journalists, becoming relevant news sources on the judicial inquiry involving Rodrigo Rato and the other Bankia managers: “each time there was something new happening in the legal process, the lawyers who were working for us gave us the relevant information, and then we wrote a press release, and we sent it to the print press and then, from the same press release, we wrote down a short piece to be published on our website and, from there, we also posted the same content on our social media platforms profiles” (Interview ESP\_02, Florence, April 2017). In the same spirit, activists of Riparte il Futuro sought and obtained the active collaboration of mainstream media journalists, showing a strong adaptation to the logic of mainstream media. The main national television news, as well as a commentary by a famous journalist published in one of the leading Italian newspapers, provoked a quick increase in the number of political candidates joining the campaign (Interview ITA\_01, Skype, April 2013). At the regional level, local newspapers, televisions and radio also played a role in involving political candidates and provided some visibility to the campaign (Interview

ITA\_03, Skype, May 2013). That said, activists in both campaigns also knew that mainstream media coverage is rare and often superficial. For this reason, they devised different strategies to attract attention.

Activists in Spain were aware that “mass media are still highly inaccessible [for us], but at the same highly important in Spain” (Interview ESP\_01, Skype, March 2015). For this reason, they made an attempt to “hack the mainstream media, because we made a lot of noise on the social media platforms that then attracted the attention of journalists working in the mainstream media” (Interview ESP\_01, Skype, March 2015). *Riparte il Futuro* instead sought to reach the public through certain popular, nationally aired television and radio programmes: the satirical daily show *Striscia la Notizia*, with an audience of approximately 10 million people, and *L'Infedele*, a well-followed political talk show. This proved to be a successful choice, since activists noticed “a peak in citizens’ signatures of the online petition when the campaign was covered in these popular media, to the point that during *L'Infedele* the servers went out of service for a while due to high traffic” (Interview ITA\_04, Skype, May 2013).

#### *Communication platforms for participation*

The communication strategy of the two campaigns also revolved around the engagement of individual citizens, although it followed two different paths: *Riparte il Futuro* was “organizationally brokered” (cfr. Bennet and Segermberg 2013) with an emphasis on strong coalitions and collective frames; in contrast, the *15MpaRato* campaign leaned more towards an “organizationally enabled” (ibidem) model of collective action, characterized by a loose coalition and more personalized framing of issues and actions.

*Riparte il Futuro* revolved around a strong slogan that evoked a positive collective action frame, according to which the fight against corruption “does not revolve around the indignation of citizens, that is a mechanism that, of course, usually works...but that in the Italian context we decided not to use because Italy is already full of indignation...and therefore we decided to rather use citizens’ willingness to appropriate the future of the country” (Interview ITA\_02, Skype, April 2013). Activists retained a strong control over the type of engagement that they requested of citizens, providing them with a detailed script on how to participate in the campaign. For political candidates, activists asked for their concrete help to reform article 416-ter or the penal code once elected in the Italian parliament. As soon as a political candidate agreed to support *Riparte il Futuro*, activists immediately sent him or her “an email in which we greeted the candidate, asking her to advertise her support for the campaign, and we included the link to our website to be shared in the political candidates’ Facebook and Twitter profiles, and then we also asked them to invite other candidates to join the campaign and

to circulate a press release about their commitment” (Interview ITA\_02, Skype, May 2013). For citizens who were part of the electorate, activists requested them to sign an online petition that urged political candidates to keep their promises to fight corruption once elected in the parliament. Also in this case, immediately after signing the petition, citizens were welcomed as active members of the campaign through an automatic email message with a standard script to be used to share the news through Facebook and Twitter, as well as invited to send an email to their contacts to inform them about the campaign. The only form of mild personalization of the campaign was allowed on the website: “there is a section of the website in which the supporters of the campaign can send us a picture and explain to us why they supported the campaign...this is a way in which people can appropriate our campaign so that it becomes their campaign as well” (Interview ITA\_02, Skype, May 2013).

In the case of 15MpaRato, activists also looked for the support of citizens through digital technologies to reach the objective of a lawsuit against Rodrigo Rato and the other Bankia executives. However, the campaign employed its very name as a hashtag that could be used in different contexts and with different meanings related to the struggle against corruption. Moreover, instead of an online petition, activists requested citizens to donate money through the GoTeo crowdfunding platform to gain the necessary resources to hire a lawyer and face the expenses related to judicial action: “it was really quick! Approximately 1000 citizens gave us money through the crowdfunding.... They gave us 5 euros, 15 euros, small amounts of money...and then in less than a week we had 16,000 euro” (Interview ESP\_01, Skype, March 2015). Finally, while asking for a specific type of involvement, activists did not prepare any ready-made recipes concerning citizens’ engagement: “we just asked people to spread the campaign’s voice by sharing information on their social media profiles and by monitoring what the mainstream media said about the campaign” (Interview ESP\_03, Florence, May 2017). However, the 15MpaRato activists exerted loose control with regard to spreading the campaign’s voice in that they did not suggest standard scripts to be used to advertise the campaign but rather allowed potential participants to freely appropriate the campaign hashtag as best suited them.

## **6. Creating, digesting and transforming digital data in the two campaigns**

Beyond the active involvement of citizens, activists also embedded digital data in the two campaigns, thereby engaging with data-activism, which can be defined as an “[ensemble of] sociotechnical practices of engagement with data [...], or the encounter of

data and data-based narratives and tactics with collective action” (Gutierrez and Milan, 2018). While activists can engage with data in different ways in the course of mobilization, I argue that three data-related practices seem particularly relevant: data creation, data usage and data transformation. First, the very definition of data-activism suggests the presence of some level of agency exerted by activists towards data (cfr. Milan 2017), and for this reason, it is important to assess how activists create the data that they then embed in their collective actions. Then, it is important to consider that the weight that data have in data-activism changes according to activists’ data usage in the context of their collective action. Finally, data do not speak for themselves, and activists must transform data into information that can be more accessible to the wider public (Milan 2017, Schrok 2016).

**Table 3 – Digital data-related practices**

	<i>Riparte il Futuro</i>	<i>15MpaRato</i>
Data creation	Extraction of supporters’ data	Leaking of elites’ data
Data usage	Data as resource to tailor the campaign	Data as the main pillar of the campaign
Data transformation	Data digestion and soft remediation (i.e., infographics)	Data digestion and hard remediation (i.e., popular theatre)

Table 3 shows that *Riparte il Futuro* and *15MpaRato* had several differences in approaching digital data. Activists involved in the latter campaign produced digital data through BuzonX, an encrypted platform for secure leaks of sensitive information about corruption and related criminal activities. The data they were looking for were not public in the first place: on the contrary, they were soliciting citizens to send materials including information not meant to be released to the public. Activists set up the technological platform to ensure the protection of whistleblowers, but then asked citizens to actively participate in the campaign. *Riparte il Futuro* also embedded data as a relevant feature of the campaign, although in this case activists created data in two different ways. On the one hand, political candidates who agreed to sustain the campaign were asked to send in information about themselves to reinforce the idea of transparent candidacies: curriculum vitae, income declaration, conflicts of interest, and judicial situation. On the other hand, citizens who signed the online petition also agreed to release some of their personal information to the Change.org platform, hence filling a dataset about the campaign supporters that activists could then profile. In short, while *Riparte il Futuro* extracted data from its supporters, whether average citizens or politi-

cal candidates, 15MpaRato emphasized the more active role of citizens, if not as direct creators of data, at least as data brokers engaged in leaking activities.

Once activists had the relevant data in their hands, they used them to sustain different aspects of their campaign. In Riparte il Futuro, the Change.org platform was much more than a tool for online participation: “we used the information gathered through the online petition to divide our supporters according to...for instance, to the city in which they lived, and then we contacted all those who lived in one city when we organized a debate there linked to the themes of the campaign, and we could do this very quickly” (Interview ITA\_02, Skype, May 2013). For 15MpaRato, the data gathered through the leaking platform BuzonX were mostly used to unveil the wrongdoing of the political, economic and financial elites in Spain, with the aim of triggering the indignation of the Spanish people even further. Moreover, the release of the leaked data to the mainstream media was also accompanied by the XNet activists’ attempt to “change the narrative of the mainstream media not with regard to corruption as such, but rather concerning the actors involved in the struggle against corruption, hence underlying the importance of citizens’ agency in countering corruption” (Interview ESP\_03, Florence, May 2017). Activists sought and obtained mainstream media coverage in television news on national channels, like La 2 and La Sexta, in which they were able to impose their narrative about the leak, underlining the importance of active citizenship in fighting against corruption. In sum, while data were a resource for mobilization in the case of Riparte il Futuro, their role in the campaign 15MpaRato was more linked to the symbolic level of protest, with data being a leverage in constructing a narrative of the active citizen against corruption.

As for data transformation, the two campaigns share the presence of a twofold process that involves first the “digestion” (Shrock 2016) of data before they become public and then the “remediation” (Levriew 2011) of data once they are already circulating in the public sphere. The digestion of data refers to activities that activists perform so that the data can become part of the campaign, such as evaluating, checking, filtering and polishing the data. For instance, when political candidates sent their curriculum vitae and income declaration to Riparte il Futuro, activists double-checked the information included before publishing the materials on the campaign website: “we had to double-check the way in which the curriculum vitae was structured, the information that was included there, as well as the income declaration for each candidate” (Interview ITA\_06, Skype, May 2013). The 8.000 emails received through the BuzonX required a task force of activists, lawyers and journalists to evaluate the materials that citizens sent and, in the case of relevant information, to decide how and when to release them. The Blesa email leak, for instance, required long preparation before it

could become public (XNet 2015), with several skills mobilized in a collective effort to prepare the data for the mainstream media and the public: “we selected the relevant emails and we uploaded them all, but before that we erased the personal data and any other information that could be considered sensitive, and then we made them all available on a free website, so that people who go there could navigate the information easily” (Interview ESP\_02, Barcelona, March 2015).

While similar with regards to the digestion of data, the two campaigns differ dramatically with regard to the remediation of data once they were released to the broader public. Putting at its centre the transformation of media, “remediation borrows, modifies, samples and remixes existing content, forms, and expressions to create new works, relationships, interactions and meanings” (Levriew 2011, 219). If we consider digested data as some form of media content, then remediation implies the translation of data from one media technology to another or, also, from one media language to another. Activists in *Riparte il Futuro*, for instance, transformed the data on corruption in Italy into visuals that they published on the campaign website and on the related social media platforms: while data might be difficult to understand when they are in tables and graphs, the use of info-graphics allowed the data to travel from the written to the visual language, hence becoming more widely accessible to the public. This treatment of the data, however, can be considered a soft form of remediation since the data remain in the digital realm, without travelling from one technology to another. Moreover, the visualization of data per se does not imply the construction of a new relationship between activists and the people to whom they want to speak. The 15MpaRato campaign, in contrast, opted for a form of hard remediation, with the data related to the Blesa email leak undergoing a relevant transformation and leaving the digital realm to enter several theatres across the country: activists transformed the hundreds of emails into a theatre performance called *Hazte Bankero*, defined as a “work of data theatre, documentary theatre and open source theatre” (Levi and Salgado 2017, 28) that aimed to tell the story of the economic collapse in Spain from the viewpoint of the corrupted elites who were responsible for it. Instead of the visual language of info-graphics, in this case, activists employed a theatrical performance that supported storytelling based on the data, giving a political meaning not only to the data in themselves but also to the related theatrical performance, bringing the long tradition of activist and political theatre (cfr. Boal 1979, Downing 2001) within the struggle against corruption. In so doing, they were also transforming their relationship with the people they wanted to address through the campaign against corruption: citizens became live audiences in theatres all over the country and experienced the leaked emails through face-to-face interactions with activists.



## 7. Conclusions

In this article, I analysed two campaigns against corruption that embedded specific types of digital data in their toolkits. Considering the findings presented above regarding the two campaigns, I suggest three main lessons that we can draw about the roles that data might play for anti-corruption activism and, also, some more general reflections on data-activism as such.

A first aspect to be discussed is related to how activists embedded data in their mobilization, consistent with the organizational structure and communication strategy that characterized their collective actions. In this regard, data-activism is situational, and to fully grasp its meanings and consequences, we must pay attention to the activist context in which it is developed. When considering *Riparte il Futuro* and *15MpaRato*, the way in which activists employed the data to foster the two campaigns is particularly consistent with the organizational structure and the communication strategy. In the case of the former, data were mostly conceived and employed as resources extracted from the people who support the campaign to further spread the mobilization: this instrumental use of and extractivist attitude towards data is consistent with the top-down organizational structure of the campaign, with a centralized leadership and the predominance of professional activists; moreover, the instrumental use of data is also consistent with the communication strategy of the campaign, which viewed individual citizens as relevant supporters that are expected to engage with the campaign following a predetermined script. The *15MpaRato* campaign also involved individual citizens in mobilization but followed a more bottom-up organizational structure sustained through the work of voluntary activists and oriented towards informal and dynamic patterns that mixed vertical and horizontal decision-making processes as well as centralized and decentralized leadership. This mirrored a more proactive stance towards citizens' participation as producers and brokers of data on corruptive behaviours, hence situating the supporters of mobilization at centre stage and underlining the importance of the average citizen in denouncing corruption. In line with this approach, the *15MpaRato* activists did not simply employ digital data to further support mobilization; instead, they also constructed the campaign around the digital data that they were able to gather through *BuzonX*. In short, while in *Riparte il Futuro*, digital data had a relevant although secondary role, in the case of *15MpaRato*, digital data became a foundational feature of the campaign. As I also noted at the beginning of this article, both campaigns were successful in reaching their short-term objectives, and their positive results could also be linked to a use of digital data that was consistent with their organizational structure and communication strategy. While at the theoretical level we

can observe the importance of analysing data-activism in the context of the mobilizations in which they are employed, at the more practical level, this means that activists interested in embedding digital data in their struggles against corruption might also benefit from reflecting on what data can work as leverage, considering the characteristics of their organizational structure and the necessities of their communication strategy beyond the type of corruption at stake.

A second feature to be considered further is that the way in which activists engaged in the creation of data is also telling, especially with regard to the role that individual citizens might play in struggles against corruption, pointing to two different conceptions of political participation in the age of big data. In the case of 15MpaRato, activists asked citizens to show some agency with regard to the production of data related to corruption, hence evoking the idea of “monitory democracy” (Keane 2009) outlined above, according to which citizens control their rulers from below. In contrast, in the case of Riparte il Futuro, the data were to some extent extracted from citizens, either manually in the case of politicians or automatically in the case of the online petition signers. Beyond this, the way in which activists created data also substantiated the very notion of transparency that is so central in the anti-corruption literature today. The two campaigns certainly show that the availability of data is central to enhancing downward transparency, but their analysis also illustrates that there are at least two opposite ways through which this might occur. In Riparte il Futuro, politicians who agreed to support the campaign released data about themselves, thus exerting a certain form of control on the data that flowed from the political elites in the making and the average citizen; in the case of 15MpaRato, in contrast, the average citizen became active in looking for and then providing otherwise hidden data on the economic elite to activists, who then released these data to the press. In both cases, the result is increased transparency regarding the political and economic elites as a result of a collective action against corruption from the grassroots movement. However, the mechanisms that led to this differed, and these differences also had a consequence on the quality of the transparency achieved. In short, the analysis of data creation allows for a better understanding of activists’ perception and enactment of active citizenship and data transparency against corruption.

Finally, the transformation of digital data through mechanisms of data digestion and data remediation lead us to a more general reflection on who is the main agent in the struggle against corruption, between the lone citizen who denounces bribes and other corrupt behaviours and the social movement organization that raises a collective voice to speak against corruption. The two campaigns clearly show that this is a false dichotomy and, in fact, highlight the importance of assembling both individual agency and

collective efforts in the production of relevant data to fight corruption, in this case but also more in general to struggle for a more equal society. Riparte il Futuro and 15MpaRato show that such assemblages might assume different nuances and be based on different premises. Nevertheless, they are relevant in any case. The unfolding of data-related activities clearly shows that in a grassroots struggle against corruption, the use of data sees individuals at the forefront of data creation but also returns a primary role to social movement organizations in processes of data transformation: engaged citizens in a datafied society might act alone against corruption, but they need their actions to be embraced by a collective effort to make a difference and obtain recognition. In other words, in the case of anti-corruption struggle, “data-activism bridges individuals, modulating the relationship between the I and the We — our sense of ourselves both alone and as members of a community” (Renzi and Langlois 2015, 207). While big data might create collectivities in societies through a somewhat artificial algorithmic automation (Couldry and Hepp 2017), data-related practices in the context of struggles against corruption have the potential to rearticulate the interconnection between the individual citizen and collective actors, constituting collectivities that are rooted in the very collective action by which the digital data are created, employed and transformed. These practices form the substance of strong linkages between individuals, and between individuals and collective actors, and the resulting collectivities. This linkage might be even more important in the case of anti-corruption, a terrain in which everyday corruption is often experienced as an individual problem rather than a collective hurdle.

To conclude, the exploratory study presented in this article shows that investigating how bottom-up initiatives against corruption incorporate the use of ICT platforms and services is important not only to understand the potential of these tools in the hands of citizens but also to develop a more encompassing analysis of the challenges and opportunities of the struggle against corruption in the age of big data. Further research, however, is needed to evaluate how different types of collective actions against corruption can have an impact within the public sphere and amongst the general population. Studies on the macro-correlation between ICTs, transparency and corruption suggest that such impact might also be negative, contributing to demobilizing citizens instead of empowering them (Bahur and Grimes 2014); it is therefore important to also assess these findings with regard to the concrete outcomes that social movement organizations employing ICTs produce in the public sphere. Finally, to place the findings presented in this paper into a broader perspective, it would be important to extend the present research to include grassroots campaigns developed around other contentious issues (i.e., the environment, labour, women) to produce more solid knowledge on

how digital data are employed in other social movements and to construct an encompassing typology of digital data creation, usage and transformations in the age of big data.

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#### **AUTHOR'S INFORMATION:**

Alice Mattoni is Assistant Professor at the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Scuola Normale Superiore in Florence. She has published widely in the fields of social movement studies and political participation studies, focusing in particular on the relationship between emergent forms of mobilization and participation in connection to the multi-layered media environments in which activists are embedded. Amongst other publications, she wrote the monograph *Media Practices and Protest Politics. How Precarious Workers Mobilise* (Ashgate, 2012) and she co-edited the following volumes: *Spreading Protests. Social Movements in Times of Crisis* (ECPR Press, 2014), *Mediation and Protest Movements* (Intellect, 2013), *Advances in the Visual Analysis of Social Movements* (Emerald, 2013), and *Alla Ricerca dell'Onda. Nuovi Conflitti nel Mondo dell'Istruzione Superiore* (Franco Angeli, 2010). Her work on social movements, political participation and media practices appeared in several international (Social Movement Studies, Communication Theory, Information Communication & Society, Triple-C, Portal, Cultural Anthropology Online, Sociology Compass, Feminist Review, Working USA).