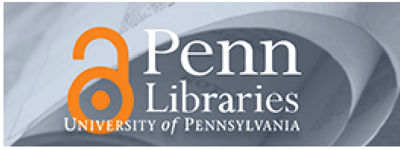

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The Technological Imaginaries Of Social Movements: The Discursive Dimension Of Communication Technology And The Fight For Social Justice

Abstract

This dissertation examines how social movements envision technology in a political way. Building on constructivist, cultural theories of social movements, literature from media history, and insights from Science and Technology Studies, I offer a discursive approach to technology, based on the notion of "technological imaginaries": sets of practice-based beliefs, individual and collective, implicit and explicit, about the role of technology in social life and social change. First, I identify a current dominant technological imaginary, arising from Silicon Valley, which is based on the equation of digital technologies with freedom and democracy, the reliance on technologies for the solution of social problems, and an alignment with neoliberalism. I then examine how three contemporary leftist social movements – the Hungarian internet tax protests of 2014, the Italian occupied social center LUMe, and the American Philly Socialists – construct their own technological imaginaries in response to Silicon Valley's. I explore these three cases through semi-structured interviews and visual focus groups, an innovative method based on a collective drawing task.

I propose a typology of social movements' technological imaginaries, based on how they respond to Silicon Valley's dominant imaginary. Imaginaries of appropriation, such as that of the Hungarian internet tax protests, accept both the dominant technological imaginary and the technologies of Silicon Valley. Imaginaries of negotiation, such as those of LUMe and the Philly Socialists, reject the dominant imaginary, but allow for the use of Silicon Valley's technologies. Imaginaries of challenge reject both the imaginary and the technologies of Silicon Valley. I also argue that appropriation, negotiation, and challenge are shaped by three political factors: the ideology of the social movement, the political context, and the presence of other prominent technological imaginaries. I suggest that movements' different technological imaginaries point to the existence of multiple, situated, political internets: even if activists all use the same digital technologies, these technologies hold different political meanings for them. This dissertation thus contributes to the literature by reconceptualizing the relationship between technology and social movements, providing a framework and an empirical qualitative approach to account for how movements are already imagining and experiencing technologies as political.

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THE TECHNOLOGICAL IMAGINARIES OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: THE DISCURSIVE DIMENSION OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE FIGHT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Elisabetta Ferrari

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THE TECHNOLOGICAL IMAGINARIES OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: THE DISCURSIVE DIMENSION OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE FIGHT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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A Laila e a tutte le altre

To Laila and all the others,

partisan women,

the communication infrastructure of the Italian Resistance

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I often hear that doing a PhD can be an isolating and desolating experience. This has not been the case for me. And it's all because of the people listed in these acknowledgments.

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ABSTRACT

THE TECHNOLOGICAL IMAGINARIES OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: THE DISCURSIVE DIMENSION OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE FIGHT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Elisabetta Ferrari

Guobin Yang

This dissertation examines how social movements envision technology in a political way. Building on constructivist, cultural theories of social movements, literature from media history, and insights from Science and Technology Studies, I offer a discursive approach to technology, based on the notion of "technological imaginaries": sets of practice-based beliefs, individual and collective, implicit and explicit, about the role of technology in social life and social change. First, I identify a current dominant technological imaginary, arising from Silicon Valley, which is based on the equation of digital technologies with freedom and democracy, the reliance on technologies for the solution of social problems, and an alignment with neoliberalism. I then examine how three contemporary leftist social movements – the Hungarian internet tax protests of 2014, the Italian occupied social center LUMe, and the American Philly Socialists – construct their own technological imaginaries in response to Silicon Valley's. I explore these three cases

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Introduction

It is night time and the sky over central Hong Kong is dark. Thousands of people are gathering in one of Hong Kong's central areas, in front of the headquarters of the Hong Kong Government. They are holding their cell phones towards the dark sky, illuminating the night with their screen lights. It is September 2014 and protesters are occupying this central square in opposition to the Chinese government's proposed reforms to Hong Kong's political system. These images were immediately picked up and circulated by both mainstream media and social network sites. *CNN* described the image, saying: "Photographed from above, the glowing screens of mobile phones held aloft by the sea of protesters have created an enduring image of the demonstrators' solidarity" (Hume & Park, 2014). *Quartz* echoed this sentiment: "It was an image that fascinated the world—a sea of lights coming from thousands of Hong Kong protesters waving their lit up mobile phones in the darkness" (Lih, 2014). The iconic image of protesters raising their phones to the sky survived the demise of the Umbrella Revolution and travelled far away.

When thousands of people, led by student activists, started mobilizing in Hong Kong, footage and images from these pro-democracy protests spread across the world in mainstream media and online. It seemed to many as though the revolts, uprisings, and occupations that shook the Middle East, Europe and United States in 2010-2011 were about to make a forceful come-back – and in such an unlikely place as Hong Kong. The police's decision to use tear gas on the occupation backfired, as powerful images – of

protesters trying to protect themselves with umbrellas (Lee, 2015) –, circulated online. These images gave the movement its name: the Umbrella Movement. And yet, as iconic as the umbrellas became, it was another image – of phones lifted to the sky – that would be taken up by other social movements, in very different countries, in the following years.

This image first reappeared in Hungary, a month after the Hong Kong protests, when thousands of people mobilized to publicly protest a tax on internet consumption that was proposed by the conservative government. Lit phones were raised in the first demonstration that drew around 10,000 people to the center of Budapest, Hungary's capital. However, it was the second demonstration in which protesters staged the most impactful version of the iconic image: a photograph captured 100,000 people crossing the Danube River on the massive Elizabeth Bridge in an aerial shot, as they lifted their illuminated phones towards the night. These protests and images of thousands made it clear to the world that there was great public support for the movement, and eventually the government withdrew the tax proposal.

Fast forward to spring 2017. Hungarian activists gathered in front of the Parliament at the end of a demonstration against Viktor Orbán's government and its legislation that targeted civil society organizations and academic institutions. Protesters once again took out their phones and raised them to the sky (Csekö, 2017). After that, in 2017 and 2018, images of protesters raising their glowing cell phones circulated throughout the Central Eastern European region: first, during the Romanian anti-corruption protests (Gillet, 2017), then in the Slovakian demonstrations that led to the resignation of the Prime Minister (Santora, 2018). And, once again, in Hungary, where

the re-election of Orbán in 2018 led protesters to take to the streets and to lift their illuminated smartphones in the air. In contexts as different as Hong Kong, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, the image of lit cell phone screens was taken up by protesters and featured in mainstream media reports.

Tracing this iconic protest action as it travelled around the world could help us tell a story about an interconnected mediated globe, in which the diffusion of protest tactics knows no boundaries. It could also tell us a story about spectacle, news values and media coverage of social movements. But I would like to suggest that this is less of a story about protest diffusion or media coverage as it is a story about the power of discourses, whether in textual or visual form, that connect technologies to social change. In other words, the key question that we should be asking about this iconic action is not why it travelled so far away from a square in central Hong Kong. Rather, we should be asking why that iconic protest action was (and still is) immediately legible as a political demand. What makes that action a political one? What underlying ideas about technology does that action reveal? And would it make sense in other political contexts?

This dissertation situates the legibility of the images of lit up cell phones lifted towards the sky within a broader discursive environment that has linked technologies (especially digital ones) with political and social processes. I argue that such protest actions become legible as a political demand because they follow the script of what this dissertation describes as a dominant "technological imaginary", in which social change has been often and powerfully connected to the use of technologies.

Recent scholarship on social movements and activism has given us an important number of (sometimes contradictory) insights into the relationship between social

movements and digital technologies. But it has not yet extensively confronted technologies from a discursive perspective or investigated their symbolic role in mobilization processes, both present and past. It has yet to shed light on how activists discursively envision technology and its role in social life and social change; how they relate to technology in a political way, and not just as an instrument for action. This is the gap that my dissertation aims to fill.

In this introductory chapter, I first review the most recent literature on social movements and technologies, identifying the need for research that also takes into consideration how activists approach technology politically, and not solely instrumentally. Second, I present my theoretical framework, based on three building blocks: cultural approaches to social movements as exemplified by the work of Alberto Melucci; historical accounts of technologies that highlight the importance of discourses; and the notion of "technological imaginary" that I repurpose from Flichy (2007a) and Jasanoff (2015). I then extend and qualify the concept of technological imaginary by drawing out its political elements. Furthermore, I highlight the three contributions that this theoretical framework makes to social movements research. I explain my research design, introduce the cases I will examine and describe my multi-method qualitative approach. I then address the limitations of my research project. In closing, I offer a preview of my argument and an outline of the chapters that follow.

Digital Technologies And The Changing "Logics" Of Social Movements

A vibrant scholarship on social movements and digital media technologies emerged in the mid-2010s (e.g. Barassi, 2015; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Castells,

2012; Gerbaudo, 2012; Juris, 2012; Treré, 2018; Tufekci, 2017; Wolfson, 2014; Zayani, 2015), in order to explain the wave of movements that surprised the world in 2011: from the Arab Uprisings to the Spanish Indignados to Occupy Wall Street. Although many other recent movements have been investigated, these three cases have greatly shaped the scholarship in this area.

In general, this scholarship has pointed out the scarcity of convincing theorizations about the role of media or technologies in the sociological traditions of social movement studies (see Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, pp. 31–32), such as resource mobilization theory (McCarthy & Zald, 2001) and the contentious politics approach (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 1996). When the role of media technologies was examined, it was usually solely through analyses of the impact of mainstream media coverage on the success or failure of movements (see Gitlin, 1980). This lack of attention to media and technology had already been noticed by a previous generation of studies on movements that tried to make sense of the opportunities offered by the internet in the late 1990s and early 2000s, in conjunction with the rise of the global justice movement.

However, the recent scholarship has also been invested in reexamining the two sets of approaches that became prominent in the 2000s: an organizational perspective that highlighted how internet technologies reduced the barriers for collective action and a focus on the creation of alternative media platforms. On the one hand, works from the 2000s looked at the affordances of the internet – of emails, listservs, websites, and forums – and argued that these new tools helped movements to reduce coordination costs, making collective organizing more affordable and increasingly effective across borders (e.g. Bennett, 2003; Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005; McCaughey & Ayers, 2003; Van de

Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004). This was fundamentally an Olsonian argument (Olson, 1971) that put the issue of coordination at the center of explanations of the function of media technologies. On the other hand, other works from the 2000s placed the need for expression at the core of movements' technological practices and thus emphasized how the internet allowed for the creation of alternative media outlets that could talk back to mainstream media coverage of movements (e.g. Atton, 2002; Couldry & Curran, 2003; Coyer, Dowmunt, & Fountain, 2007; De Jong, Shaw, & Stammers, 2005; Downing, 2008; Juris, 2005). The most important and widely analyzed example in this respect is the network of the Independent Media Center, also known as Indymedia, that was one of the backbones of the global justice movement. The radical politics of Indymedia and its open publishing practices allowed the network to become the voice of the movement (Giraud, 2014; Pickard, 2006b, 2006a); it was a corrective and a counterpoint to the mainstream coverage that seemed to only report on the violence that happened at counter-summits, and never address the reasons behind the protests.

Looked at from the 2010s, both of these lines of reasoning seemed excessively dependent on the idiosyncrasies of the global justice movement and scarcely applicable to the movements of 2011 and beyond. The global justice movement, in fact, was characterized by the need to coordinate different social movement organizations in different countries; the reliance on mass demonstrations against international summits, such as G8 and NATO meetings; and the outsized influence of Indymedia. While the legacy of the global justice movement is still present in today's movements (see Wolfson, 2014), the academic explanations that followed that movement proved of limited use in

interpreting events like the occupations of Tahrir Square, Puerta del Sol and Zuccotti Park.

First, the recent wave of studies highlighted the need to break free of the Olsonian paradigm, recognizing that while lowering coordination costs for social movements was a significant contribution of internet technologies, this was just one of the changes that could be observed in the movements of 2011. Second, it shifted the focus from alternative media to the mainstream, corporate-owned social network sites (boyd & Ellison, 2007), e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Youtube that were used by the newer movements, thus looking more at the impact of social media services on the movements than to the autonomous production of media (or technologies) by activists.

In an effort to go beyond the perceived shortcomings of older theorizations, the recent scholarship, although offering different and often contradictory takes on the relationship between movements and media technologies, has coalesced around the need for better explaining the changing "logics" of social movements that the 2010s seem to have brought about. In practice, this was translated into an overwhelming focus on how different movements have used corporate social network sites – Facebook and Twitter in particular – and how the use of these digital media might be changing how movements come to exist and operate.

In what has become one of the most influential works of this recent scholarship, Bennett and Segerberg (2013) argued that we have witnessed the emergence of a new type of mobilization, defined by the logic of connective action, which they contrasted with traditional collective action models. While in their opinion the logic of collective action – starting with the Olsonian tradition – emphasized the need for organizations to

exercise a coordination role that encourages individuals to contribute to a common goal, connective action assumes that individuals are already crafting highly personalized contributions, through their personal sharing networks developed via digital media. Thus, if collective action grappled with the problem of getting individuals to contribute, connective action is predicated upon the idea that individuals are, in fact, already contributing (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, p. 36). Furthermore, digital technologies are thought to play a very different role in collective and in connective action: in collective action networks, technology is an instrument, used by established actors to amplify their preexisting modes of engagement; in connective action, it becomes an agent, which organizes and structures relations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, p. 196). In their words:

> In the model defined by the logic of connective action, however, digital media do change the dynamics of the action: these networks operate through the organizational processes of social media, and their logic does not require strong organizational control or the symbolic construction of a united "we". (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, p. 28)

Bennett and Segerberg read the movements of 2011 as characterized by this new logic of connective action, enabled and shaped by the personalized messages that circulate through social network sites.

Castells (2012) made similar claims. He identified a synergy between the development of "internet networks" and "networked social movements" (p. 233). In line with Bennett and Segerberg (2013), he argued that the ways in which digital networks are structured is mirrored in how movements structured themselves:

> In our time, multimodal, digital networks of horizontal communication are the fastest and most autonomous, interactive, reprogrammable and self-expanding means of communication in history. The characteristics of communication processes between individuals engaged in the social movement determine the organizational characteristics of the social movement itself: the more interactive and self-configurable

> communication is, the less hierarchical is the organization and the more participatory is the movement. (Castells, 2012, p. 15)

Castells thus suggested that there is a correspondence between the supposed characteristics of digital technologies and the logics of movement organizing; not in the sense that the way movements organize themselves impacts the way they use digital technologies, but rather the opposite – that the shape of technology is reflected in the shape of the movements.

Juris (2012) also weighed in by differentiating between a "logic of networking", that characterized the global justice movement, and a "logic of aggregation" that emerged with Occupy Wall Street and the other movements of 2011. According to Juris (2012), the

> logic of aggregation is an alternative cultural framework that is shaped by our interactions with social media and generates particular patterns of social and political interaction that involve the viral flow of information and subsequent aggregations of large numbers of individuals in concrete physical spaces. (p. 266)

This different logic of organizing also has drawbacks. Juris argued that the aggregation of individuals, through digital media and through the occupation of physical spaces, is always threatened by fragmentation (Juris, 2012, p. 266). This risk is exacerbated by the way in which aggregation on social media works.

The focus on the different "logics" characterizing the movements of 2011 and beyond has been very productive in highlighting the significance of digital technologies for the life of contemporary social movements. However, scholars have overall neglected to investigate how social movement actors relate to these new technologies and what they think of them. They considered the use of technologies, but not necessarily the discursive

context in which this use has taken place. And, as I showed above, they have often implied that the structural properties of technology have an impact on movements, but have not looked at the impact of how technology is constructed discursively. Even the excellent body of work that has sought to challenge and add nuance the idea of an emerging new logic of organizing (e.g. Barassi, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2012; Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Kavada, 2015; Terranova & Donovan, 2013; Zayani, 2015) has yet to fully address this issue.

The focus on the changed "logics" of organizing has obscured the relevance of three other issues, whose analysis could move the discussion from a mere focus on the use of digital media towards a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between movements and technologies. First, this scholarship has not yet talked about how activists, while using digital technologies, are also surrounded by and embedded into different kinds of discourses about technologies, their proper place in society and their expected uses. Second, this body of work has not fully addressed how movements might think about technology as a political phenomenon, i.e. confront it from an ideological perspective. Third, this field has barely considered the symbolic role that technology can come to play in political events and social processes, including during protests. These three issues are at the core of my theoretical framework, which builds on the concept of "technological imaginary" to make sense of how social movements think about technology and its role in political and social change.

Theoretical Framework

Summary

In the following sections, I lay out my theoretical framework, centered on the notion of "technological imaginary", through which I suggest we can productively investigate how social movements relate to technologies and envision them in their struggles for social change. My framework puts three different bodies of literature in conversation with each other. First, I situate my framework within the cultural approaches to the study of social movements. Theoretically and methodologically, my work is inspired by Melucci's (1989) invitation to study movements as processes; for me, this means investigating how movements construct the environment around them through discourses – including discourses about technology. As highlighted above, the literature on social movements has not thoroughly considered how activists think about technology and how discourses about technology come to be relevant to protest and mobilization. I thus turn to two literatures that have addressed the relevance of discourses about technology to society and social change, albeit not paying great attention to social movements. I incorporate key lessons on the discursive dimension of technologies from the work of media historians (e.g. Marvin, 1988; Marx, 1964; Nye, 1996; Turner, 2006; R. Williams, 1975), who have pointed out the social and political significance of how technology is conceptualized. I then move to discussing the notion of technological imaginary, as articulated by Flichy (2007b, 2007a) and Jasanoff (2015).

I put forward my theoretical contribution by providing my own definition of the concept of technological imaginary: a set of practice-based beliefs, individual and collective, implicit and explicit, about the role of technology in social life and social change. Further, I discuss the political significance of this definition: technological

imaginaries are not only relevant because they influence how technology is designed, adopted and utilized, they are also important because they envision specific social, political and economic relationships to technology. In particular, I argue that technological imaginaries include visions of social change that need to be critically investigated. I also suggest that technological imaginaries are multiple and potentially conflicting and that it should always be possible to identify a dominant one.
Lastly, I make the case for using this theoretical framework to investigate movements and technology. I argue that social movements construct their own technological imaginaries, but are also constantly confronted with dominant mainstream imaginaries, which have specific political connotations. I suggest that using the concept of technological imaginary can help us systematize recent research on social movements and technology; furthermore, it can contribute to social movement studies by addressing three interrelated aspects: the symbolic role of technology for mobilization, the political valence of activists' technological practices, and the role of social movements in the debate over the politics of technology.

Movements as processes

In broad terms, my work is situated among constructivist, culture-based approaches to social movements and draws inspiration from the work of Alberto Melucci (1989, 1996). Melucci's framework for the study of social movements is fundamental to my research in two ways: for its focus on the discourses and practices that define social movements as processes and for its insistence on discovering the invisible aspects of social movements.

First of all, following Melucci (1989), I think about social movements as a process. This means that I consider the ways in which activists construct their systems of beliefs, negotiate meanings and make decisions to be the core elements of any analysis of social movements. For Melucci (1989), in fact, discursive practices are the foundations of collective action. Such discursive practices are directed at constructing the collective identity of a movement, understood as a "sense of we" (Melucci, 1989, p. 65) that enables action. I find Melucci's emphasis on discourses very productive as a way of thinking about technology not just as a tool, but also as a set of discourses and practices.

But where do technologies fit in Melucci's constructivist approach? Melucci (1989) argued that the process of collective identity formation structures how movements perceive themselves and the world around them:

> Individuals contribute to the formation of a more or less stable 'we' by rendering common and laboriously negotiating and adjusting at least three orientations: the goals of their action, the means to be utilized and the environment within which their action takes place. (p. 27)

I suggest that how movements imagine technology comes into play precisely in this process of construction of means, goals and environments – what Melucci called an action system (Melucci, 1989, p. 27). Technological discourses can influence how movements think about technology as a means (a tool), how goals are set and measured (for instance through quantitative aggregative measures) and how the political and social environment is perceived. For Melucci this definitional process is characterized by "interaction, negotiation and conflict" (Melucci, 1989, p. 26); this is evident also in the case of technologies, since – as I will argue below – the visions we hold about them are also conflicting and constructed in relation to different actors, including mainstream ones.

However, I also add to Melucci's argument by suggesting that the process of definition of the action system is not only shaped by discourses, but also by practices. The role of practices remains undertheorized in Melucci's work, but others, inspired by the cultural approach to social movements and Melucci's theories, have filled this gap (e.g. Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Juris, 2008b; Yang, 2005).

Secondly, one of Melucci's remarkable contributions to the study of social movements lies in his denunciation of a certain "myopia of the visible" (Melucci, 1989, p. 44), which leads scholars to only consider highly visible moments of mobilization and ignore the invisible foundational processes that sustain social movements during periods of "latency". Inspired by this criticism, I also focus my study of activists on invisible and taken-for-granted beliefs and practices concerning technology. While most of the recent scholarship on social movements and technology has focused on very visible uses of technology, e.g. Facebook pages, hashtag campaigns and websites, my work is concerned with the latent discourses and beliefs that shape and enable the uses that become visible during peaks of mobilizations.

Keeping in mind the need to think about movements' definitional processes and to undercover less visible phenomena, I now turn to the second building block of my theoretical framework: the long history of technologies.

The importance of discourses about technology: lessons from media history

A variety of cultural and social approaches have made important contributions over the years to our understanding of the relationship of technologies – and communication technologies in particular – to society (among others, Flichy, 1995,

2007b; Mansell, 2012; Marvin, 1988; Marx, 1964; Mosco, 2004; Nye, 1996; Turner, 2006; R. Williams, 1975; Winner, 1986). This distinguished body of literature sits at the intersection of media history, cultural studies, and sociological approaches in Science and Technology Studies (STS). From the telegraph to electricity to the internet, these scholars showed how discourses about technology can be considered a part of technology itself and how such discourses tend to give new meaning to existing social struggles, anxieties and hopes. They also considered how discourses about technology tend to recur in almost identical ways for each "new technology" and have thus demystified the hype surrounding the introduction of new technologies. Furthermore, they pointed out how this discursive construction of technology is profoundly political. I explore these important lessons in this section.

This scholarship has shown that societal discourses are as integral a component of technology as its technical design (Flichy, 1995; Marvin, 1988; Mosco, 2004; Winner, 1986). This contention stands in stark opposition to technologically deterministic approaches (see Wyatt, 2008), but also challenges its opposite, the "symptomatic technology" view, as Williams (1975) called it, which regards technology as wholly predetermined by extant socio-economic processes. In contrast, what this heterogeneous group of scholars has pointed to is the fact that the decisions that happen in the course of technological development (and adoption) "occur within a discursive framework" (Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant, & Kelly, 2009, p. 2009). According to Williams (1975), the development of technology, in fact, is "not only a matter of some autonomous process directed by remote engineers", but also "a matter of social and cultural definition" (p. 137).

Discourses about technologies – especially recently introduced ones – are conflicting and non-linear (Flichy, 1995). They are not only conflicting because they can be divergent, but also because they are usually the expression of interests and ambitions that might be difficult to reconcile. As Williams (1975) reminded us, speaking about television, changes in technologies do not depend "on the fixed properties of the medium nor the necessary character of its institutions, but on a continually renewable social action and struggle" (p. 138). And in fact, the discursive and nondiscursive struggles surrounding the meaning of technologies have been at the core of this body of literature on the relationship between society and technology.

Lister et. al (2009) suggested that "new technologies are taken up within a culture and are hooked into, or have projected onto them, its wider social and psychological desires and fears" (p. 70). On the one hand, new technologies provide a different, renewed avenue for the unfolding of pre-existing struggles of power between societal groups. As Marvin (1988) explained with her analysis of electricity: "old habits of transacting between groups are projected onto new technologies that alter, or seem to alter, critical social distance" (p. 5). But new technologies are also looked at through the lenses of existing societal anxieties and aspirations. New technologies can thus come to be seen as "a solution to social and cultural ills" (Lister et al., 2009, p. 429) or as the materialization of fears and instabilities.

The moments in which technologies are introduced have been at the center of these investigations, precisely because it is around these initial moments that conflicts and anxieties unfold. This focus also makes it clear that, to borrow Marvin's (1988) book title, all old technologies have been new at some point. This is not just a temporal

realization, but rather stands to highlight how newness is also a discursive construction, accompanied by promises of “a new cultural, and even existential, order to come” (Robins, 1996, p. 11). Discourses around the newness of technology reassert the power of technology to change (for better or worse) societal processes. But as Mosco (2004) argued: “practically every substantial technological change has been accompanied by similar claims. The chant goes on: This changes everything. Nothing will ever be the same again” (p. 119). Discourses of newness are nothing new: they have already been around for other technologies, such as the telegraph, electricity, radio, and TV.

These discourses of newness perform a political function. For instance, in his analysis of the relationship between the pastoral idea and the image of the machine in American culture, Leo Marx (1964) unearthed the rhetoric of progress surrounding new technologies: “to see a powerful, efficient machine in the landscape is to know the superiority of the present to the past” (p. 192). This association between progress and new technologies is pervasive and difficult to question: “it is the obviousness and simplicity of the machine as a symbol of progress that accounts for its astonishing power” (Marx, 1964, p. 192).

These powerful discourses of technological newness can also take on an even more explicitly political character. Mosco (2004) highlighted how one of the historically recurring promises of new technologies is that of transforming politics, by bringing “power closer to the people” (p. 98). Winner (1986) stated that the railroad and the telegraph were "greeted as the very essence of democratic freedom" (p. 45). Speaking of the same technologies, Leo Marx (1964) contended that American public figures saw them as "a token of possibility for democracy" (p. 190), which later turned technology

into "a transcendent symbol: a physical object invested with political and metaphysical identity" (Marx, 1964, p. 206). Nye (1996) agreed and explained how man-made technologies came to be tied with American democracy: "the citizen who contemplated such public improvements became aware of the power of democracy and saw himself as part of the moral vanguard, leading the world towards universal democracy. These man-made objects became national symbols" (p. 36).

Though coming to different conclusions, Turner (2006) and Mosco (2004) also argued that computer-mediated communication and the internet have taken on a symbolic political valence, shaped by discourses produced by a heterogeneous group of actors that brought together countercultural sensibilities and market libertarianism. Turner (2006) highlighted how by the 1990s the internet had become both a symbol of political liberation through collaborative, non-hierarchical processes and a tool for making liberation happen; internet technologies thus came to be seen as an emblem of the countercultural revolution (Turner, 2006, p. 238). In critiquing the mythical discourses surrounding the early internet – "myths of cyberspace" – Mosco (2004) also talked about the 1990s as a turning point in our symbolic conception of the internet. In particular, he highlighted the political valence of these mythical discourses of technology, which, among other things, suggest that the internet has brought about "the end of politics" (p. 105). This is a discourse about the replacement of old political relations with new practices based on technology, under the understanding that "the internet is not just a corrective to democracy; it is democracy" (Mosco, 2004, p. 115). The myths that Mosco (2004) deconstructed cast the internet as a symbol of a different type of political relations. If we think about them in the long historical trajectory of technological

developments, these myths do not make entirely new claims. And yet, they are powerful claims, that although repeated throughout history, can exert a symbolic power, shaping conversations not just about technologies, but also about political and social processes and how they should adapt to new technologies.

In examining this heterogeneous body of literature, I have emphasized the importance of identifying discourses related to technology. When talking about the internet, Mosco (2004) argued that we need to uncover what are the underlying visions of society and politics embedded in celebratory discourses regarding the internet. I follow Mosco's invitation to dig deeper and to consider how different political actors construct and deploy specific visions of technology; I do that through the notion of "technological imaginary", to which I now turn.

The "technological imaginary" in Science and Technology Studies

The term "technological imaginary" was introduced to the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) by two authors: Flichy (1995, 2007a) and Jasanoff (2015), who spoke of "sociotechnical imaginaries". For Flichy the technological imaginary is a key component in the process of innovation, both for the development and the diffusion of a technology. In his words:

> When we leave "the short-term dimension" of technical development, that is, a specific project, and consider a more long-term dimension such as electrical light and power, high-speed trains, Internet, and so forth, we encounter more than simply a project or common intention; what we witness is a collective vision or *imaginaire*. This vision is common to an entire profession or sector, rather than to a team or work collective. It concerns not only designers but also users, which is one of the strong points linking these two types of actors of technical activity. (Flichy, 2007a, p. 4)

In recognizing the role of “collective visions” in the process of shaping and adopting technologies, Flichy (2007a) rejected teleological approaches to technology; he embraced the messiness and conflict that can arise with technological inventions and used the concept of technological imaginary to account for their non-linear development. Flichy’s technological imaginary is a discursive space that can “mobilize both designers and users” (Flichy, 2007a, p. 6). Furthermore, different technological imaginaries can always coexist; in so doing, they “produce contrasting visions of the future” (Flichy, 2007b, p. 133). While Flichy mostly thought about diverging visions of the future of technology, we should probably acknowledge that the technological imaginary is attached to different visions of social and political futures, as Jasanoff (2015) explicitly stated.

As mentioned above, Flichy examined the technological imaginaries surrounding different communication technologies: the telegraph, telephone, gramophone, radio, televisions and computers (Flichy, 1995)[1] and the internet (Flichy, 2007a). For instance, he analyzed the emergence of the semaphore telegraph in the context of the French Revolution (Flichy, 1995). In 1792, the French revolutionary state decided to develop a national infrastructure for the telegraph, mostly for military use. Building a national infrastructure meant that the telegraph could be used to reconfigure the French space into a unitary nation – one of the aims of the Revolution. The semaphore telegraph was thus part of the same desire for universality, rooted in the Enlightenment, which led the revolutionaries to reform the calendar and introduce the metric system. This particular

[1] In his 1995 book, *Dynamics of modern communication*, Flichy is not yet using the term “technological imaginary” but what he is describing is precisely the discursive environment surrounding the emergence and diffusion of different communication technologies.

technological innovation was thus embedded in preexisting revolutionary discourses that gave it a specific meaning. The telegraph became a tangible symbol of the revolution: installed on a tower in the National Palace of Tuileries, it was meant to substitute the religious bell tower, following the idea that “the scientific works of the Enlightenment were to replace the symbols of royal and religious power” (Flichy, 1995, p. 11). In chronicling the intense political debate on the liberalization of the telegraphic infrastructure for commercial purposes, Flichy also gave us an account of what we can consider two conflicting technological imaginaries. When the July Monarchy ultimately voted to sanction state monopoly in the 1830s, one of the reasons for that decision was that they feared the telegraph could be used for “political agitation” (Flichy, 1995, p. 23). While for the revolutionaries the telegraph was a practical and symbolic tool in the service of their idea of uniting France, for the July Monarchy it was a threat to a newly acquired political stability. In short, the semaphore telegraph was at the center of contestation – of different technological imaginaries that framed the same technology within different visions of the political and social future.

While Flichy’s work mainly focused on the inventors, adopters or funders of technologies, Jasanoff (2015) used the term “sociotechnical imaginary” to include “the imaginative work of varied social actors” (p. 11). Her definition is fairly detailed:

> We redefine sociotechnical imaginaries in this book as collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology. (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 4)

There are a number of noteworthy and productive components in Jasanoff’s definition. The collective, public and performed character of the sociotechnical imaginary

makes it an appealing concept to be applied to the study of social movements – which Jasanoff acknowledged, too. She also contended that multiple sociotechnical imaginaries can coexist and compete in a different society. Futhermore, the ways in which individuals, collectives, societies and nation states think about technologies have clear political implications, because these sociotechnical imaginaries link technology (and science) to social change, to "visions of the collective good" (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 11). She also highlighted the legitimating role that science and technology can still play today and the difference between the imaginaries developed in different national contexts (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 13).

There are, however, two elements of this definition that I believe are too restrictive, especially if we intend to apply it to social movements. First, Jasanoff spoke of imaginaries as "institutionally stabilized". Even if we loosen up the meaning of "institution", I think that Jasanoff ended up retracing the original formulation of the concept of sociotechnical imaginary (Jasanoff & Kim, 2009), which she centered exclusively on nation states and their political institutions. While she was right in pointing to the imaginary as having to be relatively stabilized, the reference to institutions is not entirely appropriate. In fact, an analysis of technological imaginaries might be even more urgent when different, conflicting imaginaries are still up for grabs, and not yet "institutionally stabilized". Secondly, Jasanoff put the sociotechnical imaginaries squarely in the context of modern ambitions concerning the role of science and technology, and linked the imaginaries specifically to "advances" in such domains. She later acknowledged that we also need to consider the reverse:

> It goes without saying that imaginations of desirable and desired futures correlate, tacitly or explicitly, with the obverse – shared fears of harms that

> might be incurred through invention and innovation, or of course the failure to innovate. The interplay between positive and negative imaginings – between utopia and dystopia – is a connecting theme throughout this volume. (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 5)

I am critical of her language of positive and negative imaginaries: it conveys an implicit judgment and uncritically perpetrates a faith in the advancement of technology as ultimate mark of progress – a discourse, that, although widespread, needs to be questioned, and can be questioned precisely through the study of the technological imaginary.

Towards a political definition of technological imaginaries

My definition conceptualizes a technological imaginary as a set of practice-based beliefs, individual and collective, implicit and explicit, about the role of technology in social life and social change. This definition should be extended and qualified by drawing on the three bodies of literature considered above: Melucci's (1989) work on social movements, histories of technology, and Flichy (1995, 2007b, 2007a) and Jasanoff (2015). In what follows, I elaborate on the characteristics of the technological imaginaries as I envision them.

First, technological imaginaries are profoundly political. They are connected to different visions of social change (Jasanoff, 2015); they can be contentious and publicly performed. They are normative visions about society (Jasanoff, 2015). They are also, as Flichy (1995) showed, connected to political culture, like in the case of the semaphore telegraph that I have highlighted above. But drawing on the lessons from media historians that I have sketched out above, we can also see that technological imaginaries are political because they can be deployed for political purposes by a variety of social actors.

Think, for instance, of the ways in which “the machine” (Marx, 1964), the “technological sublime” (Nye, 1996) and the “digital sublime” (Mosco, 2004) are implicated in the construction of a national American identity, but also specific political and economic interests. While the political nature of the technological imaginaries is not the central element in Flichy (2007a) and Jasanoff (2015), I suggest that highlighting its political component is key to deconstructing and critically interrogating the ways in which imaginaries about technologies become enmeshed in how we think about social change. One of the questions that this framework helps us interrogate is the relationship between technological imaginaries and ideologies (or political orientations).

Second, technological imaginaries have material consequences. Speaking of the ways in which technologies are political, Winner (1986) argued:

> The things we call "technologies" are ways of building order in our world. Many technical devices and systems important in everyday life contain possibilities for many different ways of ordering human activity. Consciously or unconsciously, deliberately or inadvertently, societies choose structures for technologies that influence how people are going to work, communicate, travel, consume, and so forth over a very long time. (p. 28)

To keep with Winner, the ways in which we choose structures for technologies, including their regulation, are clearly influenced by the discourses and imaginaries that surround said technologies. In this sense, imaginaries have very material consequences that need to be investigated. At the same time, imaginaries are also embedded in material arrangements: technological imaginaries have a political-economic dimension to them, as Mosco (2004) showed.

Third, a technological imaginary, as I conceptualize it, is constructed by both practices and discourses. I incorporate this vision of the relationship between practices

and discourse from Taylor's (2004) theorization of the "social imaginary". As highlighted in his definition, practices are crucial to the imaginary: "if the understanding makes the practice possible, it is also true that it is the practice that largely carries the understanding" (p. 25). Applying this insight to the technological imaginary means recognizing that technological practices give actors a sense of what could be done with the affordances of technology, what technology's role could be; yet, actors also put into practice the visions of technology that they have developed. Methodologically, this attention to practices means departing from interpretive methods that rely only on the analysis of documents (which is how the technological imaginaries have been so far studied), to embrace a multi-method qualitative approach that allows for the investigation of practices.

Fourth, I also rely on Taylor (2004) in highlighting that technological imaginaries should be held by ordinary people, and not only by certain actors that have the power to directly influence technology. In fact, Taylor (2004) argued that the social imaginary is "shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society" (p. 23). In arguing for this, I diverge from both Flichy (1995, 2007a) and Jasanoff (2015), who tend to consider those who either create or regulate technologies, but do not really acknowledge that the technological imaginary of ordinary people should also be studied.

Fifth, there is no simple correspondence between technological imaginaries and social imaginaries. Beyond the two previous contributions that I incorporate from Taylor (2004), the notion of social imaginary should also be put in conversation with that of technological imaginary through empirical research. It would be tempting to associate the modern social imaginaries identified by Taylor (2004) with corresponding technological

imaginaries. In fact, it is evident that the three main social imaginaries identified by Taylor (2004) – economy, public sphere, self-governing people – have become three ways of talking about digital technologies, and the internet in particular: the internet as an enormous market, based on exchanges of data; the internet as the public sphere; the internet as direct democracy. It would thus seem that the technological imaginary is an applied, circumscribed version of the social imaginaries. However, I suggest that the relationship is more complicated than that. Different technological imaginaries can produce different visions of technology while aligning themselves to the same social imaginary. Thus, there is no necessary theoretical correspondence between technological and social imaginary.

It is worth noting that Taylor (2004) develops the social imaginaries to theorize the emergence of modern nation states. In his formulation, modern social imaginaries coexist within modernity, but each of them is also dominant within a national polity (although he mainly considers the United States, France and Britain) during the establishment and consolidation of that polity into a modern nation state. Taylor's is not a theory that accounts for changes in the modern social imaginaries. They thus appear a bit static: they do not leave room for challenges and are all dominant – never oppositional. The sixth component of my notion of technological imaginaries is thus that, in contrast to Taylor (2004), who forecloses the possibility of alternative and conflictual social imaginaries, I envision technological imaginaries to be plural and conflicting within a certain society. The notion of technological imaginary must allow room for multiple and conflicting imaginaries to coexist. Yet, we can assume that we should always be able to identify a mainstream, dominant technological imaginary, which I discuss in Chapter 1.

But it need not be the only one, and we should be able to find that alternative imaginaries are being developed. Flichy (2007a) and Jasanoff (2015) both recognized that imaginaries can be multiple, but I think we should also ask what role divergent imaginaries can play during political confrontations and mobilizations. Going back to the iconic image of protesters lifting their phones to the sky, in Hong Kong, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia, we can argue that these protesters relied on a technological imaginary that connected mobile phones to political freedom – an imaginary they thought expressed their opposition to their national governments.

Last, while technological imaginaries are a vision of the future, they are also constructed in implicit or explicit opposition to a more or less accurate image of the past. Since the technological imaginary is related to political culture, it has a historical dimension related to political history. But it is also related to history because, as we learn from the scholars who have sought to demystify the hype surrounding new technologies (e.g. Marvin, 1988; Mosco, 2004), discourses about technology emphasize technology in relation and in opposition to the past. This history, implicated in the way we speak of new technologies, can also be inaccurate – it can lead us to erase certain technological advancements in favor of others. In other words, considering the ways in which different technological imaginaries have been constructed and used over time allows us to not only chart the changes in society's political relationship to technology, but also interrogate the ways in which visions of the past inform discourses about the future.

As is evident from the framework that I have laid out in this Introduction, technological imaginaries can be constructed and deployed by different actors. In this

research, however, I employ the concept to investigate specifically how social movements relate to technology in a political way.

Technological imaginaries and social movement research

My theoretical framework, based on a political definition of technological imaginaries, is a conceptual tool that contributes to the study of social movements by helping us make sense of the relationship between technology and activism, in a way that accounts for both practical uses and symbolic power. It can help us go beyond technologically deterministic approaches to technology and social change, but also acknowledge that such technological determinism is a powerful discourse with which social movements (and their observers) are confronted. For instance, scholarship has now mostly moved away from celebratory language that saw in the Arab Spring a "Facebook revolution" or a "Twitter revolution"; we have seen more nuanced assessments of the relationship between digital technologies and the Arab uprisings (e.g. Gerbaudo, 2012; Kraidy, 2016; Tufekci, 2017; Zayani, 2015). But we cannot neglect that there were protester signs during the occupation of Tahrir, for instance, that praised Facebook and Twitter, and that used the language of "Facebook revolution". With the concept of technological imaginary we can begin to fully account for the multifaceted relationship between technology and protest: we can say that, while Facebook has not – in brutal terms – caused the Arab Spring, the use of digital technologies during those uprisings has been understood, by journalists and commentators, within a discursive context that connects the digital to freedom and democracy; we should also recognize that some of the protesters have drawn on those connections to further legitimize their protests.

A recent set of scholarly works (Barassi, 2015; Treré, 2018; Treré, Jeppesen, & Mattoni, 2017) has gone in the direction of interrogating imaginaries in the context of social movements research, although through the different anthropological notion of "media imaginary". In *Activism on the Web*, Barassi (2015) talked about the "media imaginary" of the different social movement organizations she analyzed. Her concept of media imaginary is less comprehensive than the technological imaginary I sketch above: it refers mainly to what activists want to do with media technology; it addresses the role of technology, but at a practical and non-symbolic level; it is shaped by the political culture of the movement – but it is unclear how it is embedded within the broader political culture and the broader media/technological imaginary. Nevertheless, Barassi's (2015) work is important because it linked media practices to the media imaginary of different movements; the concept of imaginary allowed her to argue that different movements "often develop 'different understandings' of what they wanted to achieve from media technologies, which was largely inspired by their political projects and which determined the way that their media practices were organized" (Barassi, 2015, p. 41).

In conversation with Barassi (2015), Treré, Jeppesen and Mattoni (2017) sought out to identify the different media imaginaries of recent anti-austerity movements in Italy, Spain and Greece, finding that they have three different "digital protest media imaginaries" (p. 416), which they suggested are largely based on different national activist cultures. They also argued that these "digital protest media imaginaries" could influence whether social movements are able to achieve their goals (Treré et al., 2017, p. 417). I do not necessarily share the authors' concern for the efficacy of different media imaginaries, partially because I think that conceptualizing digital media imaginaries as a

key to movement success (however defined) is already an expression of a mainstream technological imaginary that sees digital media as central to activism.

Treré (2018) positioned media imaginaries as one of the theoretical lenses, alongside "media ecologies" and algorithmic power, for the study of contemporary digital activism. He then examined in detail the media imaginary of the Italian Five Star Movement, which he defined as "authoritarian sublime" and of the Spanish Indignados, which he called "technopolitical sublime" (Treré, 2018).

While acknowledging the contributions of the concept of "media imaginary" (Barassi, 2015; Treré, 2018; Treré et al., 2017), I prefer to employ the notion of "technological imaginary". I choose to do that in order to connect to the literature on Science and Technology Studies, which has already been exploring some of the questions that guide my research. I also prefer to center technology, and not media, in order to explicitly deploy my theoretical framework to critique and denormalize the technologically deterministic assumptions that are so often embedded in how we think about technology. Lastly, while this dissertation is concerned with contemporary technological imaginaries and digital technologies, my theoretical framework could also be deployed to examine how technologies are imagined by actors in different eras. For instance, without the ambition to fully sketch out its meaning, it is worth mentioning that Lenin's proclamation of communism as equivalent to "Soviet power and electrification" (Lenin, 1964) is a technological imaginary – one that is certainly not concerned with digital media, but also not with media. Thus I choose to speak of technological imaginaries and not media ones to explicitly signal that this framework could have a broader application. However, it is evident that communication technologies play a

crucial role, not just in my theoretical framework, but also in the life of historical and contemporary social movements. So, while my use of "technological imaginary" is theoretically strategic, to allow for the inclusion of different types of technologies and to gesture towards STS, my analysis is, in practice, focused on communication technologies – and specifically digital ones[2].

My work on "technological imaginaries" can make a threefold contribution to social movement research: 1) by addressing the undertheorized symbolic power of technologies for protest 2) by systematizing the research on the political valence of activists' technological practices, including media activism and 3) by bringing social movements into the longstanding scholarly debate on the politics of technology.

The first important contribution of the technological imaginary framework is to the investigation of the symbolic power of technology for mobilization. Technologies, in fact, cannot just be understood in terms of their materiality or their affordances, but also need to be studied as political symbols. With the concept of technological imaginary we can investigate how technology is associated with certain concepts – e.g. freedom, democracy, but conversely also domination and surveillance – that make it a powerful symbol, which movements can use to mobilize. Although several recent works on social movements have touched upon these issues, the technological imaginary can provide a more comprehensive framework for their analysis, as I seek to show in the following paragraphs.

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[2] It is also important to underline that the conflation between "technology writ large" and "digital communication technologies" is not only present in my theorization, but it is also a product of historical contingency. In other words, saying technology today conjures up images of digital communication technologies, perhaps because they are the ones that feature so prominently in the dominant technological imaginary, which I explore in Chapter 1.

Reflecting on Occupy Wall Street, the Indignados movement and the Arab Spring, as well as new protest parties like the Five Star Movement in Italy and Partido X in Spain, Gerbaudo (2015) argued that we are witnessing the emergence of a distinct "populism 2.0". This renewed populist approach to politics binds together the use of digital technologies with a specific discourse about the digital. Gerbaudo (2015) contended that these populist actors appeal to a "generic Internet user" which supplants the traditional populist notion of the "common man":

> In this context, the very experience of online connectivity becomes itself an element of "commonality" to be invoked when searching for the "common" of the contemporary common man. This situation leads to a transfiguration of the populist "common man," into the imaginary figure of the "generic internet user." In this context, people, or better citizens, are not appealed to only based on their grievances, but also on the assumption that their possession of online connectivity and the experience of everyday interactivity afforded by it predisposes them to active political participation. (Gerbaudo, 2015, p. 79)

Gerbaudo (2015) thus suggested that a specific discourse about the emancipatory potential of the web 2.0 is deployed by these parties as a way to mobilize support. Their celebration of web technologies comes to stand in for a series of political values. In this sense, we could argue that the technological imaginary of these movements and parties is one which sees web technologies as a unifying experience, through which "the people", as populist subject, can come together and recognize each other as sharing the same technological practices, and thus the same political values.

Looking at Tunisia, Zayani (2015) also offered an interesting take on the symbolic role that censorship and surveillance of internet communications acquired for Tunisian youth ahead of the Arab Spring. First, he suggested that "the battle against internet censorship developed into a battle against constraints on free speech, which in

turn became inextricably linked with the broader issue of freedom" (Zayani, 2015, p. 155), then explained in detail:

> Making the fight against censorship everybody's battle turned it from a question of whether an individual could access a particular website to that of the people's entitlement to exercise their rights as citizens and the state's duty to act in accordance with the law. As it evolved, the anti-censorship movement started to question the terms under which the state-society relationship was conceived in a country that spared no effort to flaunt its democratic pretentions. (Zayani, 2015, p. 159)

In his analysis, Zayani kept returning to the tension between the bloggers' idea of Internet use and the government's idea of internet use – what I think could be termed two conflicting technological imaginaries. Not only are these two imaginaries conflicting, but their terrain of contestation is around the meaning of "liberal democracy", online and offline: while for the Tunisian government that meant minimal rights and an emphasis on economic development, for the bloggers it amounted to full citizenship rights. Crucially, this conflict over different visions of the future of Tunisia also came to be played out over the regulation of the Internet – and Zayani aptly called his chapter "The battle over Internet control". However, the battle was not just over the internet, it was also about the visions – the imaginary – attached to the use of the internet for social change – and ultimately regime change.

The second aspect of the relationship between movements and technology, which can be addressed through the concept of technological imaginary, pertains to the political valence of specific technological practices, for instance those at the core of media activism. This is a topic that the literature on alternative media and social movements (e.g. Juris, 2008a; Lievrouw, 2011; Milan, 2013; Pickard, 2006a) has covered in depth, in

contrast to other areas; nevertheless, the technological imaginary can help us systematize it.

For instance, in her analysis of radio activists in Philadelphia, Dunbar-Hester (2009) contrasted the attitudes that activists held towards radio and towards internet technologies (e.g. community wifi). She found that, while not ignoring the internet, "radio activists did not believe that webcasting met the same conditions that had led them to favor FM, including access and localism or community-orientation" (Dunbar-Hester, 2009, p. 226) and thus they found it more difficult to include in their activism. Dunbar-Hester explained these different attitudes toward radio and the internet as the product of political, practical and aesthetic considerations; she concluded that "for the activists, LPFM [low power FM radio] is a technical choice that is held to be compatible with localism, democracy and 'community', whereas wi-fi networks are less obviously compatible with these values" (Dunbar-Hester, 2009, p. 233). I suggest that what Dunbar-Hester was trying to describe is the technological imaginary of the radio activists: one in which low power FM, but not necessarily wifi, is associated with specific political orientations towards localism, democracy and community. At the same time, we can also recognize that the radio activists saw themselves in contrast to a more mainstream technological imaginary attached to the internet: "the radio activists' stance represents resistance to what they perceive as unbridled and uncritical belief in and enthusiasm for the inherently emancipatory properties of computers and the internet held by such groups" (Dunbar-Hester, 2009, p. 234). By using the framework of technological imaginaries, we can take a more comprehensive look at how movements view different

technological practices through a political lens – one of the key ideas behind the creation of activist media.

Lastly, I also suggest that we can productively employ the notion of technological imaginary to intervene in a longstanding tension around the political nature of technology. Winner (1986), for instance, attended to the politics of technology by recognizing that a technology can be political in two different ways: firstly, technology can become the avenue through which the issues faced by a community can be addressed; secondly, that certain technologies either require or are strongly compatible with particular kinds of political relationships. The technological imaginary can help us make sense of both aspects. On the one hand, it can account for the fact that technology can be envisioned, by its creators and users, as the solution to specific social and political problems. On the other hand, it can help us move beyond the now obvious notion that technology is not neutral, and acknowledge that those who create and control technology can infuse it with a specific technological imaginary (see Flichy, 2007a). Such imaginary can be challenged by using technologies in ways that were not envisioned or endorsed by its creators; yet the "original" imaginary attached to them is one that is powerful and should be reckoned with. Technology is political because it is envisioned within technological imaginaries that connect it to visions of social and political futures.

Applying the concept of technological imaginary to the study of social movements also raises other questions, which are likely to only be answered through empirical investigations. One area of questioning certainly pertains to variation, over time and among different movements: how do technological imaginaries change over time? How do they differ among movements in different countries? Can we speak of global

technological imaginaries, or local ones? Secondly, another area of inquiry is focused on the relationship between dominant, mainstream technological imaginaries and imaginaries developed by social movements. Lastly, when attending to the technological imaginaries of specific movements, we might ask what is the relationship between practices and discourses, and whether (and how) they might contradict each other.

Research questions

This dissertation uses the concept of "technological imaginary", as defined above, to investigate how different social movements in different countries relate to technology from a political standpoint. This project examines how each movement constructs its own technological imaginary; it also parses out which political factors might contribute to the construction of different technological imaginaries.

The research questions are as follows:

1) What are the technological imaginaries of social movements?
2) How are they constructed?
    a. How do social movements' technological imaginaries relate to dominant technological imaginaries?
    b. What is the role of political orientations and national political contexts in the construction of a movement's technological imaginary?
    c. How do past imaginaries inform current imaginaries?
3) What role do technological imaginaries play in the life of a social movement?
    a. How do technological imaginaries inform the technological practices of a movement?

b. What is the effect of the technological imaginaries on the organizational and political choices of a movement?
c. What is the role of the technological imaginaries in mobilization and protest?

Research Design

The dissertation project looks at the technological imaginaries of contemporary leftist social movements in three countries – United States, Italy and Hungary – through a multi-method qualitative approach. In this section I present my research design. First, I sketch out how I examine the contemporary dominant technological imaginary through textual analysis. Then I provide some information on the three case studies that I consider – the internet tax protests of 2014 in Hungary, the Italian student movement LUMe, the US-based Philly Socialists. I then articulate my multi-method approach to studying social movements' technological imaginaries, which is based on qualitative interviews and visual focus groups. I also supplemented this qualitative data collection with the observation of meetings and events and the analysis of documents. Further, I discuss my approach to data analysis. Lastly, I address some of the ethical considerations that played a role in my research.

Studying dominant technological imaginaries

In Chapter 1 I turn to the current dominant technological imaginary, which I identify as an evolution of the Californian Ideology (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996). I

provide two illustrations of the ways in which this presumed universal technological imaginary is actually limited and biased. To reconstruct this imaginary, I rely on an interpretive analysis of textual sources. Textual analysis has been the primary way in which scholars have tried to investigate the role of technology in society, by relying on literary works, media reports and cultural representations (Marvin, 1988; Marx, 1964; Mosco, 2004; Nye, 1996); textual analysis is also what Jasanoff (2015) recommends for the study of sociotechnical imaginaries.

In this vein, my first illustration of the biases of the dominant technological imaginary explores the role of race and gender in the representations offered in the first five years of *Wired* magazine, a publication that was crucial for the development and popularization of the current dominant technological imaginary. I relied on a textual analysis of the cover pages and the corresponding cover stories of 54 issues of *Wired*, released in its first five years, between 1993 and 1997. The analysis combined visual and textual elements. Images and texts were coded for emergent themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and grouped in macro-categories; connections were drawn between the macro-categories. Particular attention was given to the connections between the representation of different bodies and the themes emerging from the text. The analysis followed three iterative steps: first, it focused on the cover images; second, it considered the cover images in conjunction with the cover titles; third, it turned to an in-depth analysis of the images and text of two cover stories, which featured a white woman (April 1996) and a black man (December 1994). These cover stories were chosen because they were dedicated to non-normative *Wired* bodies, i.e. they were among the few not dedicated to white men. The December 1994 issue is the only one to feature a man of color on the

cover; the April 1996 cover story was chosen because it was the lengthiest of the stories about women.

The second illustration of the biases of Silicon Valley is based on an in-depth textual analysis of a document published by Facebook's founder and CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, in 2017, which was coded for emergent themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

While textual analysis is useful to reconstruct technological imaginaries as they are expressed through essays, articles, and documents, I turn to empirical qualitative methods to examine the technological imaginaries of the three social movements included in this dissertation.

The cases: the Hungarian internet tax protests, LUMe, and the Philly Socialists

Three contemporary cases will be examined in the dissertation: the Hungarian internet tax protests of 2014, the Italian student collective LUMe (Laboratorio Universitario Metropolitano, i.e. Metropolitan University Laboratory) and the American Philly Socialists. These three case studies present similarities and differences that can help us understand how technological imaginaries might vary in different political contexts.

First, in terms of their similarities, these three social movements can be considered as part of the same wave of social movements that have mobilized in opposition to the growth of right-wing populist forces in Europe and North America. All of these movements are presently confronting right-wing populist governments: Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary, Donald Trump in the United States, and the government alliance between the Matteo Salvini's League (*Lega*) and the Five Star Movement

(*Movimento Cinque Stelle*) in Italy. If these right-wing leaders can be broadly understood as part of the same right-wing populist moment, then it is important that we also consider the movements that oppose them as part of the same category, even if these movements are obviously different from one another. My selection of these cases thus encourages a conceptualization of these movements as part of the same cohort of movements opposing right-wing populism.

Second, the Hungarian internet tax protests, LUMe and the Philly Socialists are also similarly situated to the left of the mainstream center-left in each of their respective countries. They all eschew parliamentary representation and are critical of parliamentary politics. In Hungary, the activists that organized the Hungarian internet tax protests are part of a left-liberal activist area, that occupies the most leftist position in the truncated Hungarian political spectrum; these activists are not only opposed to Orbán's authoritarian fantasies but are also culturally progressive and generally critical of neoliberal policies. LUMe's politics and political practices firmly place the collective within the Italian "radical leftist" area, commonly considered to the left of the institutional left in Italy; LUMe opposes neoliberalism, but also racism, sexism and fascism/populism. As a socialist organization committed to revolutionary politics, the Philly Socialists are also far to the left of the mainstream left in the United States; their opposition to neoliberal capitalism goes hand in hand with a critique of the party system and of sexism and racism. Lastly, these movements all employ similar protest repertoires, such as nonviolent demonstrations and protest actions, and value participatory mechanisms in their organization.

The movements also present important differences in respect to their political orientations and the political contexts in which they are embedded. This dissertation examines in detail how the political orientations of these movements vary, while still placing them in a general leftist camp and to the left of the mainstream left in their respective countries; these differing political orientations play a role in the construction of these movements' technological imaginaries. My research also charts how the different political contexts in which these movements operate influence the shape of their technological imaginaries. Hungary's socialist legacy and the consequences of the transition to democracy chart a complicated relation to Western democracy, which is likely to affect how movements interpret Western technologies, as well as the dominant technological imaginary, which, as I will explain in Chapter 1, is specific, biased, and deeply American. Italy's political instability and its history of heightened political conflict contributed to the development of a lively leftist social movement scene, where movements are able to learn from each other and build on shared political repertoires, for instance in relation to technologies. Looking at cases of social movements in Hungary and Italy is also likely to bring into stark relief the peculiarities of the American political system, for instance its marginalization and repression of radical and socialist forces. In the U.S. context, it is also important to assess how radical social movements' imaginaries fare in a country which has long embraced a fascination with technologies. The different political orientations and political contexts of the Hungarian internet tax protests, LUMe and the Philly Socialists thus play a crucial role in my analysis of their technological imaginaries.

As is evident from this description of the cases, this dissertation does not intend to offer a strictly comparative design. Indeed, as Barassi (2015) underlined, it might be impossible to neatly compare different cultures, nations, and activist groups; however, as she argued, it is useful to juxtapose different case studies, with the understanding that highlighting the differences and similarities between the cases can help us make sense of how the specificities of each individual case can follow more general patterns. It is in this spirit that I conducted my analysis of the three cases, which I now present.

The Hungarian internet tax protests were organized in October 2014 to oppose the Hungarian government's decision to impose a tax on internet consumption. A group of left-liberal activists, previously involved in different movements, organized two successful demonstrations in Hungary's capital. As mentioned in the introduction, the first one drew 10,000 people to the streets of Budapest; the second one gave rise to the largest demonstration that the country had seen post-1989, with 100,000 people marching in the city. After this mobilization, the internet tax was withdrawn indefinitely. The core group of organizers decided to refrain from creating a new political organization, and continued to be active in different causes through other collectives. These activists self-identify as different kinds of liberals and leftists. They are part of a broad civil society mobilization that has emerged to oppose the government after the election of Viktor Orbán as Prime Minister in 2010, who is leading Hungary towards an "illiberal democracy", as he himself has defined it (Orbán, 2014).

The Metropolitan University Laboratory (*Laboratorio Universitario MEtropolitano* or LUMe) is based in Milan, Italy. The collective was founded in April 2015 during the occupation of an empty building, located next to the University of Milan.

The occupied building gave them a venue for jazz concerts, poetry readings, theater performances, and other activities, which led to the inclusion of students from the numerous art schools of Milan. They were evicted from that building in the summer of 2017. In October 2017, they conducted a brief occupation of a foreclosed cinema in the city center, re-opening it for the local population. They subsequently left the cinema and occupied a municipality-owned maintenance deposit, where they are currently carrying out their activities. LUMe is made of different working groups ("tavoli"), which are concerned with: politics, music, cinema, theater, writing, art. In the introduction to their activities, they identify as antifascist, antiracist, antisexist; they say their activities are aimed at showing the social and political value of artistic production.

The Philly Socialists are a self-described "working class political organization" (Philly Socialists, n.d.-b) based in Philadelphia, USA. They were founded in 2011; in January 2019 they had a dues-paying membership of 170. They are active in city-wide protests – for instance about net neutrality (Parent, 2018) or against President Trump's immigration policies (Orso & Feliciano Reyes, 2018) – and grassroots organizing. They have been particularly involved with the fight for better housing conditions: in 2016 they created the Philadelphia Tenants Union. Other actions that they have promoted include the development of a Community Garden and ESL classes. In 2017, they started publishing an alternative magazine, online and in print, called *The Philadelphia Partisan*. Their short presentation on their website states that they are "a political organization committed to creating a just and sustainable future for ourselves and our planet" (Philly Socialists, n.d.-a).

Methods

My methodological choices are informed by my theoretical orientation towards studying "movements as processes" (Melucci, 1989) and exploring the discursive constructions that enable the action of social movements. Furthermore, as explained in my assessment of Melucci's (1989) contribution to the study of social movements, one of the challenges for studying movements is related to the invisibility of certain fundamental processes that define them. Studying the technological imaginaries of social movements is challenging exactly because they are invisible and thus difficult to reconstruct directly. In many ways, the widespread technologies that we use every day may seem trivial and commonsensical, hardly something that can be approached directly in an academic interview. The challenge is thus to find methods that can interrogate the commonsensical, taken-for-granted aspect of technology, engender a reflection in the research participants, and create a conversation between researcher and participants about the meaning of everyday technologies and their symbolic power. I have chosen to explore my cases through a multi-method qualitative approach.

The three cases – the internet tax protests in Hungary, LUMe in Italy, and the Philly Socialists in Philadelphia – will be approached through a combination of in-depth individual interviews and visual focus groups. Given the predominance of internet-based technologies in our present day, the internet will be the main (although not the only) focus of the empirical research on the contemporary cases.

Interviews

I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with activists from the Hungarian internet tax protests, LUMe and the Philly Socialists. The interview guides that I used are available in Appendix A.

Interviewees were asked general questions about their activist biographies and about their relationship with technology. Following Star (1999), who wrote that infrastructures become visible upon breakdown, and Bucher (2016), who studied how people react to the perceived faults of algorithms, I incorporated questions that guided interviewees towards discussing moments in which they have become aware of the role of technology in their activist lives or in which they have perceived digital technologies to have caused problems in their personal lives or within the movements they are involved with.

Interviewees of LUMe and the Philly Socialists were also guided towards discussing the symbolic role of digital technologies; as can be seen in Appendix A, they were shown two pictures in which protesters raised illuminated smartphones in the air: one from the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong and one from the Hungarian internet tax protests. They were asked whether they had seen these pictures. If they did not recall these pictures, they were asked to describe what was happening in the picture and what the meaning of that protest action might be. The pictures informed a discussion between me and the interviewees about the possibility of using digital technologies as a symbol for political mobilization.

I conducted interviews with the core organizers of the Hungarian internet tax protests in January – February 2017, either in person in Budapest or via Skype. I interviewed seven men and two women, whose pseudonyms and ages are listed in Table

1. The interviews were conducted in English. On average, each interview lasted 58 minutes.

Table 1. Pseudonyms, age and gender of the Hungarian internet tax activists who participated in the individual interviews.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender
Adam	32	Male
Bálint	32	Male
Daniel	35	Male
David	45§	Male
Eszter	33	Female
Lászlo	33	Male
Péter	37	Male
Petra	-	Female
Tamás	45§	Male

Note: the ages indicated with § are an estimate based on publicly available information.

These nine interviewees represent the core organizers of a group that reached 20 people at most; each interviewee confirmed that my sample represented the most relevant individuals who were involved in the organization of the protests.

I conducted interviews with eight activists from LUMe, four men and four women, between June 2018 and February 2019. Their ages and occupations are listed in Table 2. The interviews were conducted either in person in Milan or via video chat services (Skype and Facebook Messenger). The interviews were conducted in Italian and their average length was 78 minutes.

Table 2. Pseudonyms, age and gender of the LUMe activists who participated in the individual interviews.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Occupation
Boris	21	Male	Assistant director of photography
Ilaria	24	Female	Social media manager
Jessica	27	Female	Museum staff
Maria	26	Female	Actress
Mario	25	Male	Sociology student
Paolo	24	Male	Political Science student
Stefano	25	Male	Philosophy student
Valeria	22	Female	Political Science student

The eight interviewees that took part in my research represent different working groups in the collective; they also vary in the amount of time they have spent with LUMe: while some of the interviewees were involved in founding the collective, others joined at different points in time, and one interviewee had just recently begun getting involved with LUMe when I interviewed him. This sample of activists thus captures a range of experiences in LUMe; the interviewees themselves discussed my sample with me and found it be representative of the collective.

I conducted five interviews with the Philly Socialists; their ages, occupation and preferred pronouns are listed in Table 3. The interviews took place between August 2018 and February 2019. The interviews took place in person, in Philadelphia; they were conducted in English. Their average length was 70 minutes.

Table 3. Pseudonyms, age and gender of the Philly Socialists who participated in the individual interviews.

Pseudonym	Age	Pronouns	Occupation
Alexander	43	He/him	Web developer
Donna	26	They/them	Non-profit worker
Lisa	29	She/her	Medical interpreter
Michael	24	He/him	Research assistant
Tyler	36	He/him	Librarian

As I detail below, when describing the limitations of my project, the Philly Socialists were more reluctant to participate in my research, compared to the Italian and Hungarian activists; this accounts for the limited number of individual interviews that I was able to conduct. The five interviews nevertheless offer the perspectives of organizers that have varying previous experiences of activism, that work on different projects within the Philly Socialists, and that have been members of the organization for different amounts of time.

Visual focus groups

I used focus groups to create group discussions about the meaning of technology for the activists. Given the difficulty to talk about this seemingly mundane and taken-for-granted issue, taking inspiration from the literature on graphic elicitation tasks (Bagnoli, 2009; Gieseking, 2013), I developed a new method: the visual focus group. In the visual focus groups, participants were asked to collectively draw what they thought the internet was like. The process of collectively agreeing on a picture of the internet helped to

uncover some of the unspoken assumptions about digital technologies that participants held, thus allowing them to reflect on these assumptions collectively. In my analysis, I examined the drawings in conjunction with the discussions that generated them. I provide more details on the visual focus groups in Appendix B.

Although I planned to conduct focus groups with both LUMe and the Philly Socialists, only those with LUMe were held, due to problems of access with the Philly Socialists, which I detail when describing the limitations of this research. I conducted two visual focus groups with LUMe activists: the first, which took place on November 8th 2018, lasted one hour and 36 minutes and included 5 activists (4 men, 1 woman); the second, on January 7th 2019, was one hour and 52 minutes long and included 4 activists (3 men, 1 woman). Their pseudonyms and ages are listed in Table 4. The visual focus groups with LUMe were conducted in Italian.

Table 4. Pseudonyms, age and gender of the LUMe activists who participated in the visual focus groups.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Focus Group
Emanuele*	29	Male	Focus Group 1
Maria	26	Female	Focus Group 1
Mario	25	Male	Focus Group 1
Paolo	24	Male	Focus Group 1
Vittorio*	21	Male	Focus Group 1
Alessio*	26	Male	Focus Group 2
Giulio*	24	Male	Focus Group 2

Stefano	25	Male	Focus Group 2
Viola*	20	Female	Focus Group 2

Note: the participants indicated with * did not take part in individual interviews.

Supplementary data: documents and observation

While semi-structured interviews and visual focus groups are the core of my multi-method qualitative approach, I also supplemented these two methods with the analysis of different textual sources produced by the three movements and by the observation of some of their meetings and public events. In particular, I analyzed social media posts and the website produced by LUMe; this content supplement the interviews and was used to reconstruct the history of LUMe, its different working groups and its political stances. I also analyzed the social media posts and the content of the Philly Socialists' website; this content also included the Constitution of the Philly Socialists and their Anti-Harassment Policy (available on the website) and internal documents produced by the organization and shared on social media. I used these materials to integrate interviewees' accounts of the history of the group and of their many projects, as well as to provide an explanation of their political positions and their organizational structures. I also collected and analyzed written materials published by members of the Philly Socialists, which aimed to present the organization and/or explain its political stances, for instance the notion of base-building. I also collected and examined 5 issues of the magazine published by the Philly Socialists, the *Philadelphia Partisan*.

Further, I observed meetings and public events hosted by LUMe and the Philly Socialists. I observed two open assemblies held by LUMe (in December 2017 and December 2018), one organizational assembly (in June 2018) and a working group meeting (June 2018). I also observed four public or semi-public meetings or events of the Philly Socialists: one open assembly (in July 2018), a public assembly of the Philadelphia Tenants Union (in August 2018), a General Assembly (January 2019), and a book presentation held at a local bookstore (September 2018). Additionally, I also visited the Occupy ICE Philadelphia encampments, which the Philly Socialists co-promoted, and observed a general assembly of this movement (July 2018). I took notes and collected any written materials that were available in these meetings and events. My observation of the movements complemented the data collected through the interviews and the visual focus group; it was especially useful in providing insights into the dynamics of discussion and organization that characterize the Philly Socialists and LUMe.

Data analysis

The data created through interviews and focus groups were coded through thematic (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and open (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) coding. In particular, a first round of descriptive thematic coding of the transcripts was conducted through the qualitative analysis software MaxQDA. Subsequently, a second round of open coding, directed at extrapolating more theoretically relevant codes from the existing descriptive thematic coding, was conducted on paper. Because the analysis was directed at reconstructing the specific technological imaginary of each movement, the transcripts pertaining to each case were analyzed separately – one movement at a time.

The drawings produced in the visual focus groups – both the final collective drawings and the sketches produced by different individuals – were analyzed in conjunction with the transcript of the group discussion that produced them. The themes raised in the drawings and in the group discussions were constantly compared to those emerging from the individual interviews. As I highlight in Appendix B, the drawings that emerge from the visual focus groups cannot be analyzed or presented without accounting for the discussions that generated them.

Ethics

Throughout my research, I followed the ethics guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR Ethics Working Committee, 2012). My data collection and retention, as well as my consenting procedures, also complied with the European General Data Protection Regulation. I sought the informed consent of the activists I interviewed or included in the visual focus groups[3]. Hungarian activists gave their consent orally, after I presented my project to them; interviewees of LUMe and the Philly Socialists were asked to sign consent forms. All the participants received a copy of the consent form (or script, in the case of the Hungarian activists), which included detailed information on my project, my data collection procedure, my contact details and the contact information of the Institutional Review Board of the University of Pennsylvania, to which they could report problems with my research. The Philly Socialists and the Hungarian activists received a consent form/script in English, LUMe received an Italian version.

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[3] This research is the object of two different Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols, one concerning the interviews conducted with the Hungarian activists and one concerning the interviews and focus groups conducted with LUMe and the Philly Socialists. In both cases, the IRB of the University of Pennsylvania determined that the protocols met the criteria for a review exemption (category 2).

Since this project is concerned with activists, who are often in a rather vulnerable position, my research process and my presentation of the data attempt to minimize the collection of personally identifiable information. I used pseudonyms for all the participants involved in the study; with two exceptions, in which activists chose their own pseudonyms, I assigned pseudonyms to participants based on common Hungarian, Italian, and American names, respectively. Activists were often curious about the need to be assigned pseudonyms: because they did not always feel the need to be anonymized, this generated interesting discussions about the use of research participants' data and the availability of personal information online. None of the activists requested to be identified by their names. While using pseudonyms for individual activists, I identify LUMe and the Philly Socialists with their real names[4]. The two movements were asked if they consented to my use of their names in my research and they both agreed. In the Philly Socialists, this consent was provided by the Central Committee; in LUMe, it was the organizational assembly that agreed, after hosting me to discuss my research project. Further, I also offered activists of LUMe and the Philly Socialists the possibility to get in touch with me via encrypted platforms (Signal and an encrypted email address), in addition to my institutional email address and regular texting services.

Activists of LUMe and the Philly Socialists were offered a modest compensation for their participation in the interviews and/or the focus groups; activists all elected to give that compensation to their organizations.

I planned to build member checks into my research, but I was not yet able to conduct them. The Hungarian interviewees received a summary of the main findings

[4] The Hungarian activists never formed a stable collective or organization, so they are simply identified as activists or organizers of the Hungarian internet tax protests.

pertaining to their case, written in plain language. I plan to offer a similar summary to the Philly Socialists and to LUMe (in Italian, in their case). I have also discussed the possibility of presenting the findings of the dissertation to LUMe in person, since the activists showed interest in learning what I would discover about them, but especially to hear about what movements in other countries think about digital technologies. The visual focus groups and the interviews also offered a space for me to talk to the participants about my (preliminary) takes on the data I was collecting. Visual focus groups had debriefing moments at the end of them, after activists had settled on their final drawings. At the beginning, as well as at the end, of the individual interviews, I asked participants if they had any questions for me. These moments, especially at the end of the interviews, offered activists an opportunity to inquire about my positionality as a researcher and about my research. I often discussed with them my motivations for doing this research and my tentative takes on my research findings; this often led to more discussions about contemporary activism and the meaning of digital technology. Further insights collected from the member checks that I plan to conduct will be incorporated in subsequent iterations of this project.

Limitations

Before providing an outline of my overall argument and of the chapters of the dissertation, it is necessary to spell out the limitations of my project.

The first one has to do with the limited participation of one of the social movements considered in the dissertation: the Philly Socialists. In fact, although I discussed my interest in researching the Philly Socialists with the two co-chairs of the organization, and the Philly Socialists' Central Committee agreed to my use of the name

of the organization, the organization never fully endorsed my project. One of the co-chairs sent an internal email and posted a message in their internal Facebook discussion group on my behalf, but neither the co-chair nor other organizers were interested in helping me recruit participants. I can only speculate as to why my research was received differently by the Philly Socialist than by LUMe or the Hungarian activists. I had hoped to be able to mitigate eventual surveillance concerns by offering encrypted means of communication and by explicitly mentioning that I would not disclose any of their personal information. I had also hoped to work around any biases against my academic institution by presenting myself as a former student activist and as a researcher committed to social justice. As far as I could ascertain, all the interviews that I conducted with the Philly Socialists were a positive experience for the participants, who talked to me at length and seemed to enjoy the possibility to talk about their organization. Interviewees also expressed a potential interest in taking part in a visual focus group. However, given the difficulty of even finding a small number of interviewees, I could not attempt to schedule a visual focus group. Regardless of its real reasons, about which I can only speculate, the limited number of interviews conducted with the Philly Socialists, as well as the unfeasibility of the visual focus groups, remain a limitation of this study. For that reason, I tried to supplement my analysis of the interviews with the examination of other written sources and by observing events and public and semi-public meetings of the Philly Socialists.

The second limitation lies in the nature of the qualitative methods that I chose to employ. While I maintain that the multi-method qualitative approach that I laid out provides important insights about the technological imaginaries of the social movements

I studied, it nevertheless only produces indirect data, i.e. participants' post-hoc rationalizations of their attitudes and practices. In this sense, the data I work with is different from what I could collect through an ethnographic engagement with these movements, which could allow me to observe how the technological imaginaries of these activists unfold in practice. For example, while LUMe activists told me that their use of Facebook "sponsored" posts was discussed at length within the movement, I was not able to directly observe any of those discussions. Of course, choosing an ethnographic approach does not guarantee that one will be able to observe all the relevant conversations, but an ethnographic engagement could nevertheless provide more occasions to be present should those discussions occur.

The third limitation concerns the generalizability of my findings. With my choice of three case studies from different countries, I have sought to examine how the different characteristics of the political environments in which social movements are embedded come into play in these movements' construction of technological imaginaries, and in how these imaginaries respond to the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley. In so doing, I have developed a typology of social movements' technological imaginaries, which I introduce below. This typology, however, is not meant to offer predictions about what the technological imaginaries of other movements will look like. In other words, while my research identifies a few political factors that play a role in how LUMe, the Philly Socialists, and the Hungarian activists construct their imaginaries, it should not be used to infer the technological imaginaries of other movements that are confronted with similar political conditions. It cannot be used to say, for instance, that all contemporary American socialist organizations will develop technological imaginaries

that look like the one constructed by the Philly Socialists. Rather, this typology of imaginaries is meant to be an analytical tool that can uncover the specificities of each movements' relationship to technology.

Lastly, this dissertation is limited in its applicability beyond Europe and North America, in that it only includes cases of social movements located in these developed regions and it is predicated on the dominance of a distinctly American, Western, technological imaginary. The theoretical framework deployed in this dissertation could also be used as a starting point to analyze the technological imaginaries of movements located in other parts of the world, but we should expect movements outside of Europe and North America to be faced with different threats and opportunities and to have different experiences of Silicon Valley's technologies. Most importantly, in order to use this framework in other contexts, we should pay particular attention to identifying what is the dominant technological imaginary in a given location. While the technological imaginary of Silicon Valley is increasingly global in its reach, because of its ambitions and because of the global spread of its technologies, it might not have the same dominant position in all areas of the world. While the dominance of Silicon Valley's imaginary can be readily ascertained in Europe and North America, it remains an open question in the rest of the world. For instance, we could hypothesize that the technological imaginary of the Chinese government might be the dominant one to consider when analyzing how Chinese activists construct their own technological imaginaries. This would then likely require a reconceptualization of the typology of social movements' imaginaries developed in the dissertation – but one that could still be guided by the theoretical framework laid out in this project. The geographical limitations of the dominant

technological imaginary, and of the cases examined here, do not minimize the findings of my dissertation, but rather serve to underline how social movements' relations to technology must be studied in the specific political context in which movements are embedded.

Outline of the dissertation

Based on my theoretical framework and my empirical examination of the technological imaginaries of the Hungarian internet tax protests, the Italian LUMe and the U.S.-based Philly Socialists, I develop a typology of social movements' technological imaginaries. This typology presents three different categories of imaginaries, based on how they respond to the dominant technological imaginary that I describe in Chapter 1 and that stems from Silicon Valley. The typology considers whether social movements' technological imaginaries accept or dismiss the dominant technological imaginary and whether they choose to employ Silicon Valley's digital technologies in their activism, or not. This results in three categories, which I named appropriation, negotiation, and challenge. Technological imaginaries of appropriation embrace the dominant technological imaginary and endorse the use of Silicon Valley's digital technologies; the Hungarian internet tax protests constructed such an imaginary of appropriation. Technological imaginaries of negotiation reject the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley, yet they allow for the use of Silicon Valley's digital technologies. Both LUMe and the Philly Socialists construct imaginaries of negotiation, although different ones. Lastly, technological imaginaries of challenge reject both the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley and Silicon Valley's digital technologies.

Although no empirical cases of challenge are present in the dissertation, drawing on the literature I further distinguish between imaginaries of challenge that are based on the refusal to use Silicon Valley's technologies and imaginaries of challenge that envision the development of alternative activist technologies.

Further, my empirical analysis identifies three crucial political factors that shape how social movements' construct their technological imaginaries in response to Silicon Valley's dominant imaginary: the social movement's ideology, the political context in which the social movement is embedded, and the presence of other prominent technological imaginaries, to which the movement also responds. I explain how the combination of these factors comes into play in how the Hungarian internet tax protests, LUMe and the Philly Socialists develop their technological imaginaries.

Before examining the three case studies, in Chapter 1 I describe the current dominant technological imaginary, arising from Silicon Valley; I identify its three key tenets: the belief in the free and democratic nature of digital technologies, technosolutionism, and its embeddedness in neoliberal capitalism. I highlight how this imaginary, which is profoundly American, has dreams of universality. The chapter offers two illustrations of the biases of this dominant technological imaginary, which push back on the universalistic dreams of Silicon Valley. First, I looked at one of the privileged loci for the construction of the dominant technological imaginary in the 1990s – *Wired* magazine. Through an analysis of *Wired*'s covers between 1993 and 1997 and an in-depth examination of two of its cover stories, I show how the exclusion of people of color and white women sustains the dreams of universality of Silicon Valley through a discourse I call "selective disembodiment". This discourse celebrated "cyberspace" for

offering white women and people of color a chance to leave their bodies behind. In so doing, it affirmed the idea that technology could take care of any gender and race inequalities. In practice, this discourse allowed Silicon Valley to construct its digital utopias by projecting the limited point of view of the white men that rule it. Secondly, I show how Silicon Valley's technological imaginary blends technocratic ambitions and populist justifications by analyzing how these emerge from an open letter written by Facebook CEO and founder Mark Zuckerberg in 2017. Zuckerberg's manifesto highlights the complexities of the dominant technological imaginary and the biases of the politics that it pitches as universal.

Chapter 2 examines the Hungarian internet tax protests. I first explain how the government of Viktor Orbán tried to introduce a tax on internet consumption in October 2014 and describe the protests that were organized in Budapest by a group of left-liberal activists. I contextualize the internet tax within Hungary's recent turn to "illiberal democracy" (Orbán, 2014) and I provide an overview of the social movements that have opposed Orbán since 2010. I argue that the protests were successful in pushing the government to withdraw the tax proposal because they drew on a powerful technological imaginary, that I term "mundane modernity": this imaginary blends the typical tropes associated with Western modernity with the mundanity of internet practices. This technological imaginary is one of appropriation, because it embraces both the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley and Silicon Valley's technologies. I argue that this appropriation is influenced by the Hungarian political context, which has seen a resurgence of the political cleavage of modernity vs. tradition; appropriation is also shaped by the Hungarian activists' opposition to Orbán's illiberal democracy, which has

its own technological imaginary – exemplified by the internet tax itself. I then show how the imaginary of mundane modernity was performed by the protesters through the iconic action of raising smartphones to the sky and by the thrashing of the building that hosts Orbán's party, Fidesz. As mentioned at the beginning of this Introduction, the iconic action involving smartphones was repeated in other protests in Hungary and in the region, clearly showing how this performance of mundane modernity can have a strong symbolic power. In closing, however, I show how this symbolic power has its limits: for the activists of LUMe and the Philly Socialists, mundane modernity, as performed through the action of raising illuminated smartphones, does not really make sense.

In Chapters 3 and 4 I examine two technological imaginaries of negotiation. In Chapter 3, I present the Italian leftist collective LUMe, by chronicling their political occupation of empty buildings in the city of Milan. I contextualize their activities within the longer trajectory of Italian social centers, i.e. social movements that have relied on the occupation of buildings as their primary tactic; I also focus on two of the areas in which LUMe activists have been particularly active: creating grassroots cultural spaces accessible to all and mobilizing against state racism. I then provide a description of LUMe's horizontal organizational structures. I examine their technological practices for both internal and external communication, underlining their reliance on commercial digital platforms, particularly Facebook and Whatsapp. I call their technological imaginary "using the tools of the system against the system" to highlight that LUMe activists simultaneously regard digital technologies as flawed and indispensable for social change. Their imaginary is one of negotiation: while they fiercely criticize the key tenets of the dominant technological imaginary, they rely extensively on the technologies of

Silicon Valley. In their negotiation, they draw on two resources that they use to make sense of their relationship to corporate digital platforms: offline occupied spaces and the notion of *consapevolezza*, roughly translatable as “awareness”. I thus argue that their negotiation is shaped by three political factors: their general Marxist anti-capitalist ideological orientation; the context of the Italian occupied social centers, to which LUMe belongs; and LUMe’s opposition to another prominent technological imaginary in Italian politics, that of the Five Star Movement.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the American socialist organization, the Philly Socialists (PS). I chronicle their history since their foundation in 2011 and present their many projects, which they see as “serve the people” work. I situate the Philly Socialists in the context of a recent surge in interest in socialist organizations in the United States. In describing the politics of the Philly Socialists, I highlight that they are a multitendency socialist organization committed to “base-building”, i.e. to build a power base for socialist politics outside of the electoral system; they are also actively involved in creating a national network of socialist organizations that subscribe to “base-building”, the Marxist Center. I then explain the complex organizational structure of the Philly Socialists, which I argue brings together socialist centralized structures and anarchist horizontal processes. In mapping their internal and external technological practices, I highlight the importance of the process of recruitment and retention to how the Philly Socialists employ technologies. I define their technological imaginary as “organizing where people are”: the Philly Socialists do not regard digital technologies as an ideal space, but one that is good enough – for now – to recruit people into the socialist cause. It is also an imaginary of negotiation, in that the Philly Socialists reject the core principles

of Silicon Valley's dominant technological imaginary, but extensively rely on its digital technology. Their negotiation is supported by the idea of "organizing", through which they effectively downplay and justify their use of corporate technologies – by thinking about their technological practices within a broader "organizing" strategy. I thus suggest that their technological imaginary of negotiation is shaped by an appeal to the heritage of socialist organizing, from which the PS take away the need to rely on whatever mainstream media technologies are most efficient, as well as by the PS' critique of the technological imaginary of "activist networking", which they see as prevalent in the American Left and that we might better define as lifestyle politics (Portwood-Stacer, 2013a).

In the Conclusion, I review what the imaginary of appropriation of the Hungarian internet tax protests and the imaginaries of negotiation of LUMe and the Philly Socialists tell us about the relationship between contemporary movements and digital technologies. I also draw on the literature to explain the third category of technological imaginary that I identified in my typology: challenge. I explain that challenge can further be divided into imaginaries of challenge that envision the abstention from Silicon Valley technologies and imaginaries of challenge that promote the development of alternative digital technologies. I offer examples of both. I then offer a few theoretical and methodological implications of my dissertation to the literatures on media and social movements, digital technologies, and media and communication in general. In closing, I reflect on the need for activists and academics to start imagining better technologies for better futures.

Chapter 1 – The dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley

The dominant technological imaginary

In conceptualizing technological imaginaries as a theoretical lens for the examination of the relationship between movements and technologies, I have argued that, although imaginaries are plural and conflicting, there should be a clearly identifiable technological imaginary that is dominant in a particular place and time. While social movements might dislike, criticize and oppose the dominant technological imaginary, they are nevertheless immersed in it, like the rest of society.

But what is the current dominant technological imaginary? It is a set of practice-based beliefs and discourses that have been popularized by U.S. technology companies – a group of actors that are commonly called "Silicon Valley", due to the location of most of them in that area of Northern California. The current dominant technological imaginary is an evolution of what Barbrook and Cameron (1996) already called the "Californian ideology", which, they said, "simultaneously reflects the disciplines of market economics and the freedoms of hippie artisanship. This bizarre hybrid is only made possible through a nearly universal belief in technological determinism" (p. 50). In turn, this belief is based on "a profound faith in the emancipatory potential of the new information technologies" (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996, p. 45). Turner (2006) traced the emergence of this discourse back to the Californian countercultural movements of the 1960s; Mosco (2004), Fisher (2008) and Streeter (2005) all highlighted the importance of the 1990s as a critical juncture for the consolidation and mainstreaming of these ideas, in conjunction with the rise to prominence of new forms of right wing libertarianism in the United States. They also highlighted the relevance of the tech magazine *Wired* in making

these discourses about technology both popular and glamorous (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996; Fisher, 2008; Flichy, 2007a; Streeter, 2005; Turner, 2006).

The key tenets of this imaginary are powerful. First, this imaginary connects the digital to freedom, personal autonomy and democracy, which are imagined to be accessible to everyone through the use of technologies (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996; Streeter, 2005; Turner, 2006). Digital technologies are thought to be inherently free, democratic and supportive of personal autonomy. Second, this imaginary suggests that people's problems and challenges can and should be addressed through the development and deployment of technologies, as opposed to, say, through the implementation of different policies (Fisher, 2008; Morozov, 2013; Robins, 1996). Digital technologies are thus portrayed as being inevitable and integral to human life. Third, despite being a discourse that celebrates the revolutionary power of technological innovation, this imaginary is fully embedded into and functional to dominant political-economic arrangements, i.e. neoliberalism. This means that there is a political-economic dimension to the dominant technological imaginary (Dean, 2005; Fisher, 2010; Mansell, 2012; McChesney, 2013; but mostly Mosco, 2004). In fact, we can argue that this imaginary helps legitimize neoliberal capitalism: it portrays society as classless and free of socio-economic struggles (Fisher, 2008) and promotes the idea that the market, with its endless supply of technology, is the place for the resolution of problems and the improvement of people's lives – not government (Mosco, 2004). Turner (2006) and Mosco (2004) convincingly explained how this affinity between Silicon Valley and neoliberal ideas came into being during the 1990s and how it was naturalized by *Wired* magazine.

This dominant technological imaginary is also deeply American, in two ways: it arose out of the peculiarities of Silicon Valley and of the American political scene of the 1990s and it also feeds on past imaginaries of technology and its role in constructing "America" (Marx, 1964; Nye, 1996). On the one hand, as Barbrook and Cameron (1996) eloquently argued:

> The Californian Ideology was developed by a group of people living within one specific country with a particular mix of socio-economic and technological choices. Its eclectic and contradictory blend of conservative economics and hippie radicalism reflects the history of the West Coast – and not the inevitable future of the rest of the world. (p. 63)

On the other hand, this dominant vision of technology should also be understood within a long American history of fascination with "new technologies", which I briefly discussed in the Introduction when presenting the insights of media historians on the role of discourses about technology. Building on L. Marx (1964), Nye (1996) argued that this fascination with technological developments – the "technological sublime" – is "a defining ideal for American society" (p. xiii-xiv) and "one of America's central 'ideas about itself'" (p. xiv)[5].

Recognizing that this dominant technological imaginary is shaped by political, social, and historical conditions can help us demystify its power and pinpoint its effects. This is important also because this technological imaginary, arising out of the peculiarities of Silicon Valley and of the American political scene of the 1990s, has long been characterized by dreams of universality. This imaginary, in fact, is a projection of a

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[5] As I will highlight in Chapter 2, when talking about how the Hungarian internet tax protests appropriate Silicon Valley's dominant technological imaginary, there is a continuity between the visions of technology articulated in Western modernity and the key tenets of the dominant technological imaginary. Technology and modernity are, in fact, co-constitutive (Misa, 2003); Silicon Valley thus "inherits" some of the modern ways of looking at technology, in particular its association with a promise of progress and liberation.

biased, bounded, regional set of ideas embedded in a specific political-economic arrangement, which is envisioned to have the same meaning and relevance everywhere in the world. It posits its universality by presenting its tenets as if they were global, unbiased and equally suitable for everyone. We can observe how this technological imaginary is no longer confined to the United States, but it has made its way, through mass media, pop cultural representations and even digital technologies themselves (Flichy, 2007a), to other areas of the world. The power of this US-influenced technological imaginary to reach the rest of the world was particularly evident during the coverage and early commentary of the movements of 2011, especially the Arab Spring.

Emblematic of that period was the debate that unfolded between (and around) Clay Shirky and Malcom Gladwell (Gladwell, 2010; Gladwell & Shirky, 2011; Shirky, 2011; Wasik, 2011) over the role played by internet technologies in social movements, which oriented the entire mainstream discussion on the movements of 2011 around a techno-utopian (Shirky) vs. techno-skeptic (Gladwell) binary. Regardless of the different positions expressed, the sheer existence of that specific debate only reinforced a central feature of the dominant technological imaginary: that digital technologies are the natural, central and inevitable lens through which social movements should be discussed; the debate over the use of technologies is the only one worth having, because technology is how social change can be achieved.

While we might be tempted to dismiss the terms of this debate – and the scholarship certainly has moved on from this polarizing dichotomy – we nevertheless need to acknowledge that it reflects a discursive environment in which movements are immersed. In other words, while activists might construct their own technological

imaginaries, they are nevertheless confronted with a very powerful mainstream imaginary, that sees technology as the ultimate avenue for social change. How they make sense of this imaginary is the fundamental question addressed in research.

But before turning to how contemporary social movements construct their own technological imaginaries in response to Silicon Valley's, this chapter provides two illustrations that help us identify what is at stake when we talk about technological imaginaries. Despite its dreams of universality, the dominant technological imaginary is in fact biased, in the sense that it is the expression of the social, economic and political arrangements in which it was created. First, then, I show that the utopian dreams of universality that animate the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley are actually predicated on exclusion; this proclaimed universality is the projection of the interests of one specific demographic – the white American men that dominate Silicon Valley. To do so, I turn to one of the most important moments for the development and popularization of Silicon Valley's technological imaginary – the 1990s – and to one of its most important vehicles: *Wired* magazine. Through a textual analysis of the cover images and the cover titles of the first five years of *Wired* magazine (1993-1997), as well as the in-depth analysis of two cover stories, I argue that the myth of disembodiment that is crucial to the digital utopianism of Silicon Valley is based on the exclusion of raced and gendered bodies, which is facilitated by a discourse that I call "selective disembodiment". Selective disembodiment refers to the idea that the myth of disembodiment in cyberspace does not apply equally to all types of bodies; it is, in fact, a white male fantasy that sees cyberspace as highly beneficial for white women and people of color, who are expected to use it to lose their embodied characteristics. According to this discourse of selective

disembodiment, white women and people of color matter only when they are disembodied in cyberspace, and only as disembodied entities: the voice and recognition they acquire by inhabiting cyberspace does not carry over in their embodied lives. At the same time, white men matter offline too – they are the ones who can build cyberspace for everyone else. As is evident even from this brief description, selective disembodiment is inherently political, in that it stipulates a distinction between bodies that matter and bodies that don't. It allowed Silicon Valley to conveniently forget about disparities of class, gender, and race, by assuming that technology will take care of them. Second, I show how the dominant technological imaginary has its own politics that it pitches as universal. I do this by highlighting how the dominant technological imaginary is deployed by Facebook's founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg. Through an analysis of what has been called Zuckerberg's manifesto, an open letter titled "Building Global Community" and released in 2017, I argue that the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley, which Zuckerberg draws upon, is sustained by a blend of technocratic ambitions and populist justifications. I suggest that Zuckerberg's manifesto is an illustration of the complexity and power of the dominant technological imaginary that we are confronted with.

After providing these two illustrations of the political shortcomings of the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley, I briefly address how this imaginary has fared in the past couple of years. It is reasonable to argue that the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which generated a wave of scrutiny directed not only at Facebook, but technology companies more generally, could be the beginning of the end of the current dominant technological imaginary. Only time will tell if this is the case. At the moment,

it seems that the criticism that is being moved against Facebook and the other tech giants does not fundamentally question the dominant technological imaginary.

The bodies of *Wired* magazine: selective disembodiment and Silicon Valley

The first illustration that can help us highlight the political biases of the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley considers how the universalist dreams of this imaginary are based on a celebration of technologically-enabled disembodiment, that has its roots in the 1990s and that is predicated on the neglect of race and gender disparities.

The idea of disembodiment was central to early utopian and critical views of cyberspace[6] and internet culture. Utopian views celebrated the possibility of overcoming or abandoning one's body to partake in cyberspace as a disembodied entity, free to choose its shape and identity. Such debates still reverberate on how we think about the relationship between self, society and technology today. On the one hand, in the early theories and representations of the Internet there was a strong utopian view that saw in cyberspace a form of liberation, based on the freedom to choose how one would appear online. On the other hand, a lot of scholarship was subsequently devoted to exploring all the ways in which gender and race differences went lost in the utopian view. Disembodiment is one of the sources of tension between these two positions.

In her writing about legal theory and the relationship between self and technology, Cohen (2012) powerfully highlighted how utopian views of cyberspace included "a vision of networked technologies as enabling freedom from bodily

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[6] In this part of the chapter I consistently use the word "cyberspace" to denote the fact that I am reconstructing conversations about race, gender, and technology that took place in the 1990s, when that term was widely used.

constraints" (p. 34). She then explained how disembodiment was central to different theoretical and political projects:

> for many thinkers about "cyberspace" and information policy, the advent of the Internet seems to seal the body's ultimate irrelevance to questions of social theory and social ordering, although different groups read that irrelevance differently. Thus, libertarian social critics see in cyberspace the eventual apotheosis of enlightened social and economic individualism (…) (Cohen, 2012, p. 35)

As Mosco (2004) suggested, this libertarian trend took even more explicitly political tones, configuring what he called the "myth of the end of geography", according to which social beings "are disembodied into the shifting identities of aliases, monikers, and personas" (p. 92). Consider, for instance, a classic document of this time, John Perry Barlow's *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, issued in 1996 in response to the approval of the U. S. Telecommunications Act. The document proclaimed cyberspace to be beyond the reach of governments, due to its lack of both materiality and embodiment: "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" (Barlow, 1996). The disappearance of bodies in cyberspace is cast as one of the fundamental properties of cyberspace, which made it unreachable by and unavailable to traditional forms of political sovereignty.

According to this utopian and libertarian vision, disembodiment was thus key to the experience of cyberspace and it was considered a form of liberation. For Flichy (2007a), this is the idea "that one can put one's body on hold, that computer technology can create bodiless human relations, disconnected from any engagement of the body in space and time" (p. 153). Writing about virtual sex, McRae (1996) underscored this

sense of freedom: "In virtual reality, mind and body, female and male, gay and straight, don't seem to be such natural oppositions anymore, or even natural categories to assign to people. (…) In virtual realty, you are whoever you say you are" (p. 245).

The limitations of this utopian view, however, were made apparent by more nuanced analyses that sought to re-center issues pertaining to gender, race and sexuality in cyberspace. Here I will merely refer to Nakamura's work (Kolko, Nakamura, & Rodman, 2000; Nakamura, 1995), as it is representative of a broader scholarship (e.g. Lupton, 1995; Stone, 1991) that sought to stir the discussion towards the recognition of the meaning of embodiment and disembodiment in relation to cyberspace.

Nakamura's (1995) work on "identity tourism" in text-based communities on LambdaMOO addressed the racist implications of (white) users' attempts to pass as non-white, both appropriating and objectifying others' identities. While white users' forms of racial passing were allowed, because they didn't threaten the overwhelming whiteness of these spaces, those who disclosed their non-whiteness were often accused of trying to be divisive by bringing race into a raceless space (Nakamura, 1995). The possibilities of experiencing disembodiment in cyberspace clearly looked different for people of color, women and other minorities compared to the "default" white male users. Race and gender still matter in cyberspace, said Nakamura, and race and gender are not erased by cyberspace:

> While the mediated nature of cyberspace renders invisible many, (and in some instances, all) of the visual and aural cues that serve to mark people's identities IRL, that invisibility doesn't carry back over into "the real world" in ways that allow people to log in and simply shrug off a lifetime of experiencing the world from specific identity-related perspectives. You may be able to go online and not have anyone know your race or gender – you may even be able to take cyberspace's potential for anonymity a step further and masquerade as a race or gender that

> doesn't' reflect the real, offline you – but neither the invisibility nor the mutability of online identity make it possible for you to escape your "real world" identity completely (Kolko et al., 2000).

As evidenced by Kolko, Nakamura and Rodman (2000), cyberspace does not erase differences in real life – differences that are often connected to different types of bodies and that are ignored in the popular utopian views of new technologies that characterized early Internet culture. To borrow Mosco's (2004) language, the myths of cyberspace are supported by a powerful "myth of disembodiment", which erases the political and social implications of difference.

Gender and race on the cover of *Wired*

To further reconstruct how disembodiment was talked about in the 1990s, I look at how a crucial actor in the construction of the dominant technological imaginary related to bodies and disembodiment: *Wired* magazine. I focus on what kinds of discourses about bodies and disembodiment were present in the first five years of the magazine, which are thought to be its most influential (Turner, 2006, p. 208). I thus analyzed the cover images, the cover titles and the cover articles of the first five years of *Wired* (1993-1997), to understand the discourse on bodies and cyberspace that is produced by the magazine. Given the overwhelming whiteness and maleness of the cover images, I then focused in depth on two covers and cover articles that describe other kinds of bodies: a white woman (April 1996) and a black man (December 1994).

The importance of *Wired* to early computer culture and to debates over cyberspace cannot be understated. Founded in 1993 in San Francisco, *Wired* rapidly rose to popularity nationally and internationally, as the "hottest, coolest, trendiest new

magazine of the 1990s" (Borsook, 1996, p. 24) – a sort of *Rolling Stone* for the tech scene. Imagined as the mouthpiece of the "Digital Generation" by its founder (Rossetto, 1993), *Wired* has become the most popular expression of the "culture of contemporary technocapitalism" (Fisher, 2008, p. 181). I focus on *Wired* because of its importance in reflecting and shaping the early technological imaginary of Silicon Valley, especially in its most utopian characteristics: several of its key contributors, like John Perry Barlow and Nicholas Negroponte, have been crucial to the development and popularization of utopian discourses of cyberspace.

Wired is one of Turner's (2006) key cases for tracing the relationship between the countercultural movements on the 1960s and the libertarian ethos of cyberculture. He argued that the magazine was a crucial space for the construction of a technological imaginary that brought together, in the 1990s, three constituencies: the burgeoning Californian tech scene, the libertarian politicians of the New Right, and the countercultural community of the 1960s (Turner, 2006, p. 217). According to Turner (2006), *Wired* set out to create, legitimize and model the "Digital Generation" as "a new kind of elite, born out of the antihierarchical ethos of the 1960s and powerful in a manner that matched that ethos" (p. 220). In a short time, *Wired*'s discourse became "the governing myth of the Internet, the stock market, and great swaths of the New Economy" (Turner, 2006, p. 209); although the crash of the dot-com economy in 2001 temporarily curbed the more utopian visions of the Internet, they are still embedded in the dominant technological imaginary. The relevance of *Wired*'s early discourse for understanding our contemporary approaches to technology was also highlighted by Karpf's (2018) recent commentary for the magazine's 25th anniversary.

As explained in the Introduction, this investigation of *Wired* magazine relied on a multi-stage textual analysis: first, it focused on the cover images; second, it considered the cover images in conjunction with the cover titles; third, it turned to an in-depth analysis of the images and text of two cover stories. Images and texts were coded for emergent themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and grouped in macro-categories; connections were drawn between the macro-categories. Particular attention was given to the connections between the representation of different bodies and the themes emerging from the text.

The first step of the analysis focused on the cover images. Despite the enthusiasm about disembodiment, the covers of *Wired* magazine overwhelmingly showcased bodies or bodily elements (e.g. hands, eye). Only four out of 54 covers published between 1993 and 1997 do not feature bodies or body parts: a computer (January 1997), Apple's logo (June 1997), a smiling cartoonish representation of the Earth (July 1997), a blank page (January 1995). Seven covers feature some bodily elements: cartoon characters with anthropomorphic features (December 1993, June 1994, December 1995, April 1997), a hand (March 1997), eyeballs (October 1997) [7], ans a mosaic-looking collage representing Nicholas Negroponte's face (November 1995). However, the majority of covers rely on images of whole bodies – mostly white and male bodies. In fact, 25 covers portray an individual white man and 10 portray two or more white men[8]. Women appear

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[7] A white man in a light blue shirt also appears at the bottom of the cover, but he is not the main subject of the cover.

[8] It is worth underlying that the cover of the September 1995 issue presents a photoshopped image of O.J. Simpson, retouched to appear Caucasian. Although such shocking design would suggest an articulated discussion of racial issues, the article mostly highlights "how Simpson's trial has revealed that our public institutions - especially the media - are guilty of making it impossible to resolve the most important issues facing our society" (Katz, 1995). In 2008, a brief piece on *Wired* sought to retroactively recast the meaning of the cover as an attempt to "make readers examine their assumptions about race" (Honan, 2008).

(individually) on four covers (one of them is a child, one a black woman). Three covers feature mixed-gender groups (one of which includes a black male). One cover is dedicated to a black man.

Overall, it is evident that white males – young, middle-aged or old, in casual or formal attire – are the key demographic represented on *Wired*'s covers between 1993 and 1997. The bodies of the Digital Generation are overwhelmingly white, both in print and in real life. According to Turner (2006), the readers of *Wired* in 1996 "were 87.9 percent male, 37 years old on average, with an average household income of more than $122,000 per year. In a reader survey, more than 90 percent of subscribers identified themselves as either 'Professional/Managerial' or 'Top Management'" (p. 218). White male bodies on the cover of *Wired* promoted themselves to other equally white and male bodies. In the process, they also marginalized women who were interested not only in reading the magazine, but also in writing it (see Borsook, 1996).

The second step in this analysis focused on the cover titles, their themes and their association with the different kinds of bodies represented on the covers. The most prevalent themes associated with white males (alone or with other white males) are those of success, future, war/violence and transformation – rather conventional tropes asserting men's social dominance.

Firstly, as remarked by Turner (2006), *Wired* attempted to promote – sell – an idea of financial and social success through cover stories that praised entrepreneurs, geeks and libertarian politicians. Through its stories and covers, *Wired* seemed to suggest that its readers, too, could be part of this successful Digital Generation – if only they adopted the right technologies and the right mindset. As Streeter (2005) neatly

summarized, the promise was to: “change the world, overthrow hierarchy, express yourself, *and* get rich” (p. 777). The covers communicated this idea of success in different ways; for instance, they spoke of “world domination” (June 1993), “first cd-rom superstars” (August 1994), “the first digital supergroup” (November 1994), a “winner” (October 1995), the next “insanely great thing!” (with exclamation mark, clearly)(February 1996), “the most popular computer game of all time” (August 1996), “the most powerful banker in the world” (October 1996), and “the world’s most influential online community” (May 1997). This almost hyperbolic language projects an image of extreme success and power onto the white males it describes, while at the same time legitimizing *Wired* as the powerful and successful mouthpiece of such powerful and successful men. Secondly, this aura of power and success is tied to the idea that the Digital Generation portrayed and supported by *Wired* both represents and shapes the future of the world. Four covers depicting white men explicitly use the word “future”, as a noun and as an adjective; several others use related expressions such as “new” and “next”. This discourse constructed the men featured on *Wired*’s covers as those who have either already seen the future – such as Bruce Sterling, on the inaugural issue, who “has seen the future of war”, or William Gibson and “his latest report on the future” – or are actively involved in shaping it. Thirdly, a good number of expressions used in the cover titles have to do with combat, war or violence. References to the death penalty appear twice, and war is specifically mentioned in five covers. Overall, there is a language of “fighting” and “slaying” that relies on warring metaphors to describe business competition and innovation.

White women and people of color are largely excluded from this hyperbolic language of success, future and war. In fact, the most prominent theme associated with bodies that are not white and male is that of transformation. White men are also associated with transformation, but it is mostly some type of change – a revolution! – they are driving. For women and people of color, it is either a personal transformation or a transformation they are part of, but not in charge of. For instance, the March 1994 cover dedicated to artist Laurie Anderson is titled: "Laurie Anderson reinvents herself — again"; the emphasis is on her journey of personal transformation, not on its impact on the art scene or on the artist's success.

Similar themes emerged also in Stewart Millar's (1998) analysis of *Wired*. Through an examination of cover images and stories in the magazine, she also described how *Wired* was both sexist and racist. In particular, she underlined how women were stereotyped and excluded from the magazine, while its design and content were focused on constructing an "image of a hypermacho man who uses new forms of technology to reassert power" (Stewart Millar, 1998, p. 113). She argued that *Wired* portrayed digital culture as the stomping ground of white men, while "minority figures are of interest to *Wired* only as tokens and stereotypes that reinforce assumptions of racial inequality" (Stewart Millar, 1998, p. 107). While I agree with Stewart Millar's characterization, I argue that there is more to *Wired*'s sexist and racist portrayals of cyberspace: there is an attempt at claiming universality for a vision of digital technologies that is determined by the interest of a specific demographic – white American men.

Gendered and raced bodies in cyberspace

The third step in my analysis focused on the discourse that emerged from two cover articles that are centered on non-normative *Wired* bodies: a white woman (April 1996) and a black man (December 1994)[9]. Analyzing how *Wired* approached non-white-and-male individuals can help us highlight the limits of the discourse of success and future promoted by the magazine. The two articles give us clues to understand *Wired*'s peculiar vision of the relationship between cyberspace and bodies, which I call *selective disembodiment*.

Sherry Turkle, the MIT professor who is on the cover of the April 1996 issue, is presented under the title: "Sex, Lies and Avatars: Sherry Turkle knows what role-playing in cyberspace really means". Although the long and insightful interview with Turkle only briefly refers to sex, among the many topics that she discusses, sex becomes the central concept for the cover title. As Stewart Millar (1998) remarked: "the article, entitled 'Sex, Lies and Avatars,' subverts gender issues in favor of a discussion of cybersex. Like Anderson, Turkle is sexualized, with innuendo that suggests "she knows a lot about cybersex (…)" (Stewart Millar, 1998, p. 99).

Besides the obvious reference to sex, there are also other features of Turkle's interview that reassert stereotypical representations of women. For instance, Turkle's interview is framed through the lens of personal transformation – which I identified as one of the major themes emerging from the sample of *Wired* covers. Such personal transformation, in Turkle's case, is expressed in two different ways: one, the connection between the personal circumstances of her life to her research; two, an emphasis on her multiplicity. The former, instead of legitimizing Turkle's work, actually implicitly

[9] The December 1994 cover story was chosen because it is the only one that features a black man. The April 1996 cover story was chosen because it is the longest of the stories that focuses primarily on a woman.

diminishes her academic accomplishments, attributing them merely to her personal experiences. Speaking of Turkle's stay in Paris in 1968 and the opportunities for intellectual growth that she encountered there, the article's author, Pamela McCorduck, wrote:

> Her friends were students and political activists. In *Life on the Screen* [one of Turkle's books], she describes a shy, English-speaking Sherry, who, to her astonishment, is replaced in Paris by a much more assertive and self confident French-speaking Sherry. This self-transformation was happening inside language, what she would later learn psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan calls the construction materials of the mind. And it was language – slippery, ambiguous, elusive, potent – that would be the construction materials of the Internet, too. Many years later, this self transformation growing out of language would illuminate for her how personae can willfully or unconsciously change from context to context, an idea that would come to preoccupy her. (McCurdock, 1996)

That personal circumstances influence greatly our academic interests is something we can relate to, but here McCorduck turned Turkle's decades of academic research into a *Bildungsroman*, thus implicitly downplaying Turkle's authority. Turkle is not portrayed as someone who can speak authoritatively about identity, roleplaying and cyberspace because of her rigorous academic research, but rather because she has had experiences with negotiating multiple identities. This is the second frame that is employed to talk about Turkle – and as we shall see, it extends to all women. The two images that accompany the text of the interview superimpose three different pictures of Turkle's face, each fading into the other. Such imagery is meant to convey the idea of multiplicity that emerges from the article. This is, first of all, attached to Turkle's own life and experiences:

> She continues thoughtfully: "The goal of healthy personality development is not to become a One, not to become a unitary core, it's to have a flexible ability to negotiate the many – cycle through multiple identities." She'd experienced it in her own life again and again, found it articulated in

> Lacan's musings, watched it grow out of the data she's gathered in her own work. Now Turkle proposes it as a thesis for further thinking, future work – a key to living in our postmodern times. (McCurdock, 1996)

But importantly, this idea of multiplicity is extended to all women and is cast as a precursor to women's ability to inhabit cyberspace:

> Men's lives, especially, have been socially constructed along unitary lines, which, she speculates, may be why so many of them are having a hard time just now. But women today are trained and have already had experience in negotiating multiple roles. (McCurdock, 1996)

In this key excerpt – with the notable absence of direct quotes from Turkle – the article casts women as those who are ready to take on the multiplicity of roles required by cyberspace, because they have been trained (by men? By market imperatives? By gender inequality?) to do so even offline. It is this training in precarity and identity negotiation that makes women meaningful for *Wired*: women matter because they have been trained to experience cyberspace as a disembodied multiplicity. The permanent inequality and precarity of women's lives here becomes a template for fully being able to experience what cyberspace has to offer. While the inequality that originates multiplicity offline is experience by tangible, gendered bodies, attempting to juggle multiple roles, temporalities and spaces, multiplicity in cyberspace is implicitly cast as liberatory and disembodied. While embodied multiplicity is inevitably tied to the burdens of inequality that affect women's life, the disembodied multiplicity of cyberspace is a playful interchange of roles.

The other cover story selected for this analysis is the only one[10] dedicated to a man of color between 1993 and 1997: John Lee, a New York hacker with the Masters of Deception hacker "gang". Lee's image is accompanied by the following title and subtitle:

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[10] Another black man appears towards the back of a group picture on the cover of the January 1994 issue.

"Hacker Showdown: A member of a rival phreaker gang called John Lee a 'nigger' – and in the hacker underground nothing was the same again". Yes, the only black male body on the cover of *Wired* in its first five years of existence is associated with a racial slur, which is integral part of the cover title. The slur itself appears twice in the text of the story and once in the subtitle hosted in the internal pages. But to fully appreciate the discourse surrounding race and cyberspace that emerges from this cover story, let me briefly sketch the contours of the controversy it retells – known as the Great Hacker War of 1990-91.

The article is an excerpt from a book by authors Michelle Slatalla and Joshua Quittner, titled "Masters of Deception: the Gang that ruled Cyberspace", which came out in 1995. In the text, the authors chronicled the emergence of two very different rival hacker groups: Legion of Doom (LOD), based in Texas, and Masters of Deception (MOD), based in New York City. Both of these groups were prevalently engaged in phreaking, i.e. tinkering and hacking phones and phone lines. John Lee became a member of MOD in 1990, under the screen name "Corrupt". The other crucial hacker figure in this story is Chris Goggans, a white Texas-based member of LOD, by the nickname "Eric Bloodaxe". The two individuals, and their respective groups, gave rise to a set of pranks and conflicts, which was triggered by the use of racial slurs and that escalated to a "hacker war". Although probably unrelated to the conflict between these rival "gangs", MOD members were indicted in 1992 on charges of computer intrusion and served time in federal prisons.

In this *Wired* article, John Lee of MOD is associated with different discourses compared to those that are used to describe other hackers, in particular "rival" Chris

Goggans. When introducing Lee, the article describes him as very capable, but also dwells on his personal life:

> Now, there's plenty that Eli [another member of MOD] doesn't know about Corrupt. He doesn't know, for instance, that he lives with his mom in a third-floor walk-up apartment in Bedford-Stuyvesant (that's Bed-Stuy; you've heard of it as surely as you've heard of Cabrini Green and East LA), one of New York's toughest neighborhoods. Eli doesn't know that Corrupt will need no introduction whatsoever to the concept of MOD, because Corrupt is intimately acquainted with gangs. Out in the real world, out on the streets where you measure distance with your feet instead of your modem, Corrupt used to belong to a gang called the Decepticons. (Slatalla & Quittner, 1994)

Lee's background features prominently in his portrayal; in addition to the noteworthy repetition of the racial slur present on the cover, the racist tones of the article are further reinforced by the framing of this conflict between hackers as a war between rival gangs and the description of Lee's prior engagements in a street gang. At the same time, Goggans is described as business-oriented, a hacker who wants to put his skills to good use by creating a computer security firm. Although they are engaged in similar activities, Lee is portrayed as a potential criminal, Goggans as a potential entrepreneur.

This undoubtedly racist framing becomes even more interesting when it unfolds around the main controversy between Lee and Goggans. The main incident, as *Wired* recounted it, happened during a conference call – one of the most popular forms of phreaking – between LOD members, which was suddenly joined by a member of MOD (not John Lee). In the authors' words:

> Suddenly, another voice calls in to the conference, joins the group in midsentence. The unknown newcomer does not have an accent common to these parts.
> "Yo, dis is Dope Fiend from MOD," the newcomer says in distinctly non-white, non-middle class, non-Texan inflection.
> One of the Texans (who knows who?) takes umbrage.
> "Get that nigger off the line!"

> The newcomer is silent.
> In fact, the whole conference bridge is suddenly silent, all the chattering boys brought up hard and cold against the implacable word. You might as well have slapped their faces. Interminable seconds pass. Who wants to fill that void?
> That's it. As simple as uttering one ugly word. The racial epithet instantaneously moves northward over hundreds of miles of cable, ringing in the ear of John Lee, who sits at his Commie 64 in his Brooklyn bedroom way at the other end of the line. (Slatalla & Quittner, 1994)

This episode then escalated into a conflict between Lee and Goggans, whom Lee assumed uttered the “racial epithet”. The two engaged in a conflict that ultimately ended only with the indictment of MOD members. But interestingly, *Wired* framed the offenses that these two exchange in a quite different manner. Notice how, in the following, Lee’s pestering technique – constant phone calls – is cast as a form of harassment towards Goggans:

> Sometimes John uses his street accent to harass Chris [Goggangs]. The phone calls are constant. It doesn't help to hang up. The receiver is barely down before the phone rings again. And again. And again. Chris has to take it off the hook, and leave it off the hook for hours. (...) In Chris's mind, this type of harassment definitely falls into the category of Behavior That Is Unacceptable. It's the kind of harassment he could help prevent, in fact, if he were to open his own computer security firm. (Slatalla & Quittner, 1994)

Goggans decided to respond to Lee’s “harassment” by creating a racist parody of MOD’s manifesto “The History of MOD”. As *Wired* put it, Goggans decided to “pull a little mischief” (Slatalla & Quittner, 1994) through a program that turned English into “jive” – a parody of African American vernacular speech:

> Chris has an old computer program that will translate any file into a new "language." When he feeds The History of MOD to the program, out pops a "jived" version of the document. (...) Using the jive program is the electronic equivalent of appearing in blackface – a crude, minstrel show in cyberspace: "Some nigga' name Co'rupt, havin' been real active befo'e, duzn't gots' some so'kin' computa' anymo'e and so … sheeit, duh." (Slatalla & Quittner, 1994)

The fate of the jived version of MOD's document is to circulate back to Lee. But notice how Goggans' racially charged acts against Lee are characterized by Slatalla and Quittner as "crude, minstrel show in cyberspace" and as "a little mischief". Lee's actions are harassment, Goggans' are not – they are pranks. This is certainly a racist framing, but it also points to how *Wired* looks at the relationship between online and offline, embodiment and disembodiment. What emerges from this article is that white people also live offline, while black people only live online. The constant calls that Goggans had to fend off had an impact on his offline life – and his economic success! – and therefore they were harassment. But the racist offenses that Goggans threw at Lee were immaterial, lost in cyberspace, and thus simple pranks that did not result in tangible harm. White people also matter offline, black people don't. For *Wired*, if something happens to people of color in cyberspace, it remains confined to that disembodied space; it does not have "real life" repercussions. It is only through their actions in cyberspace that people of color come to be recognized by *Wired*, but they are also confined to that disembodied space, which is thought to not have repercussions on their offline lives. This discourse further entrenched racism into cyberspace, by establishing that the symbolic violence perpetrated against people of color is inconsequential and ultimately acceptable. But it also forecloses spaces of existence and resistance for the racialized others: their offline lives, struggles, successes do not matter at all; their online lives are meaningful only as far as they effectively conceal race and the effects of racism.

Selective disembodiment

White women and people of color have a place in the discourse of the white-male dominated *Wired* as long as they are part of cyberspace. It's Turkle's expertise on role-playing and John Lee's ability to hack that puts them on *Wired*'s radar. They matter because they inhabit cyberspace, and specifically because they have learned to use cyberspace to "lose" their bodily characteristics – to disembody themselves, to become the default internet user: a white man.

In the 1990s, as we have seen, *Wired* asserted the centrality of white males to the future (of technology and society) and to success. Yet, the magazine also constructed white women and people of color as the subjects that can benefit the most from cyberspace, precisely because cyberspace allows them to experience disembodiment – to leave their "different" bodies behind. Because these categories have historically been considered embodied, they need cyberspace to have access to abstraction and disembodiment. And it is precisely in this process of disembodiment that they come to matter for *Wired*. But once they've reached this disembodied state in cyberspace, and they have been recognized as disembodied subjects, their embodied, offline lives are not *Wired*'s concern. All inequalities due to race and gender discrimination simply vanish in the disembodiment of cyberspace (for a similar argument, see Tal, 1996).

Furthermore, the "builders of computers and telecommunications networks" and "libertarian pundits and politicians" (Turner, 2006, p. 208) – the white men – in *Wired* are significant (also) for their offline achievements and are portrayed as those who can act in service of cyberspace. In contrast, others matter only for what they do online, for what they do within a cyberspace that is built and maintained by white men.

Disembodiment in cyberspace is only needed by and only meaningful for those who are not white male bodies. White women and people of color are embodied; their bodies get in the way of their recognition as part of the "Digital Generation". They need cyberspace to give them access to disembodiment, and thus make them relevant. White men do not need disembodiment at all, they are already full-fledged citizens of cyberspace – they are creating it. The cyberspace built by white men can allow others to leave their bodies behind and become worthy of attention, but white men do not need disembodiment to matter.

The discourse constructed by *Wired* is thus one of *selective disembodiment*. The magazine's discourse of cyberspace is not just a fantasy of white men who can afford to ignore how race and gender still shape online experiences; it's also an arrogant projection that pretends to assign meaning to other people's experiences of cyberspace. It implies that disembodiment is what truly counts in minorities' use of digital technologies. It also suggests that it's the endgame: once minorities experience disembodiment online, there is really no point in addressing the issues they might be facing offline. Once the digital divide is bridged, other divides don't matter to *Wired*.

Looking at the bodies represented in *Wired* allows us to uncover a vision of cyberspace that is characterized by a discourse of disembodiment that is applied differently to different types of bodies, and that is reflective of a white male utopia that is projected onto the lives of other. Selective disembodiment allows us to see how the discourse of disembodiment in cyberspace is a phantasy about the overcoming of difference through the elimination of the need of recognizing different bodies. It is a dream of universality built on the idea that technology can help everyone experience the

world as a white male. Disembodiment, as we have seen, is cast as an opportunity for minorities to be heard and recognized by leaving the diversities of their bodies behind. They can only matter once they have disembodied themselves into cyberspace, and they only matter as disembodied entities – finally able to partake in the white male fantasy of cyberspace.

Selective disembodiment has social and political implications. This false utopia clearly differentiates – along the most traditional lines – between bodies that matter and bodies that don't. Discourses of cyberspace, as Mosco (2004) shows, were never just about technology, but also about a political and social vision of the future of the United States and the world. In this case, it's a vision of politics and society that allows under-represented minorities to be heard only if they leave behind the diversities of their bodies. While superficially inclusive – of course, anyone can be part of cyberspace! – this vision downplays and curtails the agency of non-white, non-male, non-adult bodies.

The dreams of universality of Silicon Valley are thus based on the idea that technology has the power to overcome the baggage of social divisions based on class, gender, race, by freeing its users from material and bodily constraints, i.e. by allowing them to live in the world as white men would. But as I have shown, this view of disembodiment only helps to reinforce sexist, racist arrangements, while making them seem more palatable, even progressive and emancipatory. As Barbrook and Cameron (1996) argued: "this utopian fantasy of the West Coast depends upon its blindness towards – and dependence on – the social and racial polarization of the society from which it was born" (p. 62). Selective disembodiment thus allows Silicon Valley to

conveniently forget about disparities of class, age, gender and race and ignore the role that technology – in service of neoliberalism – plays in upholding them.

The Zuckerberg manifesto: Facebook as a political technology

With a note published on his personal profile on February 16, 2017, the founder and CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, addressed the Facebook community to discuss how the company planned to tackle the challenges it encountered in the wake of the 2016 US Presidential Elections. This letter was meant to address the early (i.e. pre-Cambridge Analytica[11]) criticism directed at Facebook, mainly concerning the spread of viral deception (Jamieson, 2017) in the Brexit and 2016 US presidential campaigns. The lengthy letter began with a very ambitious question: "are we building the world we all want?" (Zuckerberg, 2017). The letter then made the case for a global community that can attend to global issues like terrorism, climate change and pandemics, while affirming Facebook's role in the formation of this new constituency:

> We may not have the power to create the world we want immediately, but we can all start working on the long term today. In times like these, the most important thing we at Facebook can do is develop the social infrastructure to give people the power to build a global community that works for all of us. (Zuckerberg, 2017)

Zuckerberg positioned Facebook as uniquely suited to (help) create a global community that is supportive, safe, informed, civically-engaged and inclusive (for a critique of his use of community, see Boellstorff, 2017). Each of these characteristics can

[11] We might be tempted to dismiss the relevance of Zuckerberg's 2017 manifesto after the Cambridge Analytica scandal and the attempts of the US, the EU and the UK to restrict Facebook's power. However, the 2017 document is emblematic of a moment in which the ambitions and visions of Facebook were not yet seen as of concern to lawmakers. It is in this moment of "expansion" that such visions held a lot of (unchallenged) power.

be achieved, according to Zuckerberg, with a tweak to Facebook's designs: tools for Page administrators, the "Safety Check" feature, AI (a lot of AI), encryption, and so on.

Given the debates over truth, fakeness and journalism in which Zuckerberg's letter intervened, it is not surprising that most of the press attention to this statement focused on the algorithmic solutions that Facebook vowed to implement in the domain of news sharing (see LaFrance, 2017). But what is most striking about this document concerns its last two points, dedicated to the issue of building civically-engaged and inclusive communities. In these paragraphs, Zuckerberg's letter is a political manifesto. The part on civically-engaged community begins with the following propositions:

> Our society will reflect our collective values only if we engage in the civic process and participate in self-governance. There are two distinct types of social infrastructure that must be built:
> The first encourages engagement in existing political processes: voting, engaging with issues and representatives, speaking out, and sometimes organizing. Only through dramatically greater engagement can we ensure these political processes reflect our values.
> The second is establishing a new process for citizens worldwide to participate in collective decision-making. Our world is more connected than ever, and we face global problems that span national boundaries. As the largest global community, Facebook can explore examples of how community governance might work at scale. (Zuckerberg, 2017)

The first issue – encouraging people to engage in already existing processes – is framed in terms of voter turnout, engagement with elected representatives at a national and local level, and, in passing, protest and mobilization[12]. Besides claiming that Facebook put in place the largest voter turnout effort in history, Zuckerberg also cast his

[12] Given the importance of Facebook for contemporary mobilizations, the brief comment on protest is odd, particularly because it talks about protest as something that happens relatively infrequently: "Sometimes people must speak out and demonstrate for what they believe is right. From Tahrir Square to the Tea Party -- our community organizes these demonstrations using our infrastructure for events and groups" (Zuckerberg, 2017).

social network site as “giving people a voice” (Zuckerberg, 2017), as the social infrastructure that can support civic engagement.

However, it is with the discussion of the second issue – worldwide collective decision-making – that Zuckerberg made the most explicitly political remarks. The innovation to Facebook that he proposed is a response to the increased complexity of content takedown procedures and the persistence of hate speech and harassment on the platform. The solution he envisioned is to “combine creating a large-scale democratic process to determine standards with AI to help enforce them” (Zuckerberg, 2017), i.e. ask users to vote on the kind of content limitations they find appropriate for themselves, with the caveat that “for those who don't make a decision, the default will be whatever the majority of people in your region selected, like a referendum” (Zuckerberg, 2017). This mix of personalized settings and majoritarian principles would be subordinated to local laws when they demand content takedown or filtering. AI would do the magic and effectively match individual/majority preferences with the content that gets displayed to individual users’ Timelines.

Here Zuckerberg clearly borrowed the language of democratic politics (“democratic process”, “referendum”, “collective decision-making”) and depicted Facebook as a democracy of sorts (while still gesturing towards national laws that might restrict content beyond the will of the majority of users, and possibly winking at authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes). But he also positioned these developments in the Facebook interface as a blueprint for a global polity. The key paragraph is the following:

> Overall, it is important that the governance of our community scales with the complexity and demands of its people. We are committed to always

> doing better, even if that involves building a worldwide voting system to give you more voice and control. Our hope is that this model provides examples of how collective decision-making may work in other aspects of the global community. (Zuckerberg, 2017)

This is an explicit call for political institutions to model themselves after a website. With this paragraph, the letter distanced itself from a document like Barlow's (1996) *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, introduced above, which asserted the independence of the Internet from state powers due to the immateriality of cyberspace. Here Zuckerberg is taking for granted that independence and relying on the scale of Facebook as the determining factor that can place him outside, above and beyond the jurisdiction of individual states. Politics can thus only learn from the scale of Facebook and the solutions it is able to create "with" its users.

In the famous essay *Do artifacts have politics?* (Winner, 1986), Winner stated that a technology can be political in two different ways: first, technology can become the way in which a given community chooses to confront the issues it faces; secondly, that certain technologies either require or are strongly compatible with particular kinds of political relationships. Zuckerberg's manifesto depicts Facebook as a political technology in both of the ways identified by Winner (1986). On the one hand, Zuckerberg talked about the many things that Facebook's algorithms can fix: harassment, sensationalism and political polarization, low voter turnout and low engagement with elected officials. He pitched Facebook as the entity that can build the social infrastructure to address these global challenges (Zuckerberg, 2017). On the other hand, in Zuckerberg's manifesto Facebook emerges as a political technology also in the second sense highlighted by Winner (1986): because of its scale, the social network requires new settings – both technological and political – which are not only intended to make Facebook work in a

better way but should also serve as an example for political and institutional arrangements on a global level. Zuckerberg is very explicit on this point, as can be seen from the closing line in the key paragraph quoted above: "Our hope is that this model provides examples of how collective decision-making may work in other aspects of the global community" (Zuckerberg, 2017). He also wrote:

> Building an inclusive global community requires establishing a new process for citizens worldwide to participate in community governance. I hope that we can explore examples of how collective decision-making might work at scale. Facebook is not just technology or media, but a community of people. (Zuckerberg, 2017)

Indeed, with this manifesto Zuckerberg positioned Facebook as a political technology, which is intended to both mimic and engender governance processes. Over and over in the document, Zuckerberg went back to the issue of scale: its scale is taken to mean that it is doing something incredibly complex and that it is uniquely suited to address global challenges. Zuckerberg's assessment of the inability of nation states to solve the problems of the world is particularly striking:

> Today's threats are increasingly global, but the infrastructure to protect us is not. Problems like terrorism, natural disasters, disease, refugee crises, and climate change need coordinated responses from a worldwide vantage point. No nation can solve them alone. A virus in one nation can quickly spread to others. A conflict in one country can create a refugee crisis across continents. Pollution in one place can affect the environment around the world. Humanity's current systems are insufficient to address these issues. (Zuckerberg, 2017)

Zuckerberg's document assumes that it is indeed Facebook's role to address the global challenges of our time. No nation state can solve the world's problems, but Facebook can. In so doing, the document obliterates the role of nation states and other supranational institutions in addressing crucial social and political issues, some of which (like online harassment and filter bubbles) Facebook has contributed to create.

Technocratic ambitions

Zuckerberg's manifesto is a perfect illustration of the technocratic and populist elements that characterize the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley. Zuckerberg is not alone in his portrayal of digital technologies as a substitute for political decisions or in his invitation to model politics after technology: it has been a constant refrain of Silicon Valley and techno-enthusiast commentators for (at least) the past decade. This refrain is the other side of the second tenet of Silicon Valley that I identified, i.e. technosolutionism; if technology is the arena for the resolution of political issues, why can't politics just become more like technology?

To speak of technocratic ambitions might seem out of line. After all, the word "technocracy" invokes either images of global conspiracies or of the military-industrial-complex we associate with the Cold War. And yet, we should take seriously the way in which Silicon Valley has positioned its technologies (or to be more precise, the market for technologies) as the avenue for the framing of social problems and for the imagining of their solutions. Langdon Winner's (1977, 1986) theorizations of technocracy, technological politics, and sociotechnical orders can help us make sense of the technocratic ambitions of Silicon Valley. In fact, while Winner took seriously the question of technocracy, he sought to divorce its notion from the state-based vision that it is associated with. In *Autonomous technology* (Winner, 1977), he argued that the technological imperative can drive decisions even when power is dispersed (p. 261). In *The Whale and the Reactor* (1986), he introduced the notion of "sociotechnical order" to move us away from a state-centric focus. He thought of the development of

sociotechnical orders not as some kind of conspiracy of the elites, but rather as the idiosyncratic emergence of technologies that make specific political decisions. For Winner (1986), sociotechnical orders are unplanned; they are not the product of a master plan for world domination, but of a patchwork of discrete technological solutions to problems faced by people and communities. Nevertheless, they are a "technical constitution of society" and a "way of arranging people and things" (Winner, 1986, p. 47). While not intending to substitute political institutions, they are outside the reach of democratic politics, chiefly because they influence the kinds of questions that can be asked about justice, politics, and technology.

Winner (1986) identified five key characteristics of sociotechnical orders: 1) centralization 2) gigantism 3) hierarchical authority 4) elimination of competing activities and 5) power over politics. These five aspects are also present in the sociotechnical order that Facebook, and Silicon Valley in general, aspire to create. First, while Winner (1986) feared the centralization of technology in the hands of the state, today we can see how Facebook, but also Google and Amazon, have a great deal of centralized power not only over the data they collect, but also over the structure of the everyday activities performed by millions and millions of people, like chatting, moving around and buying things. And this control is exercised without any form of democratic input by the users of these services. Second, scale is exactly the justification for Facebook's overreach that Zuckerberg puts forward in the manifesto. In explaining what Facebook wants to do to keep the world safe, he says:

> For some of these problems, the Facebook community is in a unique position to help prevent harm, assist during a crisis, or come together to rebuild afterwards. This is because of the amount of communication across our network, our ability to quickly reach people worldwide in an

> emergency, and the vast scale of people's intrinsic goodness aggregated across our community. (Zuckerberg, 2017)

It is scale that both enables and legitimizes Facebook to act in name of the global community. But gigantism is not just a feature of Facebook: think about Google’s mission “to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful” (Google, n.d.) or Amazon’s goal to be “Earth’s most customer-centric company, where customers can find and discover anything they might want to buy online” (“Working at Amazon,” n.d.). Scale is central to the technocratic ambitions of Silicon Valley. Third, Winner denounced the authoritarianism that emerged from the need of managing complex technological systems. While anti-authoritarianism is one of the core values of Silicon Valley, there is also tremendous inequality, in terms of the racial and gender discrimination that is prevalent in tech spaces, but also of the digital labor (see Andrejevic, 2013) that is required of users to make the wheels of the web 2.0 turn as they should. Recent efforts to organize tech workers also speak to this point. While Silicon Valley presents itself as an egalitarian and liberating entity, the reality is very different: there is a disjuncture between the aspirations of the current sociotechnical order – notably scale and centralization – and the technological imaginary that legitimizes it, with its promise of ending all hierarchies and of the democratic nature of consumer technologies. Fourth, Winner (1986) talked about the “tendency of large, centralized, hierarchically arranged sociotechnical entities to crowd out and eliminate other varieties of human activity” (Winner, 1986, p. 48). In contemporary tech lingo, this is the network effect: the more people join a platform, the more valuable it becomes, and the more people want to join. The network effect is why building alternative platforms can be so difficult, as the history of failed social network sites, like the Diaspora project (Oremus, 2014), tells us.

But the discussions about Facebook or Google “killing” traditional media outlets, as well as centralizing a lot of advertising, should also be thought through Winner’s (1986) description.

Last, Winner highlights “the various ways that large sociotechnical organizations exercise power to control the social and political influences that ostensibly control them” (Winner, 1986, p. 48). It would be hard to dispute the power that Facebook and other Silicon Valley giants exercise over social and political institutions. Zuckerberg’s manifesto does not even need to consider states or other social and political institutions – they don’t matter, if confronted with the scale of Facebook. They can only learn from what Facebook is trying to accomplish. This erases the role that the state plays in the development of technology, as highlighted by Barbrook and Cameron (1996) and Mosco (2004).

As showed by Zuckerberg’s manifesto, the sociotechnical order that Silicon Valley aspires to build is global and independent from nation states. We are not talking about declaring the independence of the online from nation states, like Barlow (1996) did 20 years ago: that independence is now taken for granted, both because of the scale of these technological corporations, but also because of the hold of neoliberalism on our ideas concerning the markets and the states. It is telling that Barlow’s (1996) declaration talked about governments, states, borders, industries and sovereignty, while in Zuckerberg’s manifesto states are defined by what they can’t do. This shows how the technological imaginary of Silicon Valley has evolved: it has become more explicit in its technocratic ambitions, possibly because of its increased dominance; while in the 1990s it

could present itself as a rebellious, insurgent industry, in the 2010s it is an established dominant market sector, capable of influencing political actors.

Populist justifications

As highlighted above, we might feel discomfort in thinking of Silicon Valley through the lens of technocracy. However, if the idea of technocracy seems less plausible today, it is not because technology has become less important, but because the state – at the center of most political theory, and thus also of the idea of technocracy – has lost a lot of its discursive importance. Granted, the material power of nation states is still here to stay. But the neoliberal dogma has sought to undermine the power and the legitimacy of nation states and political supranational entities (e.g. the European Union), while elevating the market as the ultimate arena for the resolution of social problems (Touraine, 2001). Neoliberal globalization has challenged the primacy of democratic nation states both at a material and a discursive level: not just by undermining the decisions that states need to take, but also by depicting national, democratic politics as the obstacle to progress, freedom and prosperity (Harvey, 2007).

Such transformation of the standing of the state vis-à-vis the market has taken place while technologies – and the popular perception of them – were also changing (Turner 2006). It is not only that technologies have become portable and mundane, their portrayal and perception has also shifted: if today Facebook can articulate its technocratic ambitions in such a clear way, it is also because such ambitions are not seen as carriers of elite domination, but rather of techno-utopian visions of empowerment and

egalitarianism, against political elites. To be fair, Winner (1986) had already remarked that a certain optimism about technology would link it to freedom and liberation:

> Over many decades technological optimists have been sustained by the belief that whatever happened to be created in the sphere of material/instrumental culture would certainly be compatible with freedom, democracy, and social justice. This amounts to a conviction that all technology – whatever its size, shape, or complexion – is inherently liberating (Winner, 1986, p. 50).

But Silicon Valley goes a step beyond, asserting its ability to code its way out of inequality and discrimination (as highlighted in my discussion of selective disembodiment), because of its efficiency and global scale, in contrast to the relative weakness and slowness of nation states. The complex discourse that legitimizes Silicon Valley is both technocratic, with its belief in letting those who are technically proficient lead, but also deeply populist in its justifications. As such, it can be embraced by political actors of the left and the right and it can contribute to legitimizing the power of Silicon Valley itself.

Scholars have already pointed out the existence of populist elements in the way that digital technologies are portrayed and popularized. Mosco (2004) called it "an individualistic populism suffused with elite ideals" (p. 112), which emerged from the blending of countercultural and New Right libertarian ideals (Turner, 2006). The myth of the frontier, so central to the early years of the web (Turner, 2006) is itself a populist dream; Streeter showed how the introduction of the internet in the 1990s came as a promise of rebellion and redemption to the white collar workers of the knowledge economy:

> It was the people who typed their own memos, reports, term papers, and journal articles who sensed the importance of the internet first and then watched the higher-ups struggle to catch up with them. Cyberspace, with

> its romantic hint of a rebellious self image, better captured the sense of pleasure and open-ended possibility they felt in watching their secret world trump the staid world of their superiors. (Streeter, 2005, p. 766)

In Zuckerberg's manifesto, it is the fetish of the community that takes on the role of populist subject, or rather, as cited above, it is "people's intrinsic goodness aggregated across our community" (Zuckerberg, 2017). The Facebook community, which presumably includes the users, those who build, maintain and control the platform, and those who profit from it, emerges as the new populist notion of "the people" – clearly contributing to eroding the boundary between the elite of Silicon Valley and regular users. The Facebook community, as argued above, is imagined in contrast to nation states.

Mosco (2004) argued that the celebratory discourses surrounding technology – what he called myths of cyberspace – concealed an underlying vision of market-driven, individualized and anti-government politics. He attributed these discourses to American libertarians à la Newt Gingrich. But I argue that today we can observe how the populist discourses that legitimize the sociotechnical order of Silicon Valley have travelled way beyond the American right. In fact, I suggest that they have been incorporated in the political discourse of very different actors all around the world. Gerbaudo (2015) argued that new European movement parties, like the Five Star Movement in Italy and Partido X in Spain, have blended the supposedly democratic aspects of the web 2.0 technologies they utilize with classic elements of populism:

> emerging movements and parties in the popular wave utilise these social media features as means to appeal to a heterogeneous mass of Internet users and to address the ideal subject of the 'generic Internet user' in opposition to economic and political elites. The product of this adaptation is the rise of an interactive and participatory populism: a populism 2.0. (Gerbaudo, 2015, p. 68)

Similarly, Natale and Ballatore (2014) argued that the Italian Five Star Movement has inserted “elements of digital utopia and web-centric discourses (…) into the movement’s political message” (p. 105) and that “the construction of the web as a myth has shaped the movement’s discourse and political practice” (p.105).

The populist tendencies of the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley thus not only legitimize its technocratic ambitions, but also provide legitimacy to the political projects of different actors around the world. The populist justifications of the dominant technological imaginary make it more difficult to question the power of Silicon Valley: how could one even think of criticizing an industry that supports freedom and democracy?

The politics of Silicon Valley: technocracy meets populism

The Zuckerberg manifesto makes explicit the meeting of technocratic ambitions and populist justifications that fuels the dominant technological imaginary. On the one hand, it is the belief that digital technologies are thought to be inherently free, democratic and supportive of personal autonomy that is the key source of the populist justifications that we have seen in the Zuckerberg manifesto. This aspect of Silicon Valley’s technological imaginary is what sustains Zuckerberg’s use of the language of democratic politics that I highlighted above, the way he speaks about Facebook as a community and freely uses terms like “democratic process”, “referendum”, “collective decision-making”. On the other hand, Zuckerberg’s manifesto also illustrates the blend of technosolutionism and neoliberalism that characterizes the dominant technological imaginary; the open letter shows how these ideas support Facebook’s technocratic ambitions of solving the

world's problems by either supplanting nation states or pushing governance bodies to adopt Facebook's mechanisms.

To summarize, the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley is at the same time technocratic and populist. It is technocratic because it sketches out the contours of a global sociotechnical order that goes beyond states and governance bodies; an order defined by the dominance of key technological players in an "open" market that is the locus for the resolution of social problems. It is populist because it builds on the anti-elite ethos of the Californian Ideology and provides a new definition of "the people", solely predicated on the access and use of digital technologies.

By examining its technocratic and populist tendencies, we can better point out how this technological imaginary is political: it promotes specific visions of the relationship between the market, the state, and society. And it is also far from being as universal as it claims to be. While it envisions a global sociotechnical order, it builds that order by affirming a set of ideas that worked in a specific place – Silicon Valley. Deconstructing the biases of this technological imaginary is thus necessary in order to question its power, especially when, as I have argued before, it is being taken up by different political actors beyond the United States.

Conclusion: the limits of the dominant technological imaginary

In this chapter I have sketched out the main components of the current dominant technological imaginary, which has been constructed and popularized by Silicon Valley actors since the 1990s. In particular, I have highlighted the centrality of three key tenets: the equation of digital technologies with freedom, democracy, and personal autonomy;

the tendency towards technosolutionism; the connection to neoliberalism. I have argued that, despite its dreams of universality, this imaginary is deeply American: it builds on the longstanding fascination with technology in American history. But it is also deeply American in the sense that what it promotes is grounded in the assumptions that characterize a precise moment of American history – the 1990s of Silicon Valley, with their convergence of right-wing libertarianism and countercultural sensibilities (see Turner, 2006). I also suggested that it is crucial to pinpoint precisely all the ways in which Silicon Valley's technological imaginary is specific, bounded, and biased, because it offers a path for deconstructing its universalist assumptions – and its power. I then offered two illustrations that allow us to poke holes in the universalism of Silicon Valley. First, I turned to the 1990s to investigate the origins of the dominant technological imaginary in *Wired* magazine. I argued that *Wired* put forth a discourse that celebrated digital technologies for their ability to do away with gender and race distinctions, by allowing people to experience the world as the default white man. I called this discourse "selective disembodiment". I suggested that this inability to envision gender and racial diversity has carried over in the dominant technological imaginary. This imaginary sees itself as universal, but it is merely the projection of the experience of American white man onto everybody else. Second, through an analysis of Mark Zuckerberg's 2017 "Building Global Community" letter, I showed how this imaginary has its own politics, a blend of technocratic ambitions and populist justifications.

This chapter makes it clear what is at stake when we are examining technological imaginaries, especially the dominant ones: imaginaries are not just visions about specific technologies, but about the kinds of social, political and economic relations that such

technologies support and encourage. It is thus important to critically interrogate the biases of the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley given its dreams of universality. It is particularly crucial to also deconstruct how the imaginary of Silicon Valley has travelled around the world and has been incorporated in the political visions of different political actors.

Over the past two years, Silicon Valley has come under increased scrutiny, following the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018; Granville, 2019; Lapowsky, 2019). Facebook itself was the object of a Congressional hearing in the United States ("Mark Zuckerberg testimony: Senators question Facebook's commitment to privacy," 2018), while the European Union has used both its new General Data Protection Regulation and antitrust norms to challenge the business model of Silicon Valley's giants, such as Facebook and Google (Scott, Cerulus, & Overly, 2019; Scott, Van Dorpe, & Larger, 2018; "Why big tech should fear Europe," 2019). Candidates to the 2020 U.S. Presidential elections are advancing plans to "break up big tech" (Giles, 2019; Roose, 2019). Is this the beginning of the end of the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley? Maybe.

It might be the beginning of Facebook's downfall, but this does not necessary mean it is the end of the current dominant technological imaginary. While Silicon Valley might be losing its power to shield itself from regulatory intervention, I argue that the key tenets of its technological imaginary remain largely unchallenged. It is hard to regulate a technological imaginary. Policy makers can impose limits on the market share enjoyed by Silicon Valley companies, they can limit the amount of data that platforms can acquire,

share, and sell; but they cannot really stop companies from proclaiming their platforms to be bringing democracy and freedom. Who would want to do that? The dominant technological imaginary is not about the specific technologies, it is about the relation of those technologies to fundamental political processes. While the post-2016 U.S. Presidential elections preoccupation with viral deception (Jamieson, 2017) was concerned with the political leaning of digital media – did they intentionally favor Donald Trump? Are they more of the same "liberal media"? –, this chapter shows that we should still be concerned with the political biases of Silicon Valley. But these are biases that hit at a fundamental level of politics and go beyond party affiliation.

To assess the "health" of the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley, we need not look further then to Mark Zuckerberg. With Facebook's dominance being openly contested and subject to regulatory pressures, Zuckerberg released another open letter in March 2019 (Zuckerberg, 2019). While its tone is definitely less celebratory than the document I analyzed in detail in this chapter, it nevertheless proposes to solve people's growing lack of confidence in Facebook through a technological fix: encryption. The letter is all about reinforcing how encryption works and shifting the perception of Facebook from a "public social network", like Zuckerberg (2019) calls it, to the facilitator of private conversations through Messenger and Whatsapp. But the idea that Facebook can fix its shortcomings through a technological solution is itself a key idea of the dominant technological imaginary. If the imaginary still offers a way out of the troubles that Facebook encountered, we might need to wait to declare its downfall.

The rest of this dissertation further shows how the technological imaginary of Silicon Valley, as well as its technologies, are still crucial to the mobilization of social

movements around the world. As the next three chapters will demonstrate, the strongly criticized Facebook is still a crucial avenue for activists to organize and communicate. While Silicon Valley might have come under increased scrutiny, the power of its technological imaginary and of its technologies is still very real.

Chapter 2 – Appropriation: the symbolic power of mundane modernity in the Hungarian internet tax protests

Introduction

In October 2014, the Hungarian government announced the introduction of an "internet tax" that would apply to internet consumption on both mobile and landlines.[13] This proposal was met with protests in the streets of Budapest – the largest mobilization against the right-wing Fidesz government since its election in 2010, and (at the time) the biggest demonstration in Hungary since 1989. Confronted with the size of the protest, the Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, decided to set aside the proposed legislation, which has not been reintroduced since. This chapter examines the internet tax protests and their lasting impact on Hungarian social movements by analyzing the technological imaginary that was deployed during the protests.

As explained in the Introduction, this chapter is based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 9 key organizers of the Hungarian internet tax protests (7 men, 2 women). The interviews were conducted in person or via Skype in January and February 2017; the interviewees talked in English and their quotes were not edited for grammar or syntax. In the last section of the chapter, I rely on interviews conducted with activists from LUMe and the Philly Socialists, who were asked to reflect on the iconic protest action – protesters lifting illuminated smartphones to the sky – that was used in the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, as well as in the Hungarian internet tax protests.

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[13] This chapter revises and expands my published work on the Hungarian internet tax protests (Ferrari, 2018b, 2019).

The chapter theorizes the technological imaginary deployed in the Hungarian internet tax protests as "mundane modernity": an imaginary that grounds longstanding tropes of Western modernity in the everyday practices of internet use. Interviewees, in fact, associated the internet with equality and development, the future, and rationality; in so doing, they reproduced discourses about the role of technology in Western modernity. However, they also insisted on the mundanity of the internet – its importance for everyday life. This technological imaginary is one of appropriation, in that mundane modernity embraces both the technologies of Silicon Valley and its dominant technological imaginary. This imaginary reinterprets the pillars of Silicon Valley's imaginary, by equating the internet with freedom (both political freedom and market freedom) and with Western democracy. More than a simple repetition, mundane modernity appropriates Silicon Valley's imaginary to make it resonant in a post-communist context, in which ideas of Western modernity, democracy, and freedom are contentious. This imaginary of appropriation is, in fact, shaped by the Hungarian political context and the revamping of the modernity-tradition cleavage under Orbán. But mundane modernity is also shaped by an opposition to the technological imaginary of Orbán's political project – "illiberal democracy" (2014).

In the chapter I first describe the controversial internet tax proposal announced by the Hungarian government in October 2014 and the three large Budapest-based protests that opposed the tax. I then contextualize the internet tax within the Hungarian "illiberal turn" (Kornai, 2015; Pap, 2018), the deterioration of civil liberties and the rule of law progressively enacted by the right-wing governments of Viktor Orbán since 2010. I describe the internet tax protests as an unusually successful example of the left-liberal

urban social movements that have been contesting Orbán's policies for the past ten years. Furthermore, I provide some detail on the organization of the protests and explain how the activists made sense of their success. I then provide my own explanation of this success: that the internet tax protests were able to draw on a powerful technological imaginary that turned dissatisfaction with the tax into a general contestation of the Orbán government. In theorizing the technological imaginary of the internet tax protests, I highlight how interviewees associated the internet with equality and development, the future, and rationality, but also with mundanity, giving rise to an imaginary that I term "mundane modernity". This imaginary brings together the political aspirations of Western modernity with the mundanity of internet practices. I also describe the fusion of market freedom and political freedom that supports the imaginary of mundane modernity and make the case for its relevance in a post-communist context. I then theorize mundane modernity as an imaginary of appropriation, since it endorses the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley and its technologies. In this case, appropriation is shaped by the Hungarian political context – chiefly the salience of the modernity vs. tradition political cleavage – and by the protesters' opposition to the technological imaginary of "illiberal democracy", which is represented by the tax.

In the last part of the chapter, I examine how the imaginary of mundane modernity was performed during the protests: both with the iconic action of raising smartphones to the sky and with the trashing of the Fidesz party headquarters with obsolete electronic devices. The first action, with the smartphones, which was borrowed from Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, was subsequently performed by other movements, in Hungary and other Central Eastern European countries, even when

protests did not have anything to do with the internet. The diffusion of this action clearly points to how meaningful the imaginary of mundane modernity can be, at least in Central Eastern Europe. In closing, however, I highlight the limits of mundane modernity by discussing the iconic image of the protesters lifting their smartphones with activists from LUMe and the Philly Socialists. Most of the Italian and American activists did not even remember that image; they also rejected the idea that smartphones could be used as political symbols. This further underscores the limits of mundane modernity as a mobilizing imaginary and the necessity to study the meaning of technological imaginaries within the political contexts in which they are deployed.

The Hungarian internet tax protests

In October 2014, the Orbán government clumsily announced that they were contemplating a tax on internet usage on both mobile phones and landlines. This "internet tax" would have applied to all internet consumption after a first untaxed gigabyte, with a levy of 150 Hungarian forints (about $0.50) for each additional GB. As a first response to the tax, a Facebook page was created: *Százezren az internetadó ellen*, literally "100,000 against the Internet tax", which became the informal organizing hub for the demonstrations[14]. On October 26, 10,000 people marched in the center of Budapest ("Hungary: Internet tax angers protesters," 2014). The government responded by announcing that the tax would be limited to a monthly cap of 700 forints ($2.40) for individual users (Feher, 2014b).

[14] As of June 2019, the page is still being used and has collected 198,422 likes.

Unsatisfied by the government's amendments, activists organized a second demonstration for October 28, which gathered an estimated 100,000 protesters. It was the largest protest since Hungary's transition to democracy in 1989[15], and thus also the biggest demonstration against Orbán's government (Dunai, 2014). In stark contrast with previous anti-government protests, that were predominantly concentrated in the capital, Budapest, demonstrations against the internet tax also happened in smaller towns, such as Pécs, Miskolc and Veszprem on October 26th (Feher, 2014a), and Debrecen, Györ, Pécs, Szeged and Nyíregyháza on October 28th ("Bürgerbewegung oder Putschversuch? Die Internetsteuer bringt Ungarn auf Trab," 2014). These protests were not coordinated by Budapest-based activists, but rather emerged spontaneously in the different towns. The mobilization of the Hungarian countryside, usually considered the electoral stronghold of Fidesz, undoubtedly contributed to making the internet tax a highly contentious issue for the government.

The protests received a lot of domestic and international media coverage. While the domestic coverage in pro-government media was predictably skewed against the protests, the fact that the demonstrations were covered at all actually helped the activists to break out of the left-liberal circles, as they explained in the interviews. The international media coverage sought, on the one hand, to contextualize the protests within Hungary's authoritarian trajectory (Baker, 2014; Eder, 2014; Lyman, 2014a); on the other hand, it tried to frame the protests as about "internet freedom", likely because of the

[15] The size of the October 28 demonstration was surpassed on April 12, 2017, with one of the demonstrations organized against the ad-hoc law against Central European University and the anti-NGO legislation, as recognized by the Twitter account representing the internet tax protests: "Largest protest in Hungarian history – time to go mr orban #ceu" (NoNetTax_HU, 2017).

struggle over net neutrality that was simultaneously unfolding in the United States and in the European Union (Franceschi-Bicchierai, 2014).

The proposed internet tax was met with criticism by the European authorities. Neelie Kroes, who at the time was serving as European Commissioner for Digital Agenda, harshly criticized the tax on October 22nd, by tweeting: “Proposed internet tax in #Hungary is a shame: a shame for users and a shame on the Hungarian government. I do not support!” (Kroes, 2014). Kroes’ spokeperson, Ryan Heath, delivered an even stronger statement on behalf of the Commission on October 28th, openly siding with the ongoing protests (“Commission slams Hungary’s ‘internet tax,’” 2014). Heath said that Kroes supported the protests against the tax and “was determined not to allow the tax to become a precedent in Hungary, because it could become a problem for Europe’s wider economic growth” (“Commission slams Hungary’s ‘internet tax,’” 2014). He also contextualized the tax within the other measures introduced by the Orbán governments:

> if you take it in the domestic Hungary context, it’s the latest of what a lot of people would see as troubling actions. It’s part of a pattern and has to be seen as part of that pattern of actions which have limited freedom or sought to take rents without achieving a wider economic or social interest (“Commission slams Hungary’s ‘internet tax,’” 2014).

The harshness of the EU Commission’s declarations should not surprise us, given the long string of confrontations between the EU institutions and the Orbán government; however, since the conflict with EU institutions has often been welcomed by Orbán, who has sought to position himself as a defender of the Hungarian nation against foreign intervention, we might question whether such a strong condemnation by the EU would even have an effect on Orbán.

While activists were getting ready to hold a third demonstration, on October 31st, Orbán said in a radio interview that the tax proposal had been misunderstood by the population and that it would not be introduced in its current form ("Hungary internet tax cancelled after mass protests," 2014). Orbán's speech was somewhat puzzling: he said that the tax proposal had been misunderstood by the population and that it would not be introduced in its current form; yet, he also added that his government would not go against the will of the people because they are "not communist", appealing to his long-standing critique of the pre-1989 regime to cast his decision in a more positive light ("Hungary internet tax cancelled after mass protests," 2014). The organizers of the protests saw this as an unequivocal victory against the government and celebrated it with a third demonstration (Lyman, 2014b). The demonstration was supposed to be a celebratory event, with music and speeches, in Kossuth Square, next to the Parliament building. This celebration drew a much smaller crowd, of about 5000 people, but marked an important moment – one of the few victories of Hungarian social justice activists against the government of Viktor Orbán. After the protests of 2014 and Orbán's radio address, there have been no further attempts by the Hungarian government to tax internet usage[16].

Before the government backed out of the internet tax, the protests had begun to move beyond the initial demand to not have the Internet taxed (see also Gagyi, 2014). As a participant to the protests noted, slogans changed from "Free country! Free Internet!" to "Orbán piss off! We want democracy! Europe, Europe! Russians go home! Filthy Fidesz, corrupt Fidesz!" (Observer, personal communication). Opposition movements that had

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[16] The idea of taxing the internet, however, was taken up by different governments in the African continent, such as Guinea and Benin, as described by Bergère (2019).

been organizing – mostly unsuccessfully – for years, found in the internet tax an issue they could use to gather support around a broader platform of opposition to the Orbán government. It seemed paradoxical that the threat of a few dollars per month in extra taxes would lead Hungarians to protest so massively against the government, while the same government had already changed the Constitution (Human Rights Watch, 2013) and curtailed the freedom of the media (Brouillette, 2012). The starting point of this chapter is thus the puzzling success of the protests: what was so special about the internet tax that could lead so many Hungarians to the streets?

Hungary's illiberal turn

The last decade of Hungarian politics has been marked by the rise to power of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his right-wing Fidesz party. Orbán was elected Prime Minister in 2010 and then re-elected in 2014 and 2018. During his terms as Prime Minister, due to the strong majorities enjoyed by Fidesz in the Parliament, he has pushed forward a conservative agenda that he later described as "illiberal democracy" (Orbán, 2014). Orbán first explicitly deployed the label of "illiberal democracy" in a 2014 speech, where he argued that his recent electoral success gave him a mandate to "break with liberal principles and methods of social organization, and in general with the liberal understanding of society" (Orbán, 2014). He continued:

> a democracy does not necessarily have to be liberal. Just because a state is not liberal, it can still be a democracy. And in fact we also had to and did state that societies that are built on the state organization principle of liberal democracy will probably be incapable of maintaining their global competitiveness in the upcoming decades and will instead probably be scaled down unless they are capable of changing themselves significantly (Orbán, 2014).

Orbán thus stated that liberal democracies are bound to fail over the next few decades, while Hungary, having chosen to become an illiberal state, will regain competitiveness on the world stage. Orbán also claimed that the reorganization of the Hungarian state should be constructed around the idea of "national community", which in his view is, of course, an ethnonational community of Christian Magyars:

> In other words, the Hungarian nation is not simply a group of individuals but a community that must be organized, reinforced and in fact constructed. And so in this sense the new state that we are constructing in Hungary is an illiberal state, a nonliberal state. It does not reject the fundamental principles of liberalism such as freedom, and I could list a few more, but it does not make this ideology the central element of state organization, but instead includes a different, special, national approach (Orbán, 2014).

Talking about a "different, special, national approach" is for Orbán a way of claiming a Hungarian specificity that can be deployed to resist the liberal principles (and regulations) of the European Union.

This illiberal project relied on amending the Fundamental Law (i.e. the Hungarian Constitution) to tilt the balance of powers in favor of the executive branch and weaken the power and independence of the court system (Bozoki, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2013), enacting sweeping changes to media policy that undermined independent media (Brouillette, 2012; Pap, 2018, pp. 22–23), and increasing taxes while cutting budgets related to healthcare, education, and pensions (Bozoki, 2015). The Fidesz government also changed the electoral system in a way that provided an advantage to the party (Pap, 2018, pp. 24–25), leading some to call Hungarian elections "free and unfair" (Bozoki, 2015). In addition to the Media Laws, Orbán also relied on allied businessmen to consolidate the market share of pro-government media in the country (Bienvenu, 2016;

Dragomir, 2019; Fabók, Pethő, & Szabó, 2017; Kingsley, 2018). Further, Orbán has used a rhetoric that creates "enemies" of the Hungarian nation on whom any shortcoming of the government can be blamed (Csaky, 2017; Gőbl, 2018; Walker, 2018). These scapegoats include the European Union, refugees, "liberal" NGOs, and any actor that can be connected, directly or indirectly, to Hungarian-American billionaire George Soros, including Central European University (Eotvos Karoly Policy Institute, Hungarian Helsinki Committee, Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, & Mérték Media Monitor, 2014).

These sweeping changes were made possible by the fact that Fidesz (and its ally, the KDNP, the Christian Democratic People's Party) won a majority of over 66% of Parliamentary seats in the 2010 elections, giving Orbán the supermajority needed to alter the Constitution. Since 2010, the three Fidesz governments, which have all enjoyed parliamentary supermajorities, have amended the Constitution five times. The constitutional changes have been the object of scrutiny and controversy between the Hungarian government and the European institutions. However, as Pap (2018) argued, the way in which Fidesz built the new constitutional regime, i.e. by mixing and matching elements from different European constitutions, has made it difficult to discover "the destructive features of the regime, let alone being able to raise specific, reasoned criticism" (p. 4); while taken individually, each of the elements have a place in a liberal order, their assemblage in what Scheppele (2013) called a "Frankenstate" threatens individual freedom and the rule of law. Pap (2018) also defined the illiberal turn as "defying rule of law principles, dismantling core institutional guarantees for government control and adopting an ideologically biased constitution that cements these developments"(p. 5). Wilkin (2018) similarly argued that the aim of the new

constitutional regime created by Fidesz was that of creating "a permanent bias in support of Fidesz so that if they were to lose an election their appointees would still be in positions of power over whatever actions alternative governments might take" (p. 23). In this "democratic backsliding", the membership of Hungary in the European Union contributes to both constraining and stabilizing the new illiberal state (Wilkin, 2018), given that the country is still a net receiver of EU funds (European Union, n.d.).

The illiberal turn did not stop after the momentary defeat of the government on the internet tax. If anything, over the past five years, Orbán's illiberal democracy has become a model for other right-wing and populist forces in the Central-Eastern European region and in the rest of the world (Buzogány & Varga, 2018; Pappas, 2014). Since 2014, the Orbán governments have continued to attack the media (Bienvenu, 2016) and civil society (Dunai & Koranyi, 2014). In 2017, new legislation targeted Hungarian NGOs by instituting more cumbersome reporting procedures and by requiring the disclosure of foreign donations (Rankin, 2017). It has waged a prolonged battle with an unusual enemy, Central European University (CEU), the American-Hungarian university based in Budapest and founded by billionaire George Soros, forcing the institution out of the country (Mudde, 2017; "Walled worlds: 'Illiberal Democracy' and the CEU Affair," 2019). Both the legislation against CEU and against NGOs should be understood as targeting Soros, who has been construed by the Hungarian government as a (negative) symbol of (anti-Hungarian) cosmopolitanism. In 2018, the newly re-elected government approved a controversial labor reform, dubbed "slave law" by its opponents, which amended the labor code to allow companies to demand more overtime work hours from

their employees and to delay the payment for said overtime (Graham-Harrison, 2019; "Hungary president signs controversial 'slave law,'" 2018; Karasz & Kingsley, 2018).

But the event that brought "illiberal democracy" to the attention of the world was the refugee crisis of the mid 2010s, when the Hungarian government showed its xenophobic tendencies in an even clearer way (Scheppele, 2015). Although brewing for quite some time (Dessewffy & Nagy, 2016), the issue of migration came to prominence in Hungary in the fall of 2015, when hundreds of thousands of refugees attempted to enter the European Union through Hungary; while many ended up in camps across the country, thousands were stranded in Budapest, around Keleti train station, where they were denied access to the trains directed to Western Europe (Kallius, Monterescu, & Rajaram, 2016). The violent rhetoric deployed against migrants constructed a non-Christian Other that threatened the Hungarian nation; at the same time, this rhetoric also targeted the Roma and the homeless population (Kallius et al., 2016). Hungary opposed the EU relocation scheme, the so called "migrant quotas", which aimed to more fairly distribute refugees among member states. In 2016, the government called for a farcical national referendum on the "migrant quota". The question of the referendum was worded in a leading way: "Do you want the European Union to be entitled to prescribe the mandatory settlement of non-Hungarian citizens in Hungary without the consent of the National Assembly?" (Pállinger, 2019). The referendum ultimately did not reach its necessary quorum and was declared invalid. However, the government has continued to campaign on the issue of migration; in particular, it used a national consultation to ask voters about an alleged "Soros plan" to encourage immigration towards Hungary and

passed a “Stop Soros” bill, which criminalized a good deal of migration-related work or volunteering (Zerofsky, 2019), while simultaneously attacking George Soros.

The internet tax itself should thus be contextualized in the larger turn towards illiberal democracy that is at the heart of Fidesz’s politics. In this context of extremely grave and repressive political decisions taken by the Fidesz government, an internet tax of a few hundred forints seems like a trivial concern. And yet, it is around this topic that one of the largest demonstrations in Hungarian history happened, and turned into a general contestation of Fidesz. I suggest that this success has to do with the deployment of a specific technological imaginary, which helped coalesce people’s dissatisfaction with the government around a symbolic upholding of Western modernity.

Activists mobilize against illiberal democracy

The dominance of Fidesz in the post-2010 Hungarian political landscape is heightened by the immense difficulties and popular delegitimation of the left-liberal opposition parties, such as the Hungarian Socialist Party (*Magyar Szocialista Párt* or MSZP) and the green-liberals of LMP (*Lehet Más a Politika* [Politics can be different]). While an analysis of the shortcomings of the Hungarian opposition parties is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is useful to point out that their lack of popular legitimacy has opened the door for activist groups and various types of associations, including NGOs, to play a crucial role in opposing Fidesz[17]. At the same time, the unreliability of the opposition parties has also left social movements without institutional allies.

[17] My research is concerned with anti-Fidesz mobilizations on the left, but the emergence of right wing protest movements in Hungary is an important phenomenon, addressed for instance by Kaposi and Mátay (2008). The biggest competitor for Fidesz has undoubtedly been Jobbik (*Jobbik Magyarországért*

The internet tax protests should be examined within the broader civil society opposition to the Fidesz government after it came to power in the 2010 elections. By the time the internet tax was proposed, Hungary had seen the emergence of several protests, largely concentrated in the capital, which were the expression of leftist and liberal concerns surrounding the right-wing politics of Fidesz (for a general introduction, see Glied, 2014; Jensen, 2015).

The two most successful social movements to emerge between 2012 and 2014 were *One Million for the Freedom of the Press in Hungary* (better known as Milla) and *Hallgatói Hálózat* or HaHa (i.e. "student network"). They sponsored demonstrations that criticized the Orbán government for its curtailing of media freedom and fundamental rights, and for its educational reforms, respectively. Like the internet tax protests, Milla also started as a Facebook-based mobilization and its use of digital media has been crucial for creating new spaces of protest (Wilkin, Dencik, & Bognár, 2015); while it focused on the issue of press freedom, it aimed to mobilize civil society against the general illiberal direction in which Fidesz had begun to lead the country. The HaHa student movement protested against the austerity cuts to public university funding, but its contestation also became a critique of the Hungarian political system, which they believed should be changed from the bottom-up (Zontea, 2015). Milla and HaHa are part of the Hungarian civil society based, leftist-liberal opposition that is critical of the Fidesz government, the far-right Jobbik party, but also of the opposition parties in Parliament, notably the socialist MSZP[18]. While these movements, and a myriad other smaller

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Mozgalom [Movement for a better Hungary]), a far-right, nationalist and Euroskeptic party (Karl, 2017; Pirro & Róna, 2018).

[18] Milla revised its stance on party politics when it joined the Együtt 2014 party coalition to compete in the 2014 general elections.

protests, contested the Fidesz government, they never posed a significant challenge to its dominance, as attested by the 45% of the national vote that the party gathered in the 2014 elections. Both Milla and HaHa are important points of reference for the internet tax protests, whose organizers were all at least marginally involved in one or both movements. The internet tax protests, however, were larger than the any of the protest actions ever organized by either Milla or HaHa.

Anti- Orbán protests continued after the success of the internet tax protests. The refugee crisis of 2015 brought new activist groups to the fore, such as Migszol (Kallius et al., 2016) and Migration Aid (Dessewffy & Nagy, 2016; Kallius et al., 2016). The government's anti-migration propaganda was also the object of the culture jamming of the Hungarian Two Tailed Dog Party (*Magyar Kétfarkú Kutya Párt* or MKKP), a "fake party" (Ferrari, 2018a; Glied, 2014); while at the beginning, a decade ago, the party was nothing more than an intricate joke aimed at satirizing politicians, with the deterioration of the Hungarian situation it evolved into an oppositional group that fiercely criticizes Orbán. During the refugee crisis of 2015, the Hungarian government put out billboards throughout the country, which addressed migrants in Hungarian, warning them that they should respect the Hungarian way of life (Sarhaddi Nelson, 2018). The Two-Tailed Dog Party responded by crowdfunding a counter campaign, which produced billboards designed exactly to look like government's billboards, but making fun of the government. The following year, when the Hungarian government promoted the aforementioned "migrant quota" referendum and once again resorted to a national billboard campaign to encourage voters to oppose the quotas, the MKKP reused the same culture jamming tactic to invite Hungarians to invalidate their referendum ballots. Education also remained a

controversial topic: starting in 2016 the Tanítanék ("I would teach) Movement brought teachers and students to the streets to ask the government to reform the education system (Pósfai, 2017; "Tanítanék demonstrators demand new minister, education portfolio," 2017).

However, it was in 2017 that Hungary saw demonstrations as big as or bigger than the internet tax protests of 2014. The protests were catalyzed by the simultaneous introduction of legislation targeting NGOs and Central European University, as explained above (Dunai, 2017a, 2017b; Gorondi, 2017; "Hungarians protest at government moves to restrict NGOs," 2017). These protests, which continued for weeks, saw the mobilization of similar constituencies to those that participated in the internet tax protests; some of the activists who were involved in the organization of the internet tax protests also played a crucial role in the 2017 protests. In 2018, large protests broke out in Budapest after the re-election of Viktor Orbán (Bienvenu & Santora, 2018; Roache, 2018). Later in the year, the introduction of the labor code reform recalled above, which the opposition renamed "slave law", gave rise to a prolonged contestation of the government, which brought together left-liberal activists, opposition parties and trade unions (Graham-Harrison, 2019; Karasz & Kingsley, 2018; Vadai, 2018). Despite the continued mobilization of this activist opposition to Orbán, Fidesz was able to attract more than 51% of the votes in the European Elections of 2019.

The organization of the protests

The first protest against the internet tax, which took place on October 26th, was organized in less than a week. As mentioned, the initial organizing impetus was provided

by the Facebook page "100,000 against the Internet tax" and the Facebook event it created to invite Hungarians to take part in a demonstration against the tax. Both the page and the event rapidly received a lot of social media attention and gathered likes and event "attendees". This unexpected high volume of attention led the creator of the Facebook page and event to reach out to other activists of the Budapest civil society scene[19]. While the creator of the page was very proficient in managing Facebook content, the other activists had indispensable organizational and planning skills, an extensive network of contacts and experience in organizing demonstrations. This allowed the freshly formed group of activists – who knew each other (or at least knew *of* each other), due to the small size of the activist scene in Budapest, where everyone seems to know everyone – to mobilize rapidly and secure the necessary permits and equipment (e.g. amplification) for the demonstration. These field preparations included negotiating with the police and organizing field marshals to guarantee the security of the demonstrators. The organizers jumped into planning mode without knowing what to expect, as Peter recalled:

> we didn't have any plans, any strategic goals with what to do with this. So we didn't have any lineup, okay, speakers, or any other kind of performance. We had nothing. The only thing we had was a Facebook page with an enormous amount of people attending. So that's where we started (Peter).

The second demonstration, held on October 28th, was also organized quickly; however, this time, the organizers had a better idea of what the demonstration would look like. They also had more resources available, since they were able to raise funds both online and during the first demonstration.

[19] Due to the difficult situation of NGOs and civil society actors in the current Hungarian political context, as added precaution I do not identify any of the organizations whose members were involved in organizing the internet tax protests.

While the external communication about the demonstration happened largely through Facebook (on the "100,000 against the Internet tax" page) and Youtube (through the channel "100,000 against the Internet tax", available at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCW6N-NXIQ-BEloZWYMOV5Dw), activists met face to face several times over the course of the protests, in spaces offered by various NGOs, in addition to communicating via Facebook Messenger. The organizers also maintained a Twitter account (@NoNetTax_HU)(no longer available); none of the interviewees even mentioned the account, which appears to have played a minor role in the mobilization, especially given the limited relevance of Twitter in Hungary[20].

Who are the activists that organized the internet tax protests? They are Budapest-based, left-liberal and have college degrees. At the time of the protests, most of them were in their late 20s and early 30s. Most of them had several years of experience in political parties, social movements or non-governmental organizations. The Budapest-based activist scene is relatively tight-knit and people move almost seamlessly between different causes and organizations. Eszter described the Hungarian activist community as: "we are like, I don't know, like 100 people or more… 300-400 sometimes and we are activists here in Hungary, and we get involved in a lot of things like this". Bálint laughed as he told me that he got involved in the internet tax protests through the "same people" who get him to join "every protest in Hungary".

Despite the success of the internet tax protests, the organizers could not (or chose not to) form a more stable social movement or activist organization. This is partially explained by the fact that most of them were already involved in other activist

[20] In their study of political polarization on Twitter, Matuszewski and Szabó (2019) reported that in 2017 less than 1% of Hungarian internet users were Twitter users. In 2014, Hungarian Twitter users were likely to be even fewer.

organizations of different kinds. Some interviewees pointed to the fact that the political conditions did not seem suitable for the creation of a more permanent movement. Daniel expressed his regret about the failure to establish a movement: “we did not put down the basis of the movement, and actually those people involved in, which were at some point more than 20 people, were not... an organized movement, but just people randomly getting together”. Laszlo explained that it seemed difficult to bring other issues into the internet tax protests. He reported having heated conversations with people who wanted to use the internet tax protests to quickly build a more comprehensive political platform, to which he replied that:

> yes, we also want to have complete and coherent reform, but then we have to build a movement and we have to, you know, come together. So it's more work, it's not just, you know happening, in a second. And this is also a part of political education, that you have to made the people to understand that this is not the way how we achieve political change... political, yes, transformation. You know, it's not... you know... sorry, it's not just a coincidence that they call it "struggle" (Laszlo).

Laszlo’s words highlight how Hungarian activists would need a sustained structured mobilization to really push forth a platform of social change. But he did not think that the internet tax protests could or should be that. Interviewees also reported being pressured by other activists and by left-liberal media commentators, who insisted that the protest organizers should get together to form a new political party. Daniel dismissed those suggestions, but added that he felt “this empty space, which we did not fill. It's not a party, but it's a movement. Which can lead to a party”.

Even if the activists did not create a more stable movement organization or a party, the internet tax protests are considered one of the rare successes of the Hungarian

opposition to Viktor Orbán. László explained that the protests are used in public discussions to demonstrate that it is possible to score a success against Orbán. Eszter, reported that the internet tax protests made it easier to mobilize Hungarians afterwards, as it showed that protest could in fact take place in a largescale way and have a clear impact.

A successful single-issue protest?

The internet tax protests have been considered a success on many fronts. First, they delivered a blow to the Fidesz government's legislative aims and image. It was the first time – and to date, the only time – that Orbán's government was forced to respond to popular mobilization. Second, the demonstrations were successful because of both the number of people who took part in them and their heterogeneity. Interviewed activists described how rare such mass participation is in Hungary, and also emphasized how extremely rare it is to bring together such a diverse crowd, including individuals across ideological divides, ages, and genders. This success can be measured, first of all, by the fact that "by far this was the biggest political Facebook event like ever" (Adam), because thousands of people clicked the "I'm going" button on the ad-hoc Facebook event page that was created by Adam himself. Secondly, success is measured by the number of people who showed up to the demonstrations: 10.000 on the first one, 100.000 on the second one. The second protest, as mentioned above, was the biggest demonstration to occur in Hungary after 1989. This surprised the activists, as Bálint said: "it was very a big surprise for us, there were a lot of people in the first protest". Daniel concurred: "Nobody... so we did not experience such big crowd previously. I'm sure I did not; I think most of the activists participating in the organization neither. Yeah... Of course it was

great”. The activists communicated how rare such mass participation is in Hungary and how it is even rarer to bring together the heterogeneous crowd that showed up in these demonstrations. Eszter argued that “there were many young people in the streets, which usually never happens, and also the supporters of Fidesz were against the internet tax. This is why they stepped back”. The activists believe that the mobilization of different constituencies, beyond the usual liberal-leftist opposition to Orbán, was a decisive factor in the government’s defeat. Speaking specifically of the second demonstration, Daniel said that “there were, you know, these far-right-ish protesters next to pretty European-lover protesters, next to the previous mayor of Budapest from the liberal party, next to the American ambassador (…) Everybody was there”[21].

It is the popularity of the Facebook event that interviewees saw as central to the successful mobilization of a lot of different people. As Péter explained:

> it provided a community feeling, that I don't have to be a weirdo activist to participate in something, because it's something that normal people do, too, now, because this is a thing that affects normal people, too. So it's not about homelessness or LGBT or those… but it... Yeah, the Facebook event, the number of attendees on the Facebook event showed that this is not a fringe situation, but it's socially acceptable to participate (Péter).

When speaking of the reasons behind the success of the internet tax protest, some of the activists conceded that it was likely a combination of “some of the most important aspects, if you want to mobilize people” (Petra) and pointed to the heterogeneity of the motivations that might have led people to take to the streets. Nevertheless, they overwhelmingly attributed the success of the protest to its single-issue focus: the internet

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[21] The presence of André Goodfriend, then chargé d’affaires at the United States Embassy in Budapest (the “ambassador” figure mentioned by Daniel) became the object of controversy when it was denounced by the Hungarian government’s spokesperson, Zoltan Kovacs (Lyman, 2014a).

and the attempt to tax internet consumption. The activists chose to frame this protest as a "single-issue project" (Lászlo), in order to mobilize more people, including those who would not necessarily agree with broader leftist and liberal concerns or with extensive criticism of Orbán's government. In retrospect, they believe that this was the main reason behind the success of the protests, as Adam explains:

> It was our main goal, and we keep it for the whole thing, that we don't want a general protest against the government, because we rather want to have a focus on the internet tax and give the people a victory over the government. Like, even an autocratic government's will can be defeated by the people. And also it was good because many people who were not necessarily in all things against the government they could connect in this one case. So… And this, I think this was important that the whole thing succeeded. (Adam)

The single-issue focus seemed particularly successful because the internet tax was an exceptionally clear topic to talk about, as many activists suggested. Interviewees claimed that it was evident to people why the tax was bad, and that they didn't have to do any sophisticated messaging to get the point across. As one organizer remarked: "this situation was really not organized, or organized by us; it was organized by the government, we just orchestrated it somehow" (Daniel). Tamás said that it was "a very, very clear thing", for which "you don't have to talk about democracy or about such complicated thoughts" (Tamás); it was an "easy message" (Daniel), "understandable for everyone" (Petra). To explain how clear the topic of the internet tax seemed to be for the Hungarian people, the activists often compared it with other contested decisions of the government, like the wave of constitutional changes that started in 2011:

> the... violation of the Supreme Court is a very very big thing, but how many of the youth people can really understand the importance of that? I don't want to be elitist, but I don't think than more than 10% can really understand what is the big problem, what was the big problem with that.

> And this was why – I don't know – 600 people were taking part in the demonstration against that. So this... this is a comfort zone, the Internet is a comfort zone, not a very hard thing to understand why is it bad for you, if you can't use the internet. So I think this was... this was the big difference. (Bálint)

I argue that while the protests were visibly framed by the activists as just addressing the internet tax, their success had nothing to do with the specifics of the internet tax and everything to do with the other policies implemented by the Orbán government: the other taxes, the cuts to public education and healthcare, the corruption scandals, and so on. The anger that people expressed in the demonstrations had been building up for a long time, and found an outlet in these internet tax demonstrations: "many people get really angry and actually it was not just the internet tax, I mean, not just because of the internet tax, but by 2014 we have reached a point when you know, everybody had enough, that was the kind of the last drop" (Petra). Petra also added that many people brought signs to the demonstrations that had nothing to do with the internet, which suggests that "people didn't just come because of the internet tax, they came because they had enough of the government". Lászlo explained:

> And that's what the internet tax was for the people: a very direct hit, and because they already knew that this government is very oppressive towards the people, this whole story, this whole abstract and foggy story suddenly, you know, just concentrated in one dot, and that was the internet tax and that it was... So then they had, you know, we have enough. (Lászlo)

The issue of the internet tax was particularly suitable to coalesce a series of grievances against the government into one mobilization that was formally just about the internet, but opened the door for a general contestation of the government. This was possible because the protests drew upon a specific technological imaginary, which associated the internet with political concepts such as democracy, freedom and Western

modernity. The protests were never just about the internet, because technological imaginaries are not just about the technologies they refer to – they speak to the political and social role of these technologies.

The mundane modernity of the internet

The technological imaginary of the internet tax protest activists can be reconstructed through an analysis of the different reasons that led them to oppose the tax. These reasons point to a technological imaginary that associates the internet with equality and development, the future, rationality, and mundanity. According to this imaginary, the internet is a powerful, but mundane manifestation of Western modernity. This imaginary is based on classic tropes of Western modernity about the equalizing power of technology, its role in progress and its connection to rationality, which become grounded in the everyday practices of internet use. This imaginary thus accepts the core of Silicon Valley's dominant technological imaginary, as well as its technologies, and celebrates the internet as a free and democratic space. It is an imaginary of appropriation: it reinterprets the technological imaginary of Silicon Valley to make it legible within a post-communist context, where the relationship between political freedom and economic freedom has been a contentious issue for the past 20 years. Further, these Hungarian activists are using this technological imaginary of mundane modernity to oppose Orbán's illiberal democracy; seen in this light, the internet tax can be conceptualized as the expression of the technological imaginary of illiberal democracy. In this way, the opposition to the internet tax becomes a metonymy for the opposition to illiberal democracy in general.

In the following sections, I detail how the technological imaginary of the activists of the internet tax protests is based on associating the internet with equality and development, the future, rationality, and mundanity. I then theorize this imaginary as one of “mundane modernity”. I suggest that this imaginary is particularly fruitful in a post-communist context, because it promises a seamless coincidence between political freedom and economic freedom – a promise that was also at the core of the transition from communism to democracy and that has been unfulfilled so far. I then theorize the imaginary of mundane modernity as one of “appropriation”, because it accepts Silicon Valley’s technological imaginary and its technologies, while adapting them not only to a post-communist context but to the specific Hungarian political situation, by pitching mundane modernity as a response to Orbán’s illiberal democracy.

Equality and development

One of the main problems with the tax was, simply put, its economic impact. The opposition to the tax went beyond the fact that “people don’t like taxes” (Daniel). The amount of the tax itself would have been unsustainable for a lot of people: “this amount of money would have meant a lot to many people (…) like many people would have been cut from the internet, because they wouldn’t have been able to pay for it” (Petra). Eszter addressed the burden placed both on poorer communities and on high volume users: “everybody could feel on his own pocket that ‘I should pay money’. It was not a small amount of money, it was... so many people couldn't pay it, in the countryside, for example... but I couldn't pay it also, because I use a lot of internet…”. Adam called the internet tax a flat tax, because of its low threshold and its lack of progressivity, and

comments: “I think flat taxes are generally not just, because everyone pays the same however income that person has… so like the poorest people also have to pay the amount, which is like… means more for them than for a rich person”.

This reflection on the fact that the internet tax would exacerbate inequality was contrasted by the activists with the idea that the internet could, under certain circumstances, promote more equality in the country. Many activists spoke of the digital divide between the city and the countryside, and the necessity to reduce that gap. They suggested that the government should be concerned with increasing access and usage of the internet, not to make it more costly for people to go online. Daniel explained the connection between taxing the internet and literacy and inequality: “that's why [the internet tax] is a bad thing: because... so the internet leads... might lead, or should lead, to digital literacy which would lead to reducing the inequalities in the society, so that's why – it’s a bad idea...”. Dávid also argued that taxing internet consumption is not the right thing to do, “because internet is a kind of... it practically is something like water or electricity, so why do you need an extra tax for that? I... uh... and probably for a government it is better to... to... increase the usage of internet”.

Several activists argued that the internet is a public utility and that the state should have a public internet service that is free or at least subsidized. Daniel said that “the internet should be a public service” and that “it would be definitely cool to have it free”; Eszter echoed him to say that “it's very sad that in Budapest we don't have free WiFi everywhere”. Péter also argued that “the direction we should go is actually subsidize the internet and to invest into making it more and more everywhere, to people and even to

companies. Because that's something that, yeah, that would really work for the country" (Péter).

Others clearly connected this issue back to the need to reduce inequality. Lászlo argued that the question the government should ask is:

> how can the state take more responsibility, and working together closer with these companies, to provide internet for the people, if not for free, but for a very very low price. And how can the state, you know, provide wifi everywhere for example in the cities and especially in the villages. So that's the problem. If you are living in a village and more than 40% of the Hungarian people are living in villages, there are some villages with internet access, but you have very very little chance to have fast speed access to the internet. (Lászlo)

Similarly, Bálint explained how inequality in access to infrastructure is connected to unequal access to information:

> the good thing would be if everybody... okay, I don't know, it's a bit irrealistic, not everybody, but more and more people could use the internet for free, because I think this informational gap between the... between somebody in the center of Budapest and somebody in the center of North Hungary, is very very big. So... I think the right thing would be the government would work on that, to have free internet access everywhere. (Bálint)

It is important to note how, in talking about the divide between the capital and the peripheral countryside, the activists reproduced a certain language that is common to technologically deterministic views of information technologies and development. The quotes from the interviews seem in line with what Burrell (2012) described as the championing of "universal connectivity as an imperative for the progress of developing countries" (p. 133), although they are applied to poorer rural areas within Hungary[22]. These discourses are not alien to the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley

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[22] While the internet tax spurred some protest in the countryside, too, the political divide between the city and the countryside has been a longstanding problem for the civil opposition to Fidesz (see Wilkin et al., 2015).

either, which, as highlighted in Chapter 1, often portrays the digital divide as the single most pressing challenge that needs to be addressed in order to guarantee prosperity and freedom.

Future

The Hungarian activists also believed that the internet tax went against the future. Their notion of future is conflated, as it often is, with the idea of progress. Adam suggested that "it's just so backwards thinking to tax the internet", and explained that "this was in trend with how the government generally thinks about many modern things" and that the "modern world has the internet as a tool for lots of things" (Adam). Bálint reframed this, by saying that the internet tax is "a good symbol that Fidesz don't know anything about the youth".

The criticism about the backwardness of the government extends to implicitly criticize the ideal of "illiberal democracy" as a return to an authoritarian past. The backwardness is not just political, it's also economical: the interviewees conveyed the sense that the government's inability to appreciate technologies is blocking economic development. Péter talks about the fact that investing in the IT-related sector would help Hungary be less vulnerable to global economic changes, but argues that "the main problem is that for some reason our government doesn't have any day-dreaming about technology" and that "if you have that kind of attitude for something that will define the next decades, yeah, pretty much you've already lost". Dávid compared the internet tax to other controversial decisions of the government, like the mandatory closing of retail stores on Sundays (Pállinger, 2019, p. 71; C. J. Williams, 2014), and argued that "the

internet story and closing the shops are very very similar (…) both stories are against more or less the economy. Making the life of the people harder". For the interviewees, the internet tax is thus another step away from the future. Péter's words clearly communicated the sense of frustration with the direction of the country:

> Right now, we are working our way back to, I don't know, the middle of the 20th century. I don't know if you've been to the countryside. It actually looks like it's the 1950s and people live like it's the 1950s. And we had a dictatorship in the 1950s under socialism! (…) Is that the future? (Péter)

No, the activists would argue, the future is the internet.

Rationality

Another theme that emerged from the interviews is the apparent stupidity of the internet tax. Indeed, the tax proposal had some serious issues of feasibility that the government was never able to address. But the activists communicated this by calling the tax "stupid, absurd" (Adam) or "not really sane" (Daniel). They regarded the internet tax as something that would go against rationality. Lászlo implied that the tax would never have been proposed by anyone who had "some experience with reality". The activists conveyed the sense that it would be nonsensical to even think about taxing the internet. Adam said it was "so visibly a stupid thing", Tamás argued that it was "totally crazy", Daniel called it "nonsense" (several times), Bálint recalled that it "was so silly and so unrealistic, that I can't really imagine to be honest, how could it work". Péter explained more in detail: "So it was evident that it won't happen. In that way, because it just can't. (…) it wasn't a policy issue, it wasn't something coming from an ideological standpoint of the government, it was just a bullshit screw-up".

The interviewees suggested that the internet tax was not “a very thoughtful idea” (Bálint), a mistake, “a stupidity of the government” (Lászlo). After all, how could someone rational even consider taxing the internet? The recurrence of terms that indicate the nonsensical and stupid nature of the tax proposal reinforces the notion that taxing the internet would mean going against rationality. This discourse is in line with teleological discourses of technology that emphasize how technological progress is the manifestation of rationality. In this particular context, however, technology as the symbol of rationality took on an oppositional symbolic meaning.

Mundanity

The fourth theme that emerged from the interviews is that of the mundanity of the internet, which the activists saw as a key component of the success of the protests. Eszter contrasted the issue of the internet tax with other controversial decisions of the Hungarian government, like the Media Laws or the amendment of the Constitution, that she found not only less easily understood, but also less universal: “it was for everyone, I mean, because they made many many things that are much worse than the internet tax, but the other things are not affecting everyone in the country, but this one was affecting everyone”. The demonstrations were successful because people could weigh the tax against the importance of the internet for their daily life. In the interviews, the internet emerged as something very personal, a space of personal freedom: a private sphere in which the government should not be allowed to intervene. The internet, said Dávid, “is so involved in our everyday life, that everything which relates… touches it… we act really

sensitive on that". Bálint also remarked that people "got furious because they felt they can really lose their personal stuff".

Eszter and Petra both associated the internet to people's homes, in order to express the deeply personal and everyday nature of the internet:

> every part of the society, everybody understood what does it mean when they put a tax on the internet, and well... at least they understood that they need to pay more and they understood that it's something which would really... like... how to say? which would really affect their personal life, and their, you know... so something which would get into their bedroom, let's say it this way. (Petra)

> I think on one hand it was a big amount of money, but on the other hand, it was like that they are... the government goes into your house. It's your private thing that you use everyday. Of course, you use it for work, but it's your private life, and I think in Hungary many people is addicted to Facebook, but really… They live their lives there, communicating with each other there, organizing events, everything on Facebook. And it was about that, that they want to take away one thing from your life. (Eszter)

Notice here how "bedroom" and "house" signal a connection between the internet and a sphere of life that should be considered private and protected from government intervention.

Another aspect that emerged from this mundane and personal vision of the internet is that it is conceived as a space in which everyone is free to access and consume content. It is a freedom that is constructed around consumption, and not necessarily expression: the freedom to access information, to watch movies, to use Facebook, to share copyrighted material. Dávid even remarked how one torrenting site decided to take a position on the internet tax by alerting its users about how much each download would be taxed. Bálint further explained people's concerns about the impact of the tax on their downloading habits: "It's funny because we saw calculations about how [much] one episode of *Game of Thrones* would cost. (…) There were some speculations about going

to Slovakia and Austria and torrent things, and then come back"[23]. In her analysis of anti-ACTA discourse, Nowak (2016) also showed that piracy has become an everyday online practice overlaid with an ethos of freedom. Being free to choose what to read or watch – including pirating copyrighted material – is embedded in these visions of the internet as a private and personal space in which people can do what they please. As Adam summarized: "this is your space, you decide what you, what you read and don't need to… yeah, so like, you decide what you read. It's personal".

The mundanity of modernity

Three of the four themes identified in the interviews – future, equality and development, rationality – are key concepts associated with Western modernity (Giddens & Pierson, 1998; but also Taylor, 2004). Here they get equated with the internet, which is seen as representing the future, the achievement of equality and development, and rationality. Taxing the internet is wrong, because it goes against modernity. As Adam summed up nicely: "it's against modernity, it's against common sense. Yeah, it's against common sense. And it's socially unjust, and also even hard for jobs. You have lots of reasons, I think I used this anti-modern comment, against common-sense, it's like a collection of arguments". Although Adam was not talking about academic definitions of modernity, his argument clearly illustrated how the internet is associated with rationality, with the future, and with equality and development; the internet tax represented a threat to these three important aspects of modernity. Yet this modernity is experienced through mundane, everyday practices: checking Facebook, downloading pirated content, reading

[23] Budapest is about 50 km from Slovakia and 170 km from Austria.

the news. Experienced through the mundanity of smartphones and torrenting websites, modernity becomes a domesticated, everyday practice (see Appadurai, 1996). When the internet is equated with it, modernity becomes something that we can hold in our hands.

Taylor (2004) argued that "the sanctification of ordinary life" (p. 102) was part of the experience of modernity. Here, the mundane and ordinary aspects of the internet reinforce the power of the idea of modernity. It is through this dual association of the internet with both modernity and mundanity that the technological imaginary of the internet tax protests can symbolically counter Orbán's illiberal democracy: by using the internet as a symbol of the modernity that the government is rejecting, but that is mundane for the protesters.

The freedoms of mundane modernity

In talking about the internet tax protests, international media often explained this mobilization as one about internet freedom. The interviewees overwhelmingly rejected this frame and suggest that foreign media probably used it to make the Hungarian protests legible in relation to the American and European debates on net neutrality that were happening at that time. Tamás rejected the idea that internet freedom was at the center of the protests: "I think in Hungary it's, you know, the 20th priority. Sorry, you know, when you have so many problems in a country, you cannot say... it's also, of course, it's an important part, but...". And yet, freedom comes up again and again, both in the interviews and in the slogans of the protests: "Free country, free internet" ("*szabad ország, szabad internet*") was one of the most popular.

So, what is the freedom that was envisioned in the internet tax protests? I argue that through the lens of mundane modernity, we can highlight the dual meaning of freedom in the protests: on the one hand, the liberal political freedom of modernity, on the other, the private consumer freedom of mundanity. Far from contradicting each other, these two meanings of freedom reinforce the power of the imaginary of mundane modernity, especially in the context of a post-socialist society, because of the specific conditions of the transition, which promised the simultaneous achievement of liberal democracy and market-driven prosperity (Offe & Adler, 1991); such promises have been frustrated in many ways (Bohle & Greskovits, 2012), yet their legacy helps explain the particular power of mundane modernity in the Hungarian case.

The way in which modernity is associated with the internet carries with it a notion of freedom that is predicated on Western liberal democracy. In Hungary, this should be interpreted in the context of the Communist regime and its legacy, but also of the more recent turn to illiberal democracy proclaimed by Orbán. Petra explained both aspects. Firstly, she says that by the time the government announced the internet tax,

> Fidesz made it quite clear that they wanted to have an illiberal democracy. They, you know, made strong friendship… with dictatorships and so... they became an ally with Russia, and stuff. And you know, it is kind of hard for the Hungarian people, since we had the Russian occupation, you know, the Soviet occupation and stuff. And it was for many people also kind of symbolic, that the internet meant freedom, and you know, somehow a connection to the West. (Petra)

What emerged from Petra's words is a powerful mainstream discourse that connects the internet, democracy and Western liberalism. The internet tax protests drew on this discourse, by turning the internet into a symbol of Western modernity and freedom, which could stand in opposition to Orbán's illiberal democracy.

Furthermore, the association between mundanity and the internet carries a set of additional meanings about the notion of freedom, which is understood in terms of the freedom of individuals to consume content. Notice how Bálint defined it in relation to media consumption:

> [people] didn't want to lose the freedom of the internet. I think we don't, we don't have to have theories more complex than that. This was the only really important thing for them, to watch their series free, to watch their football games for free, and... and this was threatened by the government... (Bálint)

Péter echoed this notion of freedom: "People wanted their real actual existing practical internet freedom to be able to use the internet in the next month and the month after that, and the month after that" (Péter). The internet appears as a vast market of content that consumers should be free to choose from.

If this tech-oriented overlaying of market freedom and political freedom sounds familiar, it is because it features prominently in the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley, too. In line with neoliberal principles, Silicon Valley's imaginary does not distinguish between political and economic freedom: political freedom is imagined to be achieved through the use of digital technologies available on the "free" market. In talking about the myths of cyberspace, Mosco (2004) already argued that the discourses that celebrated digital technologies in the 1990s also promoted market-driven notions of citizenship and called for the deregulation of technological markets.

In the post-communist context, the conflation between political and market freedom carries additional political relevance. A parallel to be drawn here is with the circulation of samizdat under communism (e.g. Kind-Kovács & Labov, 2015), which

took on the character of a political practice even when it involved entertainment content. In line with Petra's quotes, we might speculate that the legacy of the communist past is present in the concern for a freedom that is based on personal and quotidian choices of consumption, and not just in more abstract notions of democracy and political equality (for a similar argument, see Deák, 2011). The political relevance of consumption is also reinforced in Hungarian post-communist society by the cultural consequences of neoliberal "shock therapy" that the country had to endure after the transition. According to Wilkin (2018), the legacy of these neoliberal policies can be found in the emergence of "a form of consumerism in which consumers are encouraged to define what is good through personal gratification" (p. 21).

As I have shown, the technological imaginary of mundane modernity is influenced by the political contradictions of the Hungarian socio-political context; it is not only a response to the emergence of an illiberal state, but also to long term political phenomena that have their origins in Communist times and in the transition to democracy.

Appropriation: Silicon Valley in a post-communist country

The technological imaginary of mundane modernity constructed and deployed by the Hungarian activists is an appropriation of the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley: the activists embraced both the key elements of Silicon Valley's imaginary and the digital technologies that emerge from that imaginary. In fact, mundane modernity appropriates the three tenets of Silicon Valley's imaginary: the equation of digital technologies with freedom and democracy, technosolutionism, and the ancillary

role of Silicon Valley in neoliberal capitalism. First, mundane modernity is based on the equation between the internet and Western modernity; as explained above, this carries with it an association of the internet with both market freedom and political freedom. Second, with the imaginary of mundane modernity, the Hungarian activists also endorsed a connection between the internet and democracy, which they deployed to protest against Orbán. Petra explained this connection between democracy and the internet also in historical perspective:

> I think the internet symbolizes, you know, openness, and like all the possibilities... (…) So it's... you know, it also symbolizes that the internet is, somehow symbolizes freedom, the West, you know, belonging to the West instead of the East. (…) but you know what I mean, like symbolizing democracies, like versus dictatorships. (…) Symbolizing progress. So... (Petra)

With her quote, Petra made explicit the association between the internet and freedom, the West and democracy, which underpins the imaginary of mundane modernity, but is also the unspoken foundation of Silicon Valley's dominant technological imaginary. Further, the promise of direct democracy through digital technologies, one of the crucial dreams propagated by Silicon Valley, seems particularly appealing for Hungarian activists, given the rampant corruption of the Hungarian post-transition democratic system. Third, mundane modernity sees the internet as a solution to different socioeconomical problems, such as inequality and underdevelopment, as articulated by the activists in the interviews. But mundane modernity also coalesces aspirations about democracy and prosperity into a technosolutionist vision of technology, expected to deliver what the state and the market could not deliver in the past 30 years. Lastly, the imaginary of mundane modernity does not problematize how Silicon Valley's

visions of technology support and benefit from neoliberal capitalism. While the activists express their desires for some forms of public welfare correctives, e.g. free public Wi-Fi or public subsidies for internet consumption, there is a substantial normalization of market-driven notions of technology; as explained above, this is evident in the conflation of market freedom and political freedom that characterizes mundane modernity, as well as the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley.

The other component of this imaginary of appropriation is the fact that the Hungarian activists adopt Silicon Valley technologies in their daily life and in their organization of the protests. Further, they attribute at least part of the success of the internet tax protests to their use of these technologies – Facebook in particular.

As evidenced by the choice of the term "appropriation", mundane modernity does not simply reproduce the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley; mundane modernity is an imaginary that reinterprets Silicon Valley's ideas in a way that made sense in the Hungarian context in 2014. In particular, this appropriation is shaped by both the post-communist context and by the technological imaginary of Orban's illiberal democracy, which is exemplified by the internet tax itself.

Silicon Valley and the Hungarian political context

The imaginary of mundane modernity contextualizes Silicon Valley's imaginary in the Hungarian post-communist context. As highlighted above, the discourse of mundane modernity casts the internet as capable of simultaneously delivering economic development and political freedom. In this imaginary, the internet then becomes a powerful solution to the unsolved contradictions of the transition, in that it is seen as

offering that bundle of democracy-cum-prosperity that was promised in the transition, but not quite achieved over the past 30 years. In framing the internet as a symbol of Western modernity, the imaginary of mundane modernity touches upon longstanding – and now contentious – dreams of "catching up with the West", i.e. to resolve the contradictions of the transition through fast economic development (Ágh, 2017, p. 34).

More crucially, the appropriation of Silicon Valley's imaginary through that of mundane modernity is shaped by the fundamental political cleavage of post-2010 Hungarian politics: modernity vs. tradition, pro-West vs. anti-West, pro-EU vs. anti-EU, cosmopolitan vs. ethnonationalist, urban vs. rural. While this cleavage is not new to Hungarian politics, which has seen a clash between democratic-liberal and authoritarian forces throughout its history, as highlighted by Wilkin (2018), it is Viktor Orbán that rearticulated this cleavage in post-communist Hungary and used it to turn Fidesz into the central political force of Hungarian politics. He positioned himself and his party as offering "anti-modernism and anti-cosmopolitanism / Europeanism as a viable alternative to neo-liberal democracy and the market economy" (Pap, 2018, p. 2). It is to this cleavage that Orbán returns when his policies are contested domestically or internationally; time and time again he defended Fidesz' decisions by pitching his government as the defender of the Hungarian nation against the outside threat of an international power[24] (Ágh, 2017, p. 36), chiefly the European Union.

Orbán's rearticulation of the modernity vs. tradition cleavage also makes it almost impossible for other actors to articulate class-based grievances: since his illiberalism so strongly attacks the institutions that have promoted neoliberal capitalism, e.g. the EU and

[24] This framing is effective within a national political culture which remembers its past as a string of defeats to the hands of international empires: the Ottomans, the Hapsburgs, Nazi Germany (but not always!), and the Soviet Union.

the IMF, on nationalist grounds, any attempt to criticize such institutions from a social justice perspective risks being construed as support for Orbán himself. As Wilkin (2018) argued, this leads to a situation in which no political forces are effectively opposing neoliberal policies: Orbán's government embraced many aspects of neoliberalism, especially austerity politics, while the liberal-left political elites "attempt to circle the square of subordinating the Hungarian economy and society to the dictates of global finance while trying to stand up for some notion of social justice" (Wilkin, 2018, pp. 27–28). This makes it difficult even for social movements to mobilize against neoliberalism; it is no surprise that the internet tax activists are not interested in critiquing the connection between capitalism and Silicon Valley. While they might dislike neoliberalism, they dislike Orbán more.

In this context, the internet then becomes the cool and mundane face of Western modernity, Western liberalism, and Western capitalism, that Hungarians can hope to "catch up with". Not the modernity of the IMF and the EU technocrats, but the "cool" modernity of Silicon Valley, with its gadgets and its promise of prosperity and tech development; not the bureaucratic democracy of the international institutions, but the direct democratic ethos of Silicon Valley. Mundane modernity allows the left-liberal activists to insert themselves in the cleavage articulated by Orbán, but not in a subordinate position: to offer a cool version of the modernity they aspire to; a version of modernity that cannot be readily criticized on ethnonationalist grounds, and that might even be more powerful than international institutions. If, as Appadurai (1996, p. 9) wrote, modernity is an elsewhere, then Silicon Valley is a better modern elsewhere to hang on to, compared to Brussels.

The internet tax protests thus appropriated the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley within a political context that sees a struggle over modernity and the West as its core cleavage. Drawing on the imaginary of Silicon Valley allowed the protesters to cling on to aspirations of modernity and Westernization through the mundanity and "coolness" of technology, which cannot be readily subsumed in the nationalist discourse of Orbán's government.

Responding to the technological imaginary of illiberal democracy

As I have argued throughout this chapter, the imaginary of mundane modernity is constructed and deployed by the Hungarian activists in opposition to Orbán's illiberal democracy. I contend that, for the activists, illiberal democracy carries with it a specific technological imaginary, which is exemplified by the internet tax itself.

The activists criticize Orbán and his government for their inability to use and understand the internet and digital technologies, something that they think explains Fidesz's general attitude towards modernity. The interviewees were often amused and sometimes outraged when they told me that Orbán and other top Fidesz politicians are really not familiar with new technologies. Bálint said he did not "think that a lot of Fidesz politicians are really good with iPhones". Daniel added that it is common knowledge that Orbán does not really know how to use a computer. Adam explained that "the Prime Minister personally does not really use new technologies" and that "he doesn't really understand modern technology"; to support his claim, he said that when Orbán is photographed at his desk, such as in a famous Facebook profile photo, one can clearly see that he does not have any electronic devices around him. When I asked him if Orbán's

presumed scarce knowledge of technology meant that he could not be a good politician, he replied: “Okay, I don’t want to exclude the chance that he could be a good leader without knowing it, but like… how [do] you avoid it? Completely… so much in your life, to don’t really use these things”. Peter linked Orbán’s limited digital literacy to the internet tax: “it was really obvious that Viktor Orbán had this idea. He heard about the internet… he doesn't even really use a computer, on a daily basis”.

Dávid argued that Orbán’s lack of familiarity with digital technology means that “Orbán’s government is a government who are not able to really understand the new time, the new technologies”. Peter added that the government is not necessarily hostile towards technology: “I don't think they hate it or they are negative about it. It's just something that meh... who cares?”. Daniel recalled another time in which Orbán seemed to ignore the importance of digital technologies:

> there was once something Orban said: yeah, it's very good to have "those little startups, investing in like future and modern technologies, but we are building the society based on work here"… Which like, I think somehow meant, yeah, it is not work what you are doing in so-called "high tech startups", just some bullshit, but we make work (Daniel).

In retelling this anecdote, Daniel used his hands to make scary quotes when paraphrasing Orbán’s sentence and when saying the words “high tech startups”, to further underscore how he found Orbán’s position absurd. Notice how, in Orbán’s position, as detailed by Daniel, there is a stark contrast between the future and modernity of digital technologies, and traditional “work”, which we can imagine to be associated with how Orbán would describe the traditional values of the Hungarian nation. This small episode thus serves to illustrate how illiberal democracy has its own technological imaginary,

which downplays the importance of digital technologies. While this technological imaginary might not be explicitly or officially articulated by Orbán, it is picked up by the Hungarian activists, who constructed mundane modernity in response to it.

Performing mundane modernity

As examined in the Introduction, when Jasanoff (2015) provided her definition of "sociotechnical imaginaries", she underlined the importance of investigating how these imaginaries are publicly performed by different actors. The technological imaginary of mundane modernity was performed by the internet tax protesters through two different actions that gained prominence during the demonstrations: the recurrent use of illuminated smartphones and the trashing of the headquarters of Fidesz.

One of the most recognizable actions of these protests, which can be seen in Figure 1, is borrowed from the Umbrella movement in Hong Kong (see Lee, 2015): protesters lifting their phones, with lit up screens, towards the sky.

Figure 1. Protesters lift their illuminated smartphones, as they march through central Budapest during the first internet tax protest, October 26th 2014. Photo by Stefan Roch (used with permission). Protester's faces were blurred by the author to preserve their anonymity.

The Hungarian protesters did it several times, even though only two of the interviewees mentioned it in the interviews. When asked about the origin of the action, Eszter explained:

> Actually, we saw a demonstration in China, I think it was in China, where they used this – but not regarding the Internet. I don't remember on what issue. And we thought that we should use this, because it shows that... shows something, the people do something in the demonstration, and it... I think this thing can present the future, the internet... that it's connected, and so on... and also that we are together (Eszter).

What Eszter was trying to convey with her explanation of this protest action is that it helped illustrate the meaning of the internet, and its connection to the future (as already examined in the chapter). The Hungarian protesters did not borrow the action

from Hong Kong to stage an elaborate comparison between the Hungarian and Chinese state. As Eszter's quote shows, the organizers did not even remember what the topic of the Hong Kong movements was. That action resonated, for the Hungarian activists, not so much because it is borrowed from a pro-democracy demonstration, but because it channels a complex set of aspirations about modernity into something as easily accessible and mundane as a smartphone. The gesture embodied the symbolic power exerted by the association between the internet, political freedom and Western modernity: it allowed the Hungarian activists to visually perform the technological imaginary of mundane modernity.

The second performance of the imaginary of mundane modernity took place in a much more unplanned way, during one of the main incidents of the demonstrations. After the end of the first demonstration, on October 26th, a small crowd of protesters headed for the headquarters of Fidesz, Orbán's party. Upon arrival, they started throwing old pieces of IT equipment – modems, routers, keyboards, and even monitors – against the building. The protesters also attempted to tear down the protective fence and break the windows. No one was injured, and only the exterior of the building was damaged. The organizers did not plan this action, but could not stop it, either.

What the organizers had wanted, was for people to have something to do during the demonstration, instead of solely listening to speeches. Therefore, they asked participants to bring their old electronic goods to the demonstration and planned to end their demonstration outside the Fidesz headquarters. A video, prepared by the organizers of the protests and distributed via YouTube, invited protesters to bring along their

obsolete devices. One of the organizers was portrayed in the video with different types of old electronic equipment, while he said:

> In order to block this unjust tax, bring along ruined electronic devices. A broken router, an overused keyboard, an old cell phone, a ruined laptop, or damaged cables. Bring as much as you can, as much as you can carry to succeed (Százezren az internetadó ellen, 2014)[25].

While organizers encouraged people to show up with broken devices, they did not really have a good plan for how to use them; it seems that they intended for people to deposit these gadgets on the doorstep of Fidesz's headquarters. However, given the unexpectedly large size of the crowd, the organizers had to redirect the demonstration to a larger square nearby (Heroes' Square). After they proclaimed the end of the demonstration, part of the crowd went to the Fidesz building anyway, computer parts in hand.

But why did the activists decide to ask participants to bring old electronics? Some of the activists said that they wanted to visually represent the internet in a way that would look good in pictures. But others explained that the old computer parts were meant to be something more than a cool photo-op: they helped convey the message that the internet tax was an obsolete way of thinking about the internet. Adam said that they "asked the people to bring you know, all the mouses [sic], bad computers, to place in front of the Fidesz [building] as a symbolic gesture that their idea to tax the internet is very outdated"; Dávid echoed him: "simply show them that... bringing the old things... how they are thinking about the whole thing is such old".

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[25] I thank Robert Vámos for this translation.

This episode thus illustrates how the old devices came to represent the technological imaginary of illiberal democracy. As Péter argued:

> Somebody came up with it, and everybody just went with it, that okay, what if we say that, bring some old IT equipment with you and let's make a heap of garbage out of them, to show the government that this idea to try to restrict the internet it's way behind us, it's... it's the mindset of the 1990s and it belongs to the same garbage dump. (Péter)

The internet tax thus became a metonymy of the backward-looking attitude of illiberal democracy: this is what the activists meant to communicate by asking people to bring their obsolete electronics along. The fact that protesters started throwing the technology against the Fidesz headquarters further underscores that the demonstrators thought about the internet tax as a proxy of the government's shortcomings, as Eszter explains:

> actually I think this protest was not only about the internet. But it was about... it was also anti-government protest. Because otherwise they wouldn't destroy the headquarters of Fidesz. And I think for some people it was only about the internet, but for many people it was also about the government. (Eszter)

The organizers' decision to ask protesters to bring obsolete electronics and the vandalism against the Fidesz headquarters both point to a performance of the imaginary of mundane modernity in opposition to the illiberal democracy.

Mundane modernity travels

The performance of mundane modernity through the raising of illuminated smartphones to the sky immediately became a defining image of the internet tax protests. In Hungary, it became a symbol that reminded public opinion that it was possible to defeat Viktor Orbán. The protest gesture subsequently transcended the internet tax to

become an important symbol for all sorts of political protests in Hungary and in other Central-Eastern European countries between 2014 and 2019, as mentioned in the Introduction.

In spring 2017, Hungarian activists used the same action to protest against government-sponsored legislation targeting actors deemed to be foreign-influenced and hostile to Hungarian values. These organizations included civil society and activist groups, and the law was especially targeted at Central European University, the higher education institution founded by Hungarian-born billionaire George Soros (Rankin, 2017). Large mobilizations went on for weeks to protest the legislation against these organizations. In one protest, activists concluded a rally in front of the Hungarian Parliament at sundown and raised their phones to the sky, as can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Protesters lift their cell phones in front of the Hungarian Parliament while protesting against the legislation targeting NGOs and Central European University on April 9th, 2017. Photo by Martin Mölder (used with permission).

Journalists drew the link between these images and those from the internet tax protests and argued that demonstrators were using this imagery to remind the government of the successful protests of 2014 (Csekö, 2017).

The circulation of the images and use and re-use of this action continued throughout 2017 and 2018. In May 2017, when Romania saw massive protests against the loosening of anti-corruption legislation, the *New York Times* opened its coverage with a photo of three protesters holding their cell phones, their faces illuminated by the glow of the screens and the flashlight function (Gillet, 2017). In March 2018, the demonstrations that led to the resignation of Slovakian Prime Minister Fico also adopted this same iconic action (Santora, 2018). Again in Hungary, after the re-election of Orbán in April 2018, protesters staged a huge demonstration. At dusk, in front of the Parliament building, they once again took out their phones while they sang both the Hungarian and European anthems (Murphy, 2018). Later in 2018, when massive protests sought to stop the government from approving the labor code reform known as "slave law", illuminated phones were used once again ("Hungary president signs controversial 'slave law,'" 2018; Karasz & Kingsley, 2018; Vadai, 2018).

First in Hungary, then in Romania and Slovakia, protesters adopted the action of collectively lighting up their cell phone screens, knowing that the image would be featured and circulated in countless news reports and social media feeds. I argue that the resonance of this performance of mundane modernity in the Central Eastern European region, which is still shaped by its common Communist past and the legacy of the transition, should be understood as a consequence of the complex role that the idea of Western modernity plays in these countries. As explained in the Hungarian case,

mundane modernity is an attractive version of Western modernity; a cool modernity that can be symbolized by something as benign and mundane as a smartphone. In this context then, raising a smartphone towards the sky is an action that can be readily interpreted as a political demand.

The limits of mundane modernity as a mobilizing discourse

During the internet tax protests, the imaginary of mundane modernity was used in opposition to the threat of an illiberal order put forward by Viktor Orbán – and for that purpose it was extremely successful. However, there are two important limits to the imaginary of mundane modernity that should be considered: first, although this imaginary resonated with many protests in Central Eastern Europe, it is certainly not equally suitable for or meaningful to social movements in different contexts; second, in the Hungarian case it failed to support the creation of a full-fledged social movement that could advance a broader social justice platform beyond the withdrawal of the internet tax proposal.

The first limitation of the imaginary of mundane modernity is a direct consequence of its appropriation of Silicon Valley's imaginary. It is hard to imagine how activists that are concerned with the role of corporations or with how social network sites provide an opportunity for governments to surveil movements could find much political purchase within an imaginary of mundane modernity that appropriates Silicon Valley's ideas about the inherent free and democratic nature of digital technologies. During the interviews with the Italian LUMe and the American Philly Socialists, I employed two pictures as visual aids that allowed me to gauge whether the imaginary of mundane

modernity resonated with these activists. The pictures are shown in Figures 1 and 2: they are widely circulated media images that reproduce the use of illuminated cell phones as a symbol in both the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong and the Hungarian internet tax protests.

Figure 3. Pro-democracy demonstrators hold up their mobile phones during a protest near the Hong Kong government headquarters on Sept. 29, 2014. Photo by Dale de la Rey/AFP/Getty Images.

Figure 4. Hungarian protesters march across the Erzsebet Bridge in Budapest. October 28th, 2014. AP Photo/MTI, Janos Marjai.

After showing the pictures to the interviewees, I asked them if they recalled seeing the pictures and whether they could identify what was portrayed in the pictures. We then discussed what they thought the illuminated phones represented and whether it seemed like a symbol they could relate to. None of the LUMe activists could correctly identify either picture; this might also be due to their young age – most of them would have been in high school when the Umbrella Movement and the Hungarian internet tax protests happened. Among the five Philly Socialists interviewees, only the two older activists recalled seeing these pictures: Tyler (36) correctly identified the image of the Hungarian protests, while Alexander (43) recognized the one from Hong Kong.

More interestingly, activists of both the Philly Socialists and LUMe had a hard time pinpointing the meaning of the lit-up phones. A few remarked on how the lights could substitute candles in a vigil (LUMe: Boris, Stefano; Philly Socialists: Lisa); many

more read the phones as a way to signal one's presence, like people used to do at concerts with lighters (LUMe: Stefano, Jessica, Maria, Valeria; Philly Socialists: Donna). A couple of interviewees suggested it might be a practical way to illuminate the event (LUMe: Mario, Valeria). One interviewee (Stefano from LUMe) suggested that the phones were a good representation in the case the demonstrations had to do with access to technology (as it is, in a way, in the Hungarian case); another one (Paolo from LUMe) tentatively argued that the action might stand to signal that "part of the mass is conscious". Lastly, Tyler and Alexander, the two activists who correctly identified one picture or the other, both associated the action with the intent to show that the activists rely on the smartphone as a tool – and particularly a tool that can allow them to document the protests (and possibly their repression). Tyler described the meaning of this action as follows:

> I guess it's sort of like the phone as a means. I mean almost everyone has a phone now, so there is a ready-made element where anybody can participate. You have your phone with you. There's the element to which phones can both like we can interact with the world through them and also they reflect us and we view things through them (Tyler).

He then went on to suggest that the activists are also using the phones to convey the sense that the world is watching: "It's sort of like we are watching and yeah, like sort of we're not alone, I guess." (Tyler).

It is only for two interviewees from the Philly Socialists, Lisa and Michael, that this symbolic action speaks more directly to the idea of freedom: freedom of speech for Michael, and "freedom, freedom of communication, media, communication" for Lisa. Both of them find that this action would probably resonate in a US context, too. For other

interviewees of both the Philly Socialists and LUMe, though, the action that spread from Hong Kong to Hungary to the rest of Central Eastern Europe, is less meaningful. When I discussed with them how this symbol was meant to convey a powerful association between digital technologies and freedom, most of them resisted and questioned this interpretation. Donna (Philly Socialists) said that "the lights are definitely strange". Alexander (Philly Socialists) even found it funny that smartphones could take on such a connotation; in a doubtful tone, he added: "maybe people have positive feelings about their smartphones?" (Alexander). The Italian activists were even more skeptical. Mario commented that he found the action "certainly effective, it's an immediate and powerful symbol, but… I feel a bit of sadness when I think about the smartphone becoming a symbol of freedom, when in many ways it can actually be a symbol of the opposite". Along similar lines, Jessica offered that "it's a bit anxiety inducing to think that all these people certainly have a Facebook profile, that they have access to the internet, that their location is being logged" (Jessica). Valeria completely denied that this protest action could have a legible political meaning:

> I don't know… I don't think that through… I mean, I personally don't believe I have a voice through the smartphone. I certainly have access to more information, but it would honestly never cross my mind to take out my phone. If not to take a picture. I would never take out my phone as a symbol of something, no (Valeria).

In Valeria's perspective, the smartphone is not a suitable political symbol. Maria also shared that view and compared the smartphone to a traditional symbol of the communist Left: "I mean, a political symbol for me is like hammer and sickle. Something that can last for a long time. I see a smartphone more tied to the here and now". She then

questioned whether the smartphone could function as a symbol for protests about other topics: "Because already for migration issues it cannot be a symbol anymore. What would it represent?" (Maria).

The reactions of the vast majority of the interviewees of both the Philly Socialists and LUMe point to the limited resonance of the visual performance of mundane modernity outside of a post-communist context. When the activists were made aware of the types of demonstrations in which the images were taken, they often tempered their discomfort with the symbolism of the action by allowing that it could make sense in the specific context of Hong Kong or Hungary. But most of them could not see such action happen in one of their demonstrations or in other protests in their respective countries. This shows the limits of a technological imaginary of mundane modernity. The assumptions about technology, modernity and freedom that made this imaginary a powerful mobilizing discourse in Hungary and the smartphone a resonant political symbol for other protests in the Central Eastern European region do not necessarily translate to other political contexts.

The second limitation of the imaginary of mundane modernity can be observed in the specific context of the Hungarian internet tax protests. Although useful for the short-lived internet tax protests, this imaginary was not enough to sustain the creation of a more stable and sustainable activist infrastructure – a full-fledged social movement – in opposition to Orbán's government. While there are also specific political conditions that made it difficult for the Hungarian activists to sustain a long-term mass movement, we can also speculate that the discourses surrounding the internet that were used in the protests were not as suitable to build a broad platform centered on social justice. While it

is difficult to pinpoint why the creation of a broader movement was not possible, it seems plausible to at least suggest that an imaginary that pitches technology as the solution to the lack of economic development and equality and as a manifestation of rationality might fall short as a catalyzer for a broad movement for social justice. In both Silicon Valley's imaginary and in the imaginary of mundane modernity, it is the internet – not social mobilization – that is thought to bring about social change. And if that is the case, the imaginary of mundane modernity is in itself unlikely to inspire the kind of imagination that would be necessary to bring together a sustained large scale mobilization in the Hungarian political context.

Conclusions

In this chapter I analyzed the technological imaginary that was constructed and deployed during the Hungarian internet tax protests of 2014. In order to do that, I described the internet tax and the three demonstrations that a group of Budapest-based left-liberal activists were able to organize. I suggested that the internet tax should be read as an element of Hungary's turn to illiberal democracy that has been enacted and theorized by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, since his coming into power in 2010. I also emphasized that the internet tax protests should be considered among other activist mobilizations against Orbán: while the internet tax demonstrations might have been organized by left-liberal activists, who had been involved with many other anti-Orbán protests, they drew a much bigger and heterogeneous crowd. I then examined the success of the protests. I attributed that success to the deployment of a technological imaginary

that connected the internet to bigger political demands and turned the internet tax into a proxy of the government's policies.

Through interviews with the main organizers of the internet tax protests, I explained how the internet came to be associated with both Western modernity and mundanity. This technological imaginary, which I called mundane modernity, appropriates the core ideas of the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley, in that it associates the digital with democracy and freedom and pitches technologies as the way to solve sociopolitical issues. This imaginary of appropriation is meaningful within the post-2010 Hungarian political context, which has seen the resurgence of the political cleavage of modernity vs. tradition. The appropriation of Silicon Valley's imaginary is thus influenced by the heightened political relevance of Western modernity in the contemporary Hungarian political scene. Yet, it is also shaped by the activists' opposition to Orbán's illiberal democracy, which has its own technological imaginary, of which the internet tax is an illustration.

The deployment of the imaginary of mundane modernity in the Hungarian internet tax protests – and in other non-internet focused protests throughout the region – also shows the mobilizing power of technological imaginaries, especially those that draw on the dominant ideas that have been popularized by Silicon Valley over the past few decades. The performance of the imaginary of mundane modernity through the symbolic lifting of smartphones to the sky could be read as a political symbol because of the very power of Silicon Valley's imaginary and its appropriation in the post-communist context.

However, as I have shown in this chapter, the power of this imaginary has limits. The Italian and American activists with whom I have discussed the protest action

involving smartphones expressed their reservations about its political relevance. Turning smartphones into a political symbol did not make sense to them. I thus argued that mundane modernity is not an equally suitable imaginary for movements that, as LUMe and the Philly Socialists, disagree with the premises of the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley.

I now turn to LUMe and the Philly Socialists, whose rejection of Silicon Valley's ideas requires the construction of technological imaginaries of negotiation.

Chapter 3 – Negotiation: LUMe and the tools of the system

Introduction

In this chapter I examine the technological imaginary of the Metropolitan University Laboratory (*Laboratorio Universitario MEtropolitano*, or LUMe[26]), a radical leftist collective based in Milan, Italy. The collective is made of students and recent graduates of the universities and art academies in Milan. They are a broadly inclusive leftist group, which self-describes as "antisexist, antiracist, and antifascist". Since its founding in 2015, LUMe has occupied three different empty buildings, which they opened to the public and used to host public events, such as concerts, theater performances, and debates. LUMe is widely known in the Milanese activist scene for its commitment to promoting grassroots culture.

This chapter is based on a combination of interviews and visual focus groups. In particular, I rely on 8 semi-structured interviews conducted with LUMe activists (4 men and 4 women) between 2018 and 2019. The interviews were conducted either in person in Milan or via video chat software (either Skype or Facebook Messenger); their average length was 78 minutes. I also conducted two visual focus groups, with 5 and 4 participants respectively. Interviews and visual focus groups were conducted in Italian; they were audio-recorded and transcribed. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Italian are mine. In addition to the interviews and visual focus groups, I observed LUMe in different occasions: two open assemblies (in December 2017 and December 2018), one

[26] Although LUMe activists are not consistent in their capitalization practices, I reproduce the sequence of uppercase and lowercase letters that they use in their logo.

organizational assembly (in June 2018) and a working group meeting (June 2018). I also collected media coverage of LUMe and monitored as LUMe's social media content.

I describe LUMe's technological imaginary – in the words of the members of the collective – as "fighting the system with the tools of the system". It is an imaginary that sees digital technologies as flawed, but indispensable for social change. In the terms employed by this dissertation, it is an imaginary of negotiation: the Italian activists criticize the key aspects of the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley, yet they rely on Silicon Valley's technologies in their activism. To make sense of the tensions that ensue, they draw on two resources: their occupied, offline spaces and the idea of using digital technologies with "awareness" (*consapevolezza*). Their imaginary of negotiation is shaped by the legacy of the Italian social centers; this legacy carries with it an attention to the role of occupied spaces, which plays a key role in how LUMe activists think about the digital. But there is also another element which shapes their negotiation: the prominence of the technological imaginary of the Five Star Movement, one of the main Italian political parties, now in government. Their imaginary, which re-elaborates the technological imaginary of Silicon Valley, is predicated on a discourse of digital utopianism, which has been used to justify nondemocratic practices within the party (see Natale & Ballatore, 2014; Treré, 2018).

In the chapter I first describe LUMe's history, since its foundation in 2015, and I highlight how the three subsequent occupations have structured the life of the collective. I then examine the politics of LUMe. I contextualize the collective's politics within the long history of Italian "social centers", i.e. social movements that occupy buildings as their primary political practice; I show how LUMe critically reinterprets this legacy. I

then focus on two of the main issues that have guided LUMe's political action: their interest in using occupied spaces to foster grassroots culture that is accessible to all, and their anti-racist mobilization. The chapter then describes the horizontal organizational structures through which LUMe operates. Further, I account for LUMe's technological practices as they pertain to both external and internal communication; in particular, I highlight the centrality of Facebook and Whatsapp in the life of the collective. In the rest of the chapter, I theorize LUMe's technological imaginary of "using the tools of the system to fight the system". I use the collective drawings prepared by the activists in the visual focus groups, as well as the interviews, to highlight LUMe's main critiques of the internet: a) an anticapitalist critique of how corporate power operates online and b) skepticism about the democraticness of the internet. However, despite this criticism, they also believe that digital technologies are crucial for activism and that there is no alternative to them. Their technological imaginary of negotiation thus considers digital technologies simultaneously as flawed and indispensable. I describe how their negotiation relies on "awareness" and on occupied spaces as resources that allow them to make sense of their technological imaginary. Lastly, I argue that LUMe's technological imaginary is shaped by both the heritage of the Italian occupied social centers and by LUMe's rejection of the prominent technological imaginary expressed by the Five Star Movement.

The Metropolitan University Laboratory

LUMe is based in Milan, Italy. LUMe was founded in April 2015 during the occupation of an empty, privately-owned multi-story building located in vicolo Santa

Caterina, next to the University of Milan (*Università degli Studi di Milano*, usually known as *Università Statale*). The occupied building gave them a venue for concerts, poetry readings, and theater performances, which led to the inclusion of students from the numerous art schools and performance academies of Milan.

The occupation was spearheaded by an existing collective, called *Collettivo Dillinger*, which was founded by a handful of activists who came from the same political background: having created a left-wing political association for high school students in Milan, called *Rete Studenti*. When this generation of activists arrived at the University of Milan, they decided to continue their experience of organizing through the creation of a collective – *Dillinger*. It is *Dillinger* that originally occupied the Santa Caterina building ("Milano: Nasce Lume, Laboratorio Universitario Metropolitano," 2015) and named it LUMe, which subsequently became the name of the larger collective. In their communiqué following the occupation, they reflected on the meaning of the occupation: "We believe that the only way out of a crisis, that is first existential and of thought, and then economic, lies in the exchange of critical ideas, in the encounter between thinking bodies and minds" (Collettivo Dillinger, 2015). As I will show below, the importance of occupying physical space is crucial to the politics of the collective.

The activists I have encountered and interviewed are all in their twenties, with younger members as young as 21 and older members around 28-29 years old. This means that generationally, these young activists have been greatly influenced by the mobilization of the Anomalous Wave, the student movement that, between 2008 and 2009, opposed the educational policies of the Berlusconi IV government (see Barassi & Treré, 2012); although not all of the LUMe activists were old enough to be part of the

Wave, the founding members of the collective started to be politically active during that time of heightened student activism.

In the following two years LUMe grew rapidly, taking advantage of the proximity to the University of Milan. They cleaned, painted and renovated the occupied building, opening it up to the public and providing a hub for music, performance and art. They discovered that the Santa Caterina building also had access to a crypt and held all of their concerts and performances there. LUMe activists turned the other floors (four in total) into a bar, a relaxation room with couches, a rehearsal space, study spaces and several other rooms which hosted LUMe's sprawling projects. They often took advantage of the adjacent parvis of the Church of San Nazaro in Brolo to hold concerts and film screenings outdoors.

Over their first two years of existence, LUMe became an important hub for young artists and students of the universities in Milan. The occupied space brought together "young activists with experience as militants of social centers, students of the University of Milan and beyond, artists, musicians" ("LUMe - Tre anni di viaggio nella metropoli," 2018). Their focus on art and culture as a form of political activism made them a unique collective in the Milanese scene. During this time, LUMe grew to include between 80 and 100 activists; most of them had never been involved in activism before joining the collective.

The Santa Caterina building had a peculiar history. Part of a cluster of buildings constructed in the 16th century, it had historically been a *osteria* (popular restaurant); that *osteria* was even mentioned in one of the most important Italian novels, *The Betrothed*, authored by Alessandro Manzoni in 1827 ("LUMe - Tre anni di viaggio nella metropoli,"

2018). LUMe later honored this literary legacy with a mural painting that depicts the scene of *The Betrothed* in which the *osteria* is mentioned. The building is owned by a real estate company which has been in the midst of legal trouble for years (Collettivo Dillinger, 2015). It had been empty for ten years when LUMe occupied it.

They were evicted from the Santa Caterina building in the summer of 2017. The eviction was a rather traumatic event for the collective. According to the activists, contrary to usual police practice, LUMe was not alerted of the upcoming eviction ("Sgomberato Lume. E il centro sociale organizza un concerto," 2017). Police cleared out the occupied space in the early morning. LUMe activists only found out because an activist of an allied organization happened upon the eviction and informed them. The loss of a physical space weighed on the collective. They promptly organized open assemblies and movie screenings in the square adjacent to their no longer occupied building. They promoted a petition to the Municipality of Milan, which gathered more than 2800 supporters on change.org (LUMe, 2017a). Throughout that summer, they met in activists' apartments and in meeting spaces provided by other organizations. At that point, none of the other collectives that are close to LUMe (in the so-called *Area*, which I describe below) had an occupied space that they could offer as temporary base.

LUMe spent that summer of 2017 planning their comeback. In particular, on 23 September 2017 they organized the "cultural siege of Palazzo Marino" (*Assedio culturale a Palazzo Marino*): a one-day event, with speeches, live music, theater performances, and so on, organized around a march from the Santa Caterina building to the main seat of the municipal government of Milan – Palazzo Marino. For this event, LUMe gathered the support of a broad range of actors: other collectives in Milan and in Italy, local bands and

artists, cultural organizations, theater ensembles. With the "cultural siege", LUMe aimed to highlight its contribution to the cultural life of the city and to the precarious life of the Milanese youth, but also denounce the hypocrisy of being evicted to "preserve decorum". In one of their Facebook posts on the cultural siege, they explained that they were mobilizing "against the idea of decorum, according to which it is preferable to leave a historical building in the run-down conditions that the Santa Caterina building was in [before their occupation], instead of bringing it to life and into the spotlight of the city's cultural scene" (LUMe, 2017c). At the end of the same post, they stated that they were taking to the streets to "defend the right to a legitimate sociality, to a critical, independent and self-organized culture" (LUMe, 2017c).

The cultural siege was organized under two slogans, which exemplify LUMe's communicative style, inspired by guerrilla marketing. The first was "*LUMe non si spegne*", literally "LUMe can't be turned off". This is a play on the fact that the group's acronym is pronounced like the archaic Italian word "lume", which means light: the slogan thus simultaneously means that a light cannot be turned off and that the collective cannot be turned off. Furthermore, "lume" not only means light, but also forms the basis of the Italian word for Englightenment, *Illuminismo.* Because of this association, the group has relied on representations of "light" in its visual identity, too. Their logo is, in fact, a traditional incandescent light bulb in which the internal filament is shaped like a fist (a longtime symbol of the anticapitalist left) (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. The logo of LUMe plays on the assonance of the acronym of the collective with an archaic Italian word that means "light" (lume); the logo is a traditional incandescent light bulb in which the internal filament is shaped like a fist (LUMe, 2017b).

The second slogan was also a wordplay on the Italian term for "heavy artillery" – *artiglieria pesante* – to which LUMe added the letter "n", turning it into *artiglieria pensante*, "thinking artillery". The slogan made its way to the t–shirts that LUMe prepared for the occasion, which depicted a brain emerging from a post-nuclear explosion mushroom cloud (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. A t-shirt created by LUMe for the “cultural siege” of 2017. On top of the slogan “artiglieria pensante” (i.e. thinking artillery, a wordplay on the Italian words for heavy artillery), a mushroom cloud shaped like a brain (LUMe, 2017f).

In October 2017, LUMe conducted a brief occupation of a foreclosed cinema – Cinema Orchidea – in the city center of Milan, re-opening it for the local population. Due to the fear of being under police watch, LUMe announced it was “back” with a Facebook event (LUMe, 2017h), but did not disclose what building it would occupy. Ahead of the announcement, they prepared an entire line-up of events, including a debate on the commons (Tavola Rotonda sui Beni Comuni) with external experts, open assemblies and movie screenings (LUMe, 2017h). On October 18th, the day of the occupation, the activists met at the Catholic University of Milan (Università Cattolica) and pretended to

be celebrating someone's graduation. One activist, Jessica, posed as the graduate, with the customary laurels and flower bouquet, as well as the inevitable celebratory sparkling wine; she led the group of 80 activists through the streets around the Catholic University. Only a handful of activists knew of the destination. Once at the cinema, a first attempt to enter the building from a nearby courtyard failed, forcing the activists to break a glass panel to get in. In the following days, LUMe took advantage of the cinema to promote free movie screenings, jazz concerts, and cultural and political debates.

The occupation of the movie theater was brief. The building, owned by the Municipality of Milan, had been closed to the public since 2009; the municipal government approved and financed its renovation in 2015, but at the time of LUMe's occupation (late 2017) the movie theater still had not undergone any repair work (LUMe, 2017g; Venni, 2017). The Municipality did not take LUMe's occupation well and immediately denounced the action to the police (Venni, 2017). LUMe, however, publicly pledged it would leave the building as soon as the Municipality of Milan resumed the renovation works on the movie theater (Vazzana, 2017). On October 25th, the municipal government announced that the renovation of the Cinema Orchidea would start before the end of 2017. LUMe declared victory: they announced they would leave the movie theater on that same day (LUMe, 2017i). They stated that only their mobilization – their "conflictual action" of occupying the cinema – induced the Municipality to act (LUMe, 2017i); and that they would leave the Cinema Orchidea "with pride, having woken up the institutions from their torpor" (LUMe, 2017i). As of April 2019, unfortunately, renovations still need to begin and the Cinema Orchidea is not open to the public (LUMe, 2019b).

A week after leaving the Cinema Orchidea, on November 2, 2017, they occupied a municipality-owned maintenance deposit (magazzino del verde), where they are currently carrying out their activities. The deposit is part of the system of XVI Century walls adjacent to Porta Venezia, one of the ancient gates to the city. LUMe states that the deposit was built in 1789 to host the maintenance equipment needed for the upkeep of the gardens that were built around the defensive walls, after they no longer functioned as military defense (LUMe, 2017j). The last known use of the deposit, prior to LUMe's occupation, dated to the 1920s (LUMe, 2017j). The deposit is a vaulted space; it includes a larger room, which activists use for concerts and performances, a long L-shaped corridor with a side room used for storage, and a large entryway. While the new occupied space has its own challenges – such as the damp and cold climate –, it has given LUMe the possibility to resume its cultural and political activities; in the Facebook post where they claimed responsibility for the occupation, they explained that they were continuing their "denunciation of the abandonment of privately and publicly owned historical buildings" (LUMe, 2017j). They claimed that they wanted to "make this space a home for arts and culture, to push forward our horizontal and inclusive model, to give back to citizens a place that has survived the unstoppable transformation of the city of Milan over the past 250 years" (LUMe, 2017j).

LUMe hoped that their new location could foster a positive relationship with the neighboring communities, even if far away from the University of Milan. Their relationship with the neighborhood has been mostly untroubled. However, a group of local residents complained to the police and the Municipality about the loudness of some of the activities of LUMe, which typically take place in the evening (Mingoia, 2018a).

LUMe contended that the complaint did not originate from residents but was orchestrated by a group of party members of Forza Italia – Berlusconi's right-wing formation. While they used media coverage to reassure the neighborhood that they aimed for a respectful coexistence and to invite neighbors to take part in their activities (Mingoia, 2018b), they penned a Facebook post to criticize the Forza Italia member that they held responsible for this episode. They made fun of his attempts to rally the residents against LUMe and defended their occupation, by underlining how they managed to reopen a space that had been closed for a century: "Was it better beforehand? Abandoned for decades, with hundreds of needles both inside and in the adjoining garden, that we removed to our risk? With mice and human waste that we clean up every day?" (LUMe, 2018b).

Currently, LUMe is technically occupying a second space – a classroom within the University of Milan. For decades, this small classroom had been a hub for student organizations, clubs and the University's student-run independent newspaper (LUMe, 2018a). It was closed by the university administration in 2015. In September 2018, LUMe activists occupied the room to re-open it for the student population (LUMe, 2018d). In addition to being used by LUMe and other student groups, the room is open to students who use it as a study hall.

The politics of LUMe

LUMe is a broadly inclusive leftist collective. But if you looked for a manifesto or a ten-point plan that explains what political ideas LUMe stands for, you would be disappointed. LUMe's politics shine through their myriad events and colorful digital posters, but it is hard to pin them down. On the old blog-website that the collective no longer updates, which I will discuss in detail below, the page titled "Manifesto" has a

single long quote from activist Primo Moroni, a key figure of the Milan-based radical movements of the 1970s. His work with Libreria Calusca, an activist bookstore that functioned as a hub for radical leftists and anarchists (Lucarelli, 2018; Ruggiero, 2000, p. 172), and his involvement in the early occupation movements (*centri sociali*) make Moroni a forefather to today's movements. The quote that LUMe chose to describe themselves highlights the importance of developing spaces of resistance in the city:

> Places are crucial, because there is a process of general subsumption of life, the economy, and culture: everything is a commodity. But then there are places where this logic is rejected. I think that this is a phase in which those who have the capacities, the credibility, the subjectivity to have places, in my opinion should not just enact a political project, at least at this stage, but rather do something else that is strategic and indispensable: to transform those places in research centers, or at least devote part of their activity to education and research. If knowledge has become a productive commodity, either in itself or by being enclosed in the machine, in technology, or in information, which is its largest extension, we need to make existential decisions; but if existential decisions are not nurtured by a complex and sophisticated culture, i.e. of continuous cultural production and self-production, that decision will only produce existential malaise. Between existential revolt and the self-production of the subject there is a strategic step, which is the capacity to take control of different knowledge instruments that allow us to decode, de-structure and blow up the schemas of the adversary: otherwise nothing can come through without this primitive cultural accumulation of knowledges (LUMe, n.d.).

The long quote emphasizes the necessity to create spaces that are able to resist the commodification of life and to rescue knowledge from profit, by allowing people to autonomously create culture, away from the logics of capital. As we will see below, LUMe has taken up Moroni's invitation and sees culture as a primary locus for political contention.

The absence of a manifesto beyond the quote from Moroni is indicative of the loose articulation of the political stances of LUMe. But this is not considered a problem by the activists. As Stefano explained: “we have a rather vague political identity and everyone has their own opinions, but we have things we are fairly committed to, without having to write it down in a manifesto”. Some of this reluctance to pinning down their political values in a document certainly rests in their will to not adhere to any specific leftist revolutionary theory. As Paolo said:

> Well, let’s say that LUMe doesn’t have a real… we don’t fit within one of the many, very many theories of the Left. So, you can’t really pin us down and say that LUMe belongs to… I don’t know, the marxist-leninist tradition. We don’t aim for the creation of a mass party. You can’t say we are a libertarian space that aims for anarchy… We can say that the largest majority of our comrades, and certainly of the comrades that are in the political collective, but the group in general… we have a communist orientation, if we can still call it that. I personally am really into post-operaist theories, and it’s not just me (Paolo).

This effort towards inclusivity and a-theoretical praxis might also explain how LUMe managed to attract so many members that had never previously been involved in political activism, let alone an occupation. The other likely reason that brought LUMe to not invest time and energy into drafting a political manifesto is the fact that occupying a space frames their activism in the tradition of the “social centers” (*centri sociali*), as I will explain in the next subsection. Identifying as a social center already implies a certain set of political commitments. A few interviewees referred to the “obvious values” that LUMe holds “as a social center”: being a social center carries a set of expectations regarding political identity that are taken for granted in the Italian activist scene. This means a general leftist orientation, “a Marxist reading of society” (Mario), an opposition

to neoliberal capitalism and imperialism; it also implies a general opposition towards right-wing populism – and thus the current Italian government that is based on an alliance between the Northern League and the Five Star Movement. Yet it also entails a certain disregard for the parties of the center-left, chiefly the Democratic Party, and its local expressions, such as the coalition that governs the Municipality of Milan. Their identity as "social center" also means valuing participatory mechanisms in their organizing.

These are the political orientations embraced by LUMe, which are implicit in their calling themselves a "social center", but are made explicit through the events and mobilizations that the group promotes. When asked explicitly about the politics of LUMe, activists rarely articulate these values, although they come to the fore in their answers to other questions. The shorthand that most of the interviewees used to explain the politics of LUMe to me, and which is included in all of their online materials as well as public presentations, is that they identify as "antifascist, antiracist and antisexist". This translates into three visible threads running through their many events: promoting antifascist mobilizations and cultural events, organizing around the issue of immigration, and hosting feminist and queer artists and speakers. LUMe has been involved in the organization of anti-fascist and anti-racist protests, directed against, among others, the Northern League, i.e. the xenophobic right-wing populist party that governed the region of Lombardy since 2013 and is now a major actor in the national government coalition (elected in 2018). LUMe's collective appears friendlier towards women and LGBTQ individuals than what is typically the case for radical leftist collectives. This is also reflected in their participation in Gay Pride parades in Milan and their organization of a four-day festival, called "Body Politics: body self-determination", thought of as a

collective consciousness-raising moment directed at eliminating gender disparities. The festival was held in March 2018, around International Women's Day, and was organized in collaboration with a radical feminist collective and the Milan branch of the national feminist movement "Non una di meno" ("Not one woman less").

In the rest of this section on the politics of LUMe, I explain the importance of occupying buildings as a longstanding political tactic in the history of Italian radical activism; I highlight how LUMe consciously draws on this legacy, while also trying to distance itself from its problematic aspects. I then focus on two of the issues that have defined LUMe's political action: their commitment to grassroots, accessible culture as a form of political struggle and their mobilization against racism.

Occupation as a tactic and an identity: LUMe as a social center

In an open assembly that took place shortly after the occupation of the maintenance deposit in Porta Venezia, a participant not (yet) affiliated with LUMe, but acquainted with one of the activists, reported a rumor: that LUMe maintains a list of possible target buildings that the activists have scouted around the city. While the activists declined to get into that particular discussion or confirm the rumor, the assembly briefly discussed the problems involved in occupying buildings. Since occupation is not only illegal but defined as a criminal act in the Italian penal code, activists can be prosecuted. But LUMe activists also underscored that occupations are risky because they require a lot of labor, not only for the initial act of entering into a building to claim it and reopen it for public fruition, but also for necessary repairs and organizational work. LUMe takes great pride in the labor that its activist put into de facto restoring both the Santa Caterina building and its current occupied location. When I first visited LUMe for

an open assembly in December 2017, the building had been occupied for a couple of months. It was dark, incredibly damp and the heating was not really working. When I conducted my first interviews in June 2018, the environment had completely changed: the activists put in a wooden floor, a bar with functioning beer taps, a sink and a fridge. They upgraded the heating system with a more complex set of pipes, they added couches and a foosball table. The walls were now covered with the posters of their many events. While LUMe's assembly did not deny its dream of occupying more than one building at the time, the reality is that multiple occupied sites would be incredibly hard to manage for a large, but horizontally-run collective composed mainly by students and recent graduates – most of whom at their first activist experience.

Occupations are direct confrontations with power. They are precarious and they are risky, because occupying buildings is illegal. While there are different charges for the occupation of public vs. private buildings – and public administrations might favor tolerance over repression – occupying space remains a fraught practice. Yet it is also incredibly widespread among Italian radical activists. And it is more than a tactic: maintaining an occupied space is a source of collective identity, which entails certain types of political beliefs and political practices. This collective identity is rooted in the history of Italian occupied spaces, which activists can actively draw upon.

In fact, the occupation of privately and publicly owned buildings has been a popular tactic for Italian social movements for the past 40 years (Genova, 2018; Mudu, 2018; Ruggiero, 2000). The occupation of buildings for political purposes emerged as a tactic in the 1970s, when activists of the extra-parliamentary left occupied universities, abandoned factories, run-down buildings and even churches (Edwards, 2009; Mudu,

2004). Although sometimes referred to in the English language literature as "political squats" (see Genova, 2018), in Italian these occupied spaces are called social centers (centri sociali) or occupied self-managed social centers (centri sociali occupati autogestiti, frequently referred to with the acronym CSOA). Unlike in other European countries, today these occupied spaces are usually not destined to provide accommodation to activists: they are occupied to host political, cultural and social events, not for housing[27]. The core principle guiding the praxis of the social centers is that of self-management (autogestione), which is based on a critique of representative democracy, a rejection of hierarchy, and an embrace of horizontal organizational practices (Montagna, 2006, p. 296).

The history of Italian social centers is challenging to periodize. Writing in 1992, the activist, historian and archivist of Milanese social movements, Primo Moroni, identified three generations of occupied social centers (Moroni, 1992). From the vantage point of 2019 we can probably identify four generations of social centers – three are well documented in the literature, but I argue for the necessity to recognize a fourth one, that helps explain the contemporary moment.

First, the initial wave of occupations of the 1970s, which started before and fed into the tumultuous events of 1977, was the consequence of the emergence of youth as a political actor in the post-1968 context – a largely disenfranchised, impoverished and precarious youth (Moroni, 1992). Occupying buildings was the response to the erosion of traditional social spaces of aggregations – which for the Left were chiefly factories and party-sponsored spaces – and to the need of creating autonomous spaces for the pre-

[27] In the 1970s the squatting of empty apartments and houses was more commonly included in the occupation tactics of the extra-parliamentary left, e.g. Lotta Continua (Gray, 2018). Live-in occupations still exist today, but they are understood to be disjoined from the experience of the social centers.

figurative experimentation of alternative lifestyles. A second generation of occupations emerged in the 1980s, driven by the thriving punk scene and the attempt to escape the spread of heroin, by providing social spaces that were not tied to heroin consumption. The most important social center of this generation is Leoncavallo in Milan, not because of its founding (it existed since the 1970s), but because in 1989 the police evicted it in a heightened confrontation that generated a wave of solidarity throughout the country. This solidarity translated into the occupation of more spaces, in conjunction with the rise of a new student movement in Italian schools and universities – the Panther (La Pantera). A third generation of social centers found strength in the extraordinary international mobilization of the global justice movement. From the mid-1990s onward, after the Zapatista uprising in the mountains of Chiapas, through the anti-Iraq war demonstrations of the early 2000s, social centers were a crucial component of the broader anti-globalization movement. New occupations emerged everywhere in Italy. After this period of growth and (relative) popularity of social centers, which actively created regional and national networks of solidarity with each other, political and organizational divisions began to weigh on this already fragmented and diverse movement (Casaglia, 2018, p. 490). This led to a perception of social centers as sectarian and self-righteous, more interested in cultivating loyalty within an inner circle of long-time activists than incubating inclusive mobilizations.

Some of these tendencies, however, have been mitigated in what I argue is a new generation of social centers, which were born in the 2010s. These social centers were established by newer generations of activists, for whom the financial crisis of 2008 and the Anomalous Wave of student movements in Italy in 2008-2009 were key events. In

Milan, this generation of social centers includes not only LUMe (b. 2015), but also Macao (b. 2012) (Cossu, 2018; Murru & Cossu, 2015), ZAM (b. 2010) (Barassi, 2015), CASC Lambrate (b. 2012) and CSOA Lambretta (b. 2012); similar experiences also sprung up in other Italian cities, for instance Labas in Bologna (b. 2012). A catalyzing event for this new wave of occupations that was specific to Milan was the urban development process ahead of the 2015 Milan Expo (the Universal Exposition), which gave movements in the city a chance to defend the commons (i.e. specifically green spaces in the case of the Expo) and "raise awareness about neoliberal processes of governance at work" (Casaglia, 2018, p. 492). This newer generation has critically reinterpreted the legacy of the social center identity, while attempting to be more open, i.e. less identitarian and more integrated with the neighborhoods in which the social centers are situated. As is evident in the case of Macao (Murru & Cossu, 2015; Valli, 2015) and of LUMe, as I will explain in the following section, a core focus of this new generation of social centers lies in the production of cultural events.

Throughout this 40-year history of diverse, fragmented and precarious occupations, a few key values have been constant. Social centers have been overwhelmingly urban expressions of the anticapitalist, antifascist Left[28]. Casaglia (2018) argued that, starting in the 1970s, social centers "called for a bottom-up participation in the transformation of power relations", which was put into practice through self-management and the "running [of] physical squatted space as a liberative and

[28] Social centers have emerged in rural areas, too, but in these cases they faced significant difficulties due to their geographical distance from centers of power and the characteristics of rural oriented social life (Mudu, 2018). Neofascist activists, such as those of Casa Pound, have also occupied buildings – notably in Rome – to carry out their political activities. These occupations however cannot be considered social centers because of their political orientation and more hierarchical and leader-centered organizational practices (Mudu, 2018).

participative public place" (p. 483). As Mudu (2018) suggested, social centers have engendered "an 'enactment' of physical spaces towards the production of a non-commodified sociality, free culture, and bottom-up self-managed services" (p. 451). In so doing they have brought together an opposition to capitalism with prefigurative practices, combining "radical struggle with grassroots initiatives for alternative models" (Casaglia, 2018, p. 483).

For LUMe, occupying run-down, unused buildings means actively turning them into commons, liberating them from neglect, reopening them for public consumption and filling them with politically meaningful cultural content. The idea of "commons" has been central to the praxis of social centers of the past 10 years; at the same time, the idea of fighting to preserve the commons has been seeping into mainstream public opinion due to the successful national referendum of 2011, where Italians voted to stop the privatization of the water service, under the slogan "Water as a commons" (Acqua Bene Comune) (Mattei, 2013). Commons can be defined as "social systems at different scales of action within which resources are shared and in which a community defines the terms of the sharing, often through forms of horizontal social relations founded on participatory and inclusive democracy" (De Angelis, 2014, p. 302). Although the idea of commons has been important to political philosophers for a long time, recent contributions focus on the way in which commons can be a response to capitalist enclosure that can be put in practice through a process of "commoning", i.e. through "social labor and the corresponding forms of cooperation that are located within commons" (De Angelis, 2014, p. 302). In short, talking about commons today is not necessarily talking about protecting pre-existing commons – parks, waterways, nature –, but rather about sustaining the

creation of commons which operate, as much as possible, outside of capitalist logics (Casaglia, 2018). It is in this vein that Paolo, one of LUMe's founders, defined LUMe as "urban commons" (bene comune urbano). Boris also said that what has motivated him the most to join LUMe was "the struggle and the will to bring run-down, abandoned and closed spaces to life, and to make them what we would like them to be, commons". Jessica reminisced about the occupation of the Cinema Orchidea:

> It was one of the best moments of my life. I never thought that at age 28, maybe 26 at the time… I would have occupied a movie theater. But it was great. I did not feel I was engaged in vandalism, I felt like I was doing the right thing and I don't regret it, I will never regret it… because that movie theater had been shut down for 10 years and we went in and for that week me made it live again. (Jessica)

Over and over again, in both the interviews that I conducted and in their public statements, LUMe activists echoed Jessica's words: that their occupations of buildings are really liberations, that are meant to open up and revitalize urban spaces. LUMe's approach received unexpected validation in one of the legal proceedings that LUMe's activists have been involved in ("Occupare? Non (sempre) è reato: gip 'perdona' studenti di un centro sociale," 2018; "'Occupare non è reato se lo scopo è dimostrativo', il gip di Milano perdona due studenti di un centro sociale," 2018). After the occupation of their current location in 2017, two of the activists received criminal charges. In 2018, however, the preliminary investigation judge (gip) turned down the public prosecutor's (Procura) request to proceed with a criminal trial, and instead redirected the case to an administrative court for a regular, civil proceeding. The preliminary investigation judge's decision stated that "it is not a crime to occupy a building if the action has an exemplary intent aimed at steering public authorities towards a more fruitful utilization of such

spaces with objectives connected with the enjoyment of collectivity and citizenship" ("'Occupare non è reato se lo scopo è dimostrativo', il gip di Milano perdona due studenti di un centro sociale," 2018). Commenting on this remarkable judicial decision, LUMe activists wrote:

> the symbolic value of these words, beyond the legal one, is evident: the political nature of LUMe as urban commons, its accessibility, its public and social function, and the work that, as a collective, we carry out in the city of Milan is being recognized in its entirety. But we are anyway still far away from the possibility of breaking out of current legal structures, tied to exclusionary and exclusive concepts and interpretations, to engender new legal-political practices and conceptions that are oriented towards a social use of private property. (LUMe, 2018e)

After asserting the value of occupation and commoning, and the need to rethink the law around a more collective and social interpretation of private property, LUMe's Facebook post went on to highlight how social centers are at increased risk of repression under the Northern League – Five Star Movement government. In its last part, LUMe's post invited activists to fight against "the rise of souverainiste fascisms, the complicity of populists and the neoliberal centrist parties", through "the strength and transparency of the practices, the ideas, the communities, and the networks we will manage to build" (LUMe, 2018e). In so doing, LUMe drew a direct line between the practice of creating urban commons and the opposition to rising populist, fascist and neoliberal forces.

It is evident that the occupation of buildings and their transformation into commons provides a strong collective identity to LUMe's activists. The identity work performed by the practice of occupation became even more evident to activists when they were evicted from their first occupied space in 2017. As Mario recalled:

> It is important to have a space, it's unthinkable to go on without one for a long time. Even if LUMe, even if any collective, cannot be reduced to the physical structure that hosts it in that given moment, that physical structure nevertheless contributes to giving you an identity, to giving you a certain… mindset, because when you know you have your social center, you work on it, you have to manage it, etc etc, this beats the time of your militancy. Assemblies and so on… (Mario)

Even though a social center, as a collective actor, can survive without a physical occupied space, the practices of self-management that sustain an occupation give activists an identity and a mindset, as Mario highlighted. The occupation gives LUMe a way of thinking about their activism and situate it within the broader political context of the city of Milan.

The embrace of occupation and commoning puts them in conversation with the long legacy of social centers in Italy, which I sketched out above. As one of the activists articulated:

> even historically… it can't be lost, this practice [occupation] has value, if we lose it… I mean, we talked about it a lot, when we were about to occupy again, we decided it's a practice that can't get lost and we need to continue with it even if… even if maybe we would not pull it off. (Valeria)

The activists are acutely aware of the legacy of the social centers and consciously situate their occupations within that historical trajectory. However, as both a young social center and as composed by young activists, LUMe has been critical in reflecting on what that parts of that legacy they most wanted to embrace. Many interviewees explained that LUMe tried to innovate what being a social center means: "we wanted to bring something new by proposing activities that were not… how can I say it… not the classical conception of activity that you have within social centers" (Paolo). This innovation of the

“classic” social center was necessary because of the difficult political moment in which LUMe came to exist. As Stefano chronicled:

> I mean, it was the moment when, even from the media’s perspective, the term “social center” and “social center-ers” (*centro-socialisti*) was almost a plague. It was the backlash of the ‘black block’ paranoia, it was happening again but around the social centers. It was partially caused by the Expo, and it got worse over time, for political and party-political reasons. (Stefano)

The backlash that Stefano identified corresponds to a decrease in popularity and an increase of infighting that older social centers went through after the mid-2000s, and which ultimately gave a new generation of social centers the motivation to try to do things differently. Jessica and Ilaria both highlighted that LUMe’s innovative take on the identity of social centers is what initially drove them to join. Jessica explained: “You know, one might think that social centers… that only certain types of people go there. But what I always liked about LUMe is that you could find anyone there, really”. Ilaria echoed her: “You know, LUMe was a hybrid between a classic social center and a cultural center, more in line with what had always been my interests. That’s why I joined and then I got super-politicized”. Stefano confirmed that one of LUMe’s aims was to “be able to say that [LUMe] was a social center without creating panic in other people” and that LUMe succeeded in this; Jessica concurred, explaining that LUMe’s ability to bring different people together in a non-traditional social center “is what brought me to being part of it without being ashamed, but rather to be very proud of it”.

Although LUMe might have a particularly innovative take on being an occupied social center – no doubt fueled by its characteristic attention to culture –, they are not the only expression of this new wave of social centers in Milan. For instance, LUMe is part

of a loosely coordinated aggregation of movements and (newer) social centers in Milan, known as "Area" or "Antagonistic Milanese Area" (*Area Antagonistica Milanese*). The Area is composed by LUMe, CASC Lambrate, CSOA Lambretta, Rete Studenti (the student collective through which many of LUMe's older activists first got politically engaged), ZIP and ZAM. The Area collectives regularly meet in open assemblies and engage in joint mobilizations. They coalesce around an alternative website, called "Milan in Movement" (*Milano in Movimento*, hereafter MiM), which provides information about upcoming events, documents ongoing struggles and covers actions and demonstrations, in the tradition of alternative media outlets such as Indymedia and the Italian globalproject.info ("GlobalProject," n.d.).

"Grassroots culture" for all

Besides the occupation of spaces, which, as highlighted above, is a political project in its own, LUMe is known for its attention to arts and culture. First of all, in a city like Milan, which has become unaffordable for many and which is known for exploiting creative workers and artists, the fact that LUMe is offering a venue for artists to perform (and get compensated) and for a broad public to watch live performances for a small price (usually a suggested contribution of 2-3€) is in itself a highly political stance. In contrast to other social centers, that see cultural and musical programming as a means to economically support the occupation of a space, for LUMe jazz shows, theater performances and movie screenings are a core part of their identity. These performances include both members of LUMe, who perform in different capacities, and external, invited artists.

LUMe activists describe their approach as one centered on promoting "grassroots culture" (*cultura dal basso*), self-organized cultural production that is of high quality but also accessible to all, regardless of income. In practice, this means first of all that LUMe takes great care in selecting who is performing there; that although they try to promote emerging, young artists, this does not mean that anyone is allowed to perform at LUMe. Secondly, all artists that perform at LUMe are compensated – with the exception of LUMe activists themselves, who rarely are. Artists all receive the same compensation, which is typically around 50€ per person, whether they are a "big name" or a recent graduate of a performing arts school. Thirdly, as mentioned above, shows are open to the public, without an entry ticket: the collective asks for a recommended donation of 2-3€. This aspect of economic accessibility was crucial for LUMe to engage youth and university students, who typically do not have much money. Paolo explained LUMe's approach in this way:

> One of LUMe's objectives is certainly that of promoting… like, underground culture, a culture that is at the same time accessible and at a certain level… like, that has interesting contents from a political and a cultural point of view and thus… like, often people think that if a concert doesn't cost much… it's clear, people tend to value a concert also based on how much the ticket costs. Which is a dramatic thing. And we want to turn this upside down. In the Santa Caterina building we had a wonderful concert with a sax player from New York, and we still asked for 2-3€, what we usually suggest. And we try to give a compensation to the artists that perform, whether they are actors… whether they are more established actors, and artists, or students… we try to always give them the same amount, which is roughly 50€ per musician. And at the same time, while we try to appropriately compensate the bands, we also want to make sure everyone can have access to it (Paolo).

LUMe thus tries to bridge the need to keep quality performances affordable for its predominantly young audience, while at the same time compensating the performers. Because so many of LUMe's activists are artists or aspiring artists themselves, this attention to sustainable cultural programming has been crucial for the collective, which has been able to create a loyal public for its events. As one member of the theater collective recalled:

> We managed to get the university [population] to come to the theater, to come watch a show. People who would have never gone to the theater if LUMe hadn't been right there. At some point they were just lingering outside of the space… and they were discussing what they had just seen and comparing it to what they had seen the previous day. And that is a wonderful thing. (…) There is value in that. (Maria)

This is also part of the meaning of "grassroots culture": to engender a critical engagement with cultural products. LUMe's jazz programming pioneered their approach to "grassroots culture" and served as a model for successive experiments. Jazz – never the kind of music one could find in an occupied social center – rapidly became one of LUMe's distinctive features; their Wednesday evening jazz performances featured established musicians, music students, and "jam sessions" that were open to all. The choice of this genre was not accidental. LUMe considers it a product of higher quality – "jazz is not techno, I mean, it has a different cultural value" (Mario).

But besides its complexity, jazz is also very elitist, in Milan and elsewhere, in that it is associated to expensive venues: "listening to jazz has become a classist, elitist thing; you can't do it if you don't have money in your pockets" (Stefano). Jazz was thus the perfect arena to test out LUMe's approach to inclusive "grassroots culture" and subvert the taken-for-granted exclusionary dynamics of jazz performance in the city. Jazz

concerts remain very popular at LUMe and have been a huge success in term of gathering audiences, as well as recruiting new militants.

LUMe's theater collective modelled itself on the success of the jazz group; it even experimented with theater "jam sessions", where different actors could try out scenes and monologues, albeit previously rehearsed (unlike the typical jazz jam session). LUMe's theater group also took to heart the activists' dream of not only programming cultural events, but also producing them. They have produced several shows – including one that was entirely written by LUMe's no longer existing writing collective – which were performed at LUMe and in other theaters and occupied spaces. Although the ratio of LUMe's cultural production to its cultural programming is small, the activists keep dreaming of making LUMe a space that does not just host concerts or plays, but also the place where collective cultural production can happen, on the basis of a common political consciousness.

LUMe's approach to cultural programming and production serves to show how they put into practice their belief that art is political. Maria, an actress with the theater collective, argued that "an artistic act is a political act because it is directed to a mass, a number of people. Even ten people, even two people, but it transmits something, it sends a message"; she continued to say that this message might be contradictory and reinterpreted by its audience, "but it's still a message. And this is political. This is doing politics." (Maria). Mario similarly stated that offering cultural products of high quality has "a high political value in itself" when they are presented "with different modes, without having profit as the only aim, but rather the quality of the cultural production itself". This belief in the political nature of art does not translate, however, into the

illusion that any type of cultural product is in itself political. LUMe activists are critical of contemporary artists that confuse provocation with politics; this is also what explains their emphasis on the need to offer cultural events of high quality. This is the background to Stefano's words:

> Culture in itself is not political. But it's the strongest tool that our generation has… because we've run out of tools. All the effective tools are… full. They are overpopulated with content and it's hard to use them to transmit a message of any kind. I mean, you can create a Facebook page, but you don't create a Facebook page to say something, you create a Facebook to keep people updated. (Stefano)

If social media are saturated, so are news outlets, which Stefano believes people only seek out if they already know they will agree with their content. In contrast, he held that culture is "the only way in which you can get to a piece of information without knowing anything about it before. Like, you can go watch a show of which you don't know shit about and learn something new by the end of it" (Stefano). So, while for Stefano culture is not necessarily already politics in itself, he argued that it is the best – or the only remaining – avenue for social change: "the only spark of hope we have for the future is cultural".

LUMe's political-cultural practice comes through in many of their projects and events, as can be seen in two high profile ones, which received a lot of attention and media coverage: the "cultural siege to Palazzo Marino" of September 2017, introduced above, and the pirate projections of Netflix's movie on police brutality in Italy, in September 2018.

As mentioned above, after the eviction from the Santa Caterina building, LUMe spent the summer of 2017 preparing for an event that would, in their mind, put pressure

on the Municipal Government: the “cultural siege”. Their claims to the Municipality centered precisely on the importance of art for the city of Milan and on the political importance of creating sustainable cultural practices. In their introduction to the program of the “cultural siege”, they stated: “Let’s use culture and art as weapons to fight against what we can no longer bear and as chisels to shape, together, the city that we want” (LUMe, 2017d). They elaborated more in depth on this topic in an open call for support, which asked other social centers and artists to join LUMe for the “cultural siege”, and in which they articulated two claims:

> The first is centered on the necessity, more pressing than ever, to practice and diffuse culture that can feed those who produce it and that will at the same time remain accessible and approachable independently of one’s income. (…) Culture for us is like bread: you need a lot of it, and it shouldn’t cost much. And this is the second claim, a more politically practical one: we will put pressure on the city administration of Milan (but it could also be a broader claim) to safeguard the commons and the spaces of self-organized sociality. Experiences like ours deserve to be protected, and we will ask for it out loud in that square. (LUMe, 2017e)

With that quote, and the entire call for support, LUMe put culture squarely at the center of a broad platform for radical leftist politics.

The second event which serves to highlight LUMe’s praxis in relation to culture is their decision to host a “pirate projection” of the movie “On my skin” (Sulla mia pelle), produced by Netflix. The movie tells the horrific true story of Stefano Cucchi, an Italian 31-year old, who was arrested for drug possession in 2009 and subsequently died in police custody. Cucchi’s story is well known to Italian activists, along those of other young Italian men who have died due to police misconduct over the past 10 years, such as Stefano Aldrovandi (Davies, 2014). The theatrical release of the movie, which was

presented at the Venice Film Festival and was also available on Netflix, sparked a number of "pirate projections", unauthorized and free collective screenings of the movie in squares and occupied spaces, which defied copyright laws and greatly angered the producers of the movie ("Italian youths rally to free screenings of police violence film," 2018). On September 13, 2018, LUMe organized a pirate screening in a square near their occupied space, which drew over a thousand people, despite the technical difficulties with the projection and the rain that interrupted the screening (Di Paolo, 2018; LUMe, 2018c; Torrisi, 2018; "Universitari proiettano il film su Cucchi," 2018); a few days later, they offered three more free screenings of the movie in the occupied space (LUMe, 2018c). Commenting on the screenings with Italian media, one activist from LUMe argued that it is important for people "to not watch this movie by themselves" ("Universitari proiettano il film su Cucchi," 2018); another activist expanded on this idea: "We are convinced that this story needs to reach as many people as possible and that watching the movie together really makes a difference. It is only in this way that we can raise consciousness about the abuse of paper by those in uniform and in general on the living conditions within Italian prisons" (Di Paolo, 2018). Facebook removed the events that promoted the clandestine screenings ahead of their scheduled date, including LUMe's. The activists responded, on Facebook, by confirming the screening and explaining that the event had been flagged to Facebook by the movie's distributor, Lucky Red, for copyright violation, and because Netflix considers it illegal to screen its content outside of one's home. They continued:

> The thing is, there were more than 15.000 participants in the [Facebook] event and unfortunately no one's home would have been big enough to host you all. We of course have never believed in private property and in copyright (we believe CC [Creative Commons] to be

> the only way to make and share art). For LUMe, the cinema will always be a collective ritual (and in this case also a free one), and cities are the perfect theater for every collective and rebellious practice. (LUMe, 2018b)

Even in this brief comment about the pirate screenings, LUMe reaffirmed its belief in the political power of collective, grassroots, political practice and its approach to providing access to culture – even if that means breaking the rules.

Against "state racism"

One of the difficult issues that LUMe has had to confront is that of immigration. LUMe's stance on this hot topic is an open acceptance and welcoming of refugees and migrants and a strong opposition to how national and local governments have approached the topic. The location of LUMe's occupation has also forced this reckoning: Porta Venezia, close to LUMe's current occupied building, has been an informal gathering area for migrants for years, and numerous NGOs operate in that area. While the issue of immigration is definitely at the forefront of their anti-racist stances, LUMe's praxis on this topic has been the source of constant discussions within the collective. Although LUMe aims to welcome and include any and all migrants in their activities, the reality has been different; heated discussions emerge around the issue of how exactly LUMe could include migrants in their activities. Some argue that LUMe should coordinate free and informal Italian language classes. Others suggest opening LUMe during the day, to host whatever activities are needed. Other still just suggest that migrants should be involved in creative activities, e.g. around music. However, overall the collective feels that it lacks the training and the manpower to successfully accomplish these things and that it would be better if it supported these activities when spearheaded by other actors,

chiefly NGOs. They fear that their voluntaristic approach could be taken for a tokenistic engagement, meant to assuage their consciences rather than genuinely help.

They have directed some of their efforts to creating an association, called FuoriLuogo, which brings together different student groups interested in raising awareness to the situation of migrants in the city and the country. They held an inaugural event in June 2018, with a photo exhibition at the University of Milan. Some of LUMe's activists spent time volunteering with the NGOs running the "20K" project in Ventimiglia, Italy. Ventimiglia is the border town between Italy and France, where migrants trying to reach France began coalescing after the French police started enforcing border control (Giuffrida, 2018). Several NGOs operate there, and LUMe decided to take part in the activities of 20K, which is a more grassroots effort to support people in transit and monitor their treatment by the Italian and French authorities (Progetto 20k, 2017). Photos taken by LUMe activists during their time with 20K form the basis of the photo exhibition organized by FuoriLuogo in 2018.

LUMe's stance on immigration also helps clarify their political opposition to both the current Five Star Movement-League government, which campaigns on its repressive immigration policies, and the Democratic Party, previously in power. Mario explained it in these terms:

> If on the one hand you have the fascist-Leaguist (*fascioleghista*) outlook, "let's help them in their home countries, they are stealing our jobs", on the other hand you have the do-gooder[29] positions of the Democratic Party, which to me are two sides of the same coin. Nothing changes, because they are just instrumentalizing an issue that is incredibly complex (…) just to create support for one side or the other. (Mario)

[29] For a good explanation of the charged nature of the expression "do-gooder" in the current Italian political contexts, see Horowitz (2019).

What Mario is hinting at, is the absence, even in the center-left, of a structural analysis that can link the issue of migration to neoliberalism. This results in a substantial equivalence, in LUMe's eyes, between right-wing and center-left positions on the issue of migration: what activists call "state racism" (razzismo di stato). This is coupled with intense criticism of the former Minister of the Interior, Marco Minniti, from the Democratic Party, who pushed forward controversial immigration reforms (Esposito, 2017). LUMe's stance on the issue of immigration was visually represented in a large sticker that the activists attached in several locations throughout the city, including a Permanent Center for Repatriation (CPR), where undocumented migrants are detained while waiting to be expelled (LUMe, 2018f). The sticker, pictured in Figure 7, clarifies LUMe's opposition to the migration policies of the last two governments, by depicting Salvini and Minniti (current and former Ministers of the Interior) as two heads of the same monster.

Figure 7. A sticker produced by LUMe in 2018 shows the former and current Ministers of the Interior, Marco Minniti and Matteo Salvini, as two heads of the same monster. The sticker symbolizes LUMe's opposition to the migration policies of the last two governments. Photo by author.

LUMe is frequently engaged in spearheading or supporting anti-racist and anti-immigration policy demonstrations and direct actions. In February 2019, before a city-wide demonstration ("Decreto sicurezza, in migliaia in corteo a Milano: 'Disobbediamo alle leggi razziste,'" 2019), they symbolically occupied a Ministerial building in Milan, to protest against the closure of ports enacted by the government ("Decreto Salvini, i centri sociali occupano la sede milanese del ministero: Blitz di 20 minuti tra fumogeni e striscioni," 2019; "I centri sociali occupano la sede del ministero dei Trasporti a Milano," 2019; "Milano, studenti e centri sociali occupano il Ministero dei Trasporti," 2019). The occupation was meant to be brief and symbolic: it only lasted 20 minutes, but gathered a fair amount of media coverage, allowing the activists to draw attention to the large demonstration that was scheduled for the following day. LUMe promoted this action with the other collectives of the Milanese "Area", as well as other social centers based in other Italian cities, such as Labas and TPO (Bologna), Insurgencia (Naples), and the social centers of the North East (Veneto region). This unusually large coalition show the importance of the issue of migration for contemporary Italian radical collectives and social centers.

Although not always explicitly articulated, LUME's political commitments emerge from the collective's activities: they are critical of neoliberal capitalism, of right-wing populism, of the current 5SM-Lega government; but they are also decisively to the left of mainstream center-left parties, especially *Partito Democratico*, which they criticize and oppose at both the local (the mayor of Milan) and national level. Their shorthand description as antisexist, antifascist and antiracist guides their mobilization and

programming. Of particular note is their involvement in struggles against state racism which have been intensifying due to the saliency of immigration in the current Italian situation. What characterized LUMe from the beginning is their commitment to supporting grassroots cultural production as a form of political engagement. They approach art in a profoundly political way – not just to promote politically relevant artistic content, but also to provide a collective, political way of doing culture together. As highlighted in this section, LUMe's inclusive leftist orientation builds upon the legacy of Italian occupied social centers. This includes the use of horizontal organizational structures, which I describe in the following section.

Horizontal organizational structures

LUMe is run horizontally and its structure is decentralized and multilayered. The collective is made of different working groups ("tavoli"), which have changed during its years of activity. At the moment, the active working groups are: politics (Collettivo Politico), cinema and video (Lumeteca), theater (Lume Teatro), and art. There is also a working group that is in charge of social media, which I will discuss in detail below.

The working groups meet regularly and enjoy a high degree of autonomy, although they are held accountable by the larger collective during regular assemblies. Some of the most structured working groups – now chiefly the cinema and theater groups, previously also the music/jazz group – run their own programming in the occupied building. The political collective is devoted to elaborating "ideological reflections" for LUMe, as an "anticapitalist militant experience" and making sure that the political ideas of LUMe are appropriately integrated in their artistic and cultural practice

(LUMe, 2019a); it also maintains relations with other social centers in Milan and in Italy. Recently, the political collective also started promoting days of self-education, typically led by one the members, who teaches the other activists about a political topic and leads the discussion. Lumeteca, the cinema and video working group, organizes film screenings, which range from independent movies to award-winning titles (LUMe, 2019a); they also shoot footage of LUMe events and produce short videos, typically meant for social media. The theater collective, open to current theater students, graduates and amateur actors, is involved in both producing their own theater performances and in bringing other theater shows to LUMe (LUMe, 2019a). The art collective – perhaps the most unstable of the working groups – has been in charge of coordinating exhibitions to be held at LUMe and to spearhead visual arts projects (LUMe, 2019a).

LUMe's working group structure has adapted to the ebbs and flows of their activity. In the past, LUMe also had a writing collective, which included aspiring writers of fiction and poetry and even fostered a collaboration with the theater collective – staging some of the working group's writings. It also hosted a hip-hop working group. Most notably, as highlighted above, LUMe had a music/jazz working (Lume Jazz). The working group was in charge of the music programming of LUMe, which mostly revolved around jazz performances, but also fostered musical partnerships between its members. The working group founded Conserere, an improv orchestra that emerged out of LUMe's musicians but was open to all musicians in Milan. Although the working group is no longer active in terms of making music together, some of its members are still involved in the programming of LUMe's concert, which fall under the label of LUMe Jazz and/or LUMe Suono. Ad-hoc informal groups are also formed when the need arises.

One of my interviewees, Boris, is proud of the work that he and others put into sprucing up the occupied building; in explaining this renovation work, he half-jokingly called this group of people "LUMe's autonomous carpenter collective".

In addition to the working groups, LUMe has different types of assemblies. Usually held twice a month, the operational assembly (assemblea gestionale) is a horizontally run, semi-open assembly, where activists of the different working groups meet to make decisions about the day-to-day operations of the collective (and of the occupied space). Boris described the operational assembly as a "sorting mechanism", the place where different proposals and idea can be sorted and made sense of, before they are either taken back to the different working groups or presented to the plenary assembly. Plenary assemblies are held every 2 or 3 months. They aim to be open to all the activists of LUMe. They are devoted to discussing big picture topics and take general decisions about the social center.

LUMe also holds monthly assemblies that are open to the public. The aim of these is to offer potentially interested people a venue to get to know what LUMe is about, but also provide a space for different individuals to pitch a project (a performance, an art show, etc.) to LUMe. I attended such an assembly in December 2017, shortly after LUMe had occupied its current location. In that meeting, around 50 people, including LUMe activists and "external" individuals, met for 2 hours to discuss several potential proposals for activity that LUMe could endorse and host. I also attended a smaller open assembly in December 2018, which included a total of 15 people. During both assemblies, LUMe activists briefly explained the history of the collective and the occupied space; they also sketched out the organizational structures of LUMe. In both assemblies, interested

individuals who wanted to get involved with LUMe or pitch an idea were heard and directed towards the working group that best suited their needs.

LUMe's use of technology should be understood within the horizontal political practices that characterize the collective. In particular, two aspects of LUMe's organizational structure have a strong impact on how they use digital technologies: the fluidity and autonomy of the working groups, which requires constant coordination, and the commitment to assembly-based horizontal decision making, which limits the extent to which decisions can be taken through digital means.

The technological practices of LUMe

External communication

For its external communication, LUMe is entirely dependent on commercial social network sites: the collective is very active online through its Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/pg/LUMe.occupato/), Twitter (@LUMe_occupato) and Instagram (lume_occupato) accounts. Facebook is by far their most used social network site. Through LUMe's Facebook page, the activists create and post Facebook events for the activities they organize, from demonstrations to concerts, they share and provide commentary on media coverage of different issues, such as immigration policy, they circulate pictures and videos of recent events, and distribute their own press releases. The page thus functions as an information hub for all that concerns the collective. In addition to the main LUMe page, individual working groups have their own Facebook pages, through which they typically promote their events and share posts from the main LUMe Facebook page.

LUMe's intense social media activity is managed by an ad-hoc working group within the larger collective – "LUMe Social Media". The working group is composed by activists from different working groups and a handful of other activists who have graphic design and video editing skills. The Social Media group is in charge of the collective's accounts on Instagram and Twitter, and most importantly, their Facebok page. The intense day-to-day work of the Social Media group is organized around navigating the known features of Facebook Pages, while still adhering to LUMe's principles, chiefly the necessity to produce quality content and to incorporate horizontal decision-making. The activists are acutely aware of the existence of peaks and ebbs of attention on Facebook and speak of the need to optimize when they post, to make sure that their public has the highest chance of being exposed to their content. The marketing language that permeates the backend of Facebook Pages' is clearly visible in how the activists talk about this issue. Mario, who is not a member of the social media group, understood the mechanics of the process in the following way: "Posts are programmed in a rational and rationed way. They go out at time X of day Y because that's more suitable… these kinds of methods allow you to maximize the efficacy of your communication". Ilaria, who is part of the social media group, confirmed Mario's impression of their work. But she was also quick to justify their actions: "I mean, we don't sell anything, we don't earn anything, so it's not about getting more clicks and more likes. It's about the broadest possible diffusion of information. For us it's important that people read what we think and know what we do". But LUMe also uses other features of Facebook Pages in a more proactive and political way. In particular, unlike individual Facebok profiles, Facebok Pages offer the possibility to draft posts in advance and schedule their publication. This allows LUMe

activists to not just time the publication of the posts, but also to collectively edit them before they are published. Activists in the social media group think of this as a small-scale newsroom, in which they edit each other's writing. As Paolo explained, it is "like a small newsroom, in which there is a quality check, which I think is also informative, in my opinion"; activists might suggest rewrites to each other, which Paolo finds to be personally enriching. Further, he argued that because of this collective work on the content, "there is better content that gets put out, because it does not come from a personal process, but a collective one" (Paolo). This illustrates LUMe's focus on horizontal organizing and on producing high quality content in all aspects of their activism.

The social media group enjoys a high degree of autonomy in their work. The larger collective is usually not aware of what will be posted on LUMe's social media. As Stefano, who is not part of the social media group, claimed: "Most of the time, I don't know that will be put on the Facebook page. I know about the press releases, because we talk about them [typically in the operational assembly]. But we don't write an event description together. We trust each other". Reflecting on her experience in the social media group, Ilaria clarified the boundaries of this autonomy:

> I mean, if I decided to publish an endorsement of the Northern League today, they would probably kick me out. But the basic idea for LUMe social media was to pick people that we trust – that the entire collective trusts –, to whom we can delegate this aspect of our communications… (Ilaria)

The trust that the social media group enjoys comes through in all the interviews in which the group is mentioned. When asked about problems that might have arisen in LUMe's use of social media, no activists point to tensions within the collective around

what the social media group had posted. This is remarkable, given the great tensions around this issue that scholars and activists have documented in the case of the Occupy movements (Ferrari, 2016; Gerbaudo, 2012; Kavada, 2015; Mattoni, 2013; Terranova & Donovan, 2013).

LUMe also has a blog-based website, which is no longer updated (https://lumelaboratoriouniversitariometropolitano.wordpress.com). The website is at the center of frequent discussions among LUMe activists. I stumbled into one such discussions when I walked into an operational assembly in June 2018. The general sense of the discussion was that LUMe collectively recognized the value of having a website representing themselves and their activities, but that the effort needed to build and maintain such a website was too high. Those advocating for investing labor and resources in creating a new website argued along two lines. First, they strongly felt the urge to have an archive that would document all the activities and accomplishments of LUMe: "we will need a website when they come for us" was a very memorable sentence from one of the activists. This refers to the need of being able to show the value of LUMe – as urban commons – in the face of a new eviction or other attempt to shut down the occupation. Second, the activists stated that having a website would allow them to communicate beyond the constraints of the social network sites and fully express their creative practice by accommodating flexible ways of displaying their video and audio materials. This second argument was also worded in a strongly political way: "having your own website is a political practice", as one activist stated.

During the interviews, the activists echoed similar positions. The interviewees that discussed the website with me all expressed some degree of regret for not having a

functioning website. Two different, although not incompatible, visions of what the website should be emerged from the interviews. On the one hand, there was the idea that LUMe needs an archive that can preserve and showcase everything the social center has done. As Ilaria argued, “more than a website to publicize our events, now we would need a website to contain all the work we’ve done and still do. Sort of like a portfolio of LUMe’s activities”. As it was made clear in the assembly, the idea of having an archive is tied to the precarious nature of occupied spaces. Boris explained:

> we would like to create an archive, a digital archive of everything we’ve done, everything we’ve produced, because it’s needed… because this space… any other thing, but this space is more sensitive… This space exists because there is proof that someone did something in this space, there is memory. (Boris)

In the activists’ eyes, an archive-website would function to show all that the collective has accomplished and thus its value as a social center and urban commons.

On the other hand, some activists envision a different kind of website, more focused on the production of written content, in the style of alternative media websites like Indymedia. This was the original intention even with the existing LUMe website. Stefano commented on the difficulty of setting up such a website: “today it’s difficult to have a website… either you are an already established brand, or it’s difficult to make your website stand out. The problem is that a website is an extremely large space”. It is large, according to Stefano, in the sense that it needs to be populated by a lot of content if it is to make any sense. And producing a lot of content requires effort.

Regardless of their vision of what LUMe’s website should be, activists all converge on the feeling that producing and maintaining a website would take too much effort, which at the moment they cannot spare. But the way in which the activists think

about this effort has to do with their perception of their efficacy in using social media, and Facebook in particular. In fact, they see the effort of creating a website as additional labor, on top of maintaining their active Facebook profile. Paolo articulated this position:

> I don't know… for the way we are… I mean, the website is certainly powerful, I mean, it gives you possibilities that Facebook does not give you, because Facebook is more structured… it has those limits, it has those features, you can communicate in those ways. While a website gives you… building a website you can choose what to highlight, what to put on top, what to put afterwards… But honestly since none of us are IT professionals (*un informatico*), none of us have that much time… because anyway the free time you have… already managing a Facebook page is not that easy. (Paolo)

According to Paolo, while making a website for LUMe would be very powerful and give the activists more freedom compared to Facebook, the collective does not have the technical skills or the free time to take care of the website, on top of their existing social media work. Thinking back to the early days of the original LUMe website, Ilaria recalled that "after three months we stopped updating it, because we realized that for our public Facebook had… Facebook did all that we needed. And no one had the perseverance to manage a website well." Valeria concurred, explaining that no one in the Area grouping ever made their own website "maybe because we are just not able to. And it seemed easier to optimize our use of platforms like Facebook and Instagram".

Any plan to create a website for LUMe also has to confront the fact that the Area already has its own functioning and (relatively) popular website – Milano in Movement (MiM). As mentioned above, MiM, which self-identifies as part of the tradition of countercultural alternative media in Milan, publishes articles and op-eds, covers events and acts as an aggregator of information, mainly about LUMe and the other movements

of the Area. LUMe activists read and like MiM. Valeria said that MiM "is very good, because it's comrades who write very good articles, they are reliable, you can count on them". Paolo described MiM as "the megaphone of all the initiatives organized by the antagonistic Area", which provides "total coverage on Facebook but also with articles, before, during and after events". While LUMe relies on MiM, the collective would not want their website – or their external communication in general – to follow the same blueprint. This is very evident in Stefano's explanation:

> [MiM] is extremely effective, it has a large audience, it's been around for many years, but (…) it has a niche audience. It was born as a movement website, for movement people. And our idea of opening up to the collectivity was exactly the opposite of confining ourselves in this kind of dynamic… because then it ends up being the tool that the counter-media of the movement use to lock themselves out of the conversation. (Stefano)

So, while MiM is universally appreciated by LUMe activists, it also represents an expression of the inward-looking, identitarian, movement-centric tendencies that the collective has sought to distance itself from. LUMe relies on MiM but sees itself as doing something fundamentally different from MiM with its outward-looking, Facebook-based external communication. However, as will be highlighted below, their overreliance on Facebook is the object of constant ambivalence.

Internal communication

From an internal, organizational perspective, LUMe relies heavily on both Facebook and Whatsapp. Beyond LUMe's Facebook page, the activists run a closed Facebook group with a wide range of active members: approximately 70. The main purpose of the group is to update all activists on what is happening with LUMe, so they can be plugged into the life of the collective even when they are not able to come to the

occupied space. For instance, this is where minutes from the assemblies are shared and reminders about meetings and events are posted. Occasionally, the private group is also where the collective might take time-sensitive, yet uncontroversial decisions:

> it might happen on the Facebook group, that we want to pledge our support to a demonstration and we had an assembly right the day before, so instead of waiting for six more days to give our support/sponsorship to the demonstration… if we know that the demonstration… I mean, no part of the collective would object… we use the Facebook group. (Paolo)

But besides these uncontroversial and extemporaneous decisions, the Facebook group is not where important and potentially controversial decisions are made. It can, however, be a space where political discussions happen, and conflicts arise.

On Whatsapp, LUMe has an organizational group chat, which is smaller than the Facebook group, but highly active. Although the number of participants to this group chat varies, interviewees place it at around 40. The group chat includes LUMe's most active members as well as those who have been involved with LUMe the longest. This is the space where urgent information is being disseminated and questions that require a quick answer are posed. This is also a space in which minor, day-to-day decisions are made, especially those concerning the occupied space – where someone might ask the group chat "is anyone at LUMe right now?". The group chat is also used for more political discussions and decisions that require immediate attention by LUMe – although the tendency is to state the problem in the group chat and then try to resolve it through in-person meetings. The usefulness of the Whatsapp group was evident, for instance, when their first occupation was evicted by the police: activists could be informed instantaneously through the group chat. However, the sheer number of messages on this

internal Whatsapp group can be daunting: “Sometimes when I am working, I look at my phone and there are 150 messages” (Jessica). The abundance of messages and the features of Whatsapp can sometimes create tensions, as I will detail below when discussing LUMe’s criticism of digital media.

The working groups have also created their own Facebook private groups and group chats on Whatsapp. Although I was only able to speak about these internal communication channels with members of the theater group, it seems reasonable to state that such channels mirror the division of information between Facebook and Whatsapp that the larger collective established. Speaking of how this works in the theater collective, Jessica explained “The Whatsapp group is for rapid communication, like what we had today: ‘we are meeting at 6:30’. The Facebook group is for summarizing the season’s programming (…) it’s more official”.

The last key piece in LUMe’s complex web of technological practices is the existence of a shared Google Drive folder, which is linked through the private Facebook group. The shared folder contains a messy archive of documents, leaflets, videos and photos; most importantly, it hosts two shared documents, which are mentioned by many interviewees: a calendar and a scheduling spreadsheet. The calendar is where LUMe’s activists keep track of the many meetings and events that are happening, both in the occupied space and elsewhere; activists need to take into account what is already scheduled when planning another event or meeting. The scheduling spreadsheet is where LUMe’s activists sign up to be at the occupied space to run the events, staff the bar, restock the supplies, handle the cash register. Because the collective is involved in so

many things, one of the main functions of the Facebook group is "to tag people to bug them to sign up to volunteer" (Paolo).

Fighting the system with the tools of the system

> You want people to receive a certain type of message. If you can transmit it, even if through a channel that you may or may not consider suitable, more or less dubious because of the many reasons we have listed… but there are 10.000 more we just aren't thinking about right now… again, why shouldn't you do it? Why shouldn't you take advantage of it? I mean… if you think Facebook is shit, I could potentially tell you something like that if we meet in a pub, and while we are drinking a beer you ask me what I think of Facebook, then I could say: well, Facebook is shit. But in the end, there's what I think of it at a personal level, and there's what I think about the opportunity to use it. And again, the benefits, at least from our perspective, from LUMe's perspective, outweigh the risks too much to not use it. Really… I don't see why not (Mario).

This long quote is reproduced in its entirety because it details the core of LUMe's technological imaginary: the recognition that internet technologies are flawed, but also indispensable for social change. This what the activists refer to as "using the system to fuck the system" (Ilaria, Valeria). In the theoretical terms employed in this dissertation, this imaginary can be classified as a "negotiation" of Silicon Valley's dominant technological imaginary: LUMe, in fact, rejects the core of Silicon Valley's imaginary, but nevertheless relies on Silicon Valley technologies. The negotiation emerges from the fact that the technological imaginary of Silicon Valley, from which these technologies emerge, has shaped them in a certain way. It is hard to turn the imaginary of Silicon Valley on its head, while being beholden to technologies that promote that imaginary. Negotiation thus implies the deployment of ideological and practical arrangements to mitigate the dissonance between the technological imaginary of LUMe and the

technological imaginary connected to the digital technologies of Silicon Valley. Negotiation takes different shapes for different movements, based on their ideological orientation, the political context in which they are situated, and the presence of other prominent technological imaginaries deployed by political actors in the country. In the case of LUMe, activists' negotiation relies upon the importance of offline, occupied spaces (in the tradition of social centers) and on the idea of using digital technologies in a critical and informed way, with awareness; the idea of awareness is constructed in response to the technological imaginary of the Five Star Movement (Natale & Ballatore, 2014; Treré, 2018).

As detailed above, LUMe uses corporate social media and messaging services – Facebook, Instagram, and Whatsapp – extensively in both its internal and external communication. Although I asked them about "digital technologies" or "the internet" in general terms, the interviewees almost always talked about social network sites, chiefly Facebook; their take on other internet-based services or digital technologies was always relayed after talking about Facebook and by using Facebook as a benchmark. My discussion of the findings thus follows the interviewee's orientations and focuses heavily on Facebook. Whether Facebook is an accurate stand-in for the rest of the internet is debatable. Its importance in shaping how activists think about technology, however, cannot be underestimated.

In this section, I first articulate LUMe's technological imaginary through the collective drawings produced by the activists in the course of the two visual focus groups conducted in 2018-2019 and the individual interviews with the activists. This technological imaginary hinges upon a Marxist critique of the power of corporations on

the internet, as well as a distrust in the democraticness of the internet. This imaginary, however, wrestles with these critiques because of the perceived unavoidability of digital technologies: although they are problematic, they are indispensable for political activism – there is no alternative to them. The section then explains how LUMe's negotiation with the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley relies on the use of offline, occupied spaces and on the notion of "awareness" (*consapevolezza*).

Mirrors and icebergs: LUMe's collective drawings

I conducted two visual focus groups with 9 LUMe activists in 2018-2019. A full explanation of the design of and rationale for the visual focus can be found in Appendix B. The five participants of the first visual focus group produced a collective drawing that depicts the internet as a distorting mirror, as can be seen in Figure 8. In their discussion, they first considered the idea of the internet as a mirror of society, i.e. reflecting all that is happening in society; for the activists, this mostly meant reflecting the struggle between the powerless and the powerful. The idea of the mirror, in fact, emerged in conjunction with their Marxist, dialectical reading of society, which generated a long discussion and several intermediate individual drawings. However, for these activists the internet is not a mirror that simply reflects what is going on in society, it also shapes it. While they cannot exactly determine, and thus draw, how this shaping occurs, they acknowledge it by representing the internet as a mirror that one might find in a funhouse: the distorting mirror seen at the center of the drawing. On the lower right quarter, activists drew a globe, to represent society as it is; on the upper left quarter, a globe made of numbers and letters – to represent code – which stands in for the society that is being shaped by the

internet. The two globes are purposefully similar, but different, to account for the fact that the internet is shaping reality in a distorted way. Maria explained: “it’s a mirror, not of society as much… it’s an illusory mirror of society. It’s a distorter of society… because that is never actually the society, but in some ways it works like a small world, a small society”.

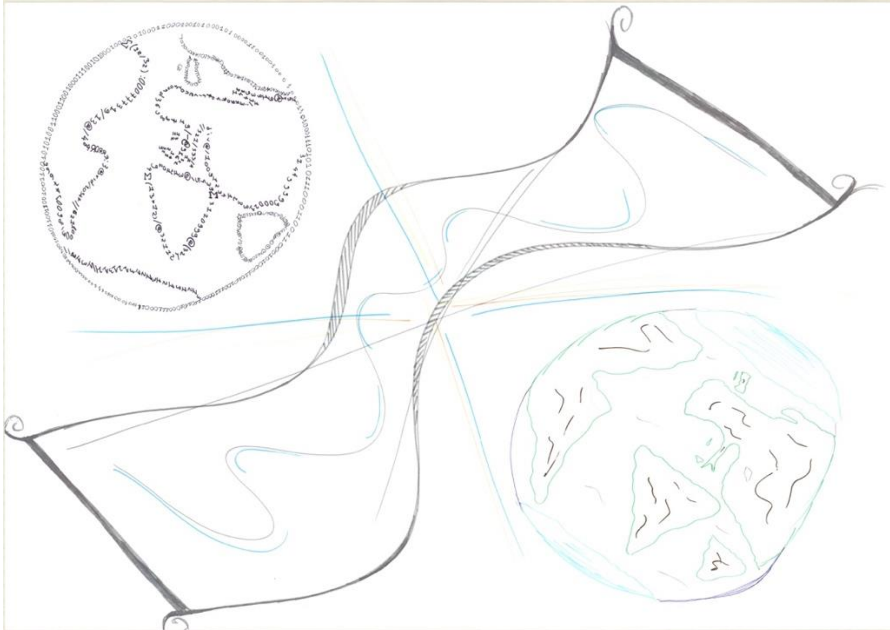

Figure 8. Collective drawing produced in the first visual focus group (November 8th, 2018). The internet is represented as a distorting mirror that reflects and distorts society.

In theoretical terms, this drawing and the discussion that generated it, attempted to grapple with the idea of the mutual shaping occurring between society and the internet. The drawing highlights two complementary aspects of the activists’ technological imaginary: the uneasy relationship between the reality of society and the reality of the internet and the necessity of a dialectical reading of both society and the internet.

A similar concern with reality and the reality of the internet, as well as a Marxist reading of the web, also emerged in the collective drawing created by the four

participants in the second visual focus group, which can be seen in Figure 9. This drawing represents the internet as an iceberg.

Figure 9. Collective drawing produced in the second visual focus group (January 7th, 2019). The internet is represented as an iceberg, composed of a visible part (benign activities) and an invisible part (problematic processes). The state, represented as a submarine, observes the iceberg without intervening. Corporations, represented as an oil platform, extract value (represented with currency symbols) out of the iceberg.

The upper part, visible above the water, is comprised of benign, everyday activities: streaming, gaming, information seeking, the publication of multimedia content and the consumption of porn. The invisible part contains more problematic processes, that undergird the daily experience of the internet, but remain hidden. Such processes are: control of information, information manipulation, privacy violation and data commodification. On the right side of the iceberg, activists depicted the state as a submarine. While the submarine sees both what is happening above and below the water, it does not intervene. On the left side of the iceberg, corporations are represented as an oil platform, which extracts value from the bottom of the iceberg (where the activists drew

the monetary symbols of the U.S. Dollar, the Euro, and the British Pound). The submarine and the oil platform are meant to represent how power operates on the internet.

Activists discussed at length exactly what it means to consider processes of data commodification and privacy violation or corporations' extraction of value from the internet as "hidden". Some participants argued that the role of corporations is very evident and that people should know what using online services means. Others, however, underlined the difference between a surface knowledge of the existence of targeted ads and the inability to read and decipher privacy policies and the political awareness of the entity of the exploitation that is taking place. This is what ultimately resulted in the drawing of the internet as an iceberg: as the metaphor goes, while we know there must be something underneath the visible part of the iceberg, we might have trouble estimating its entity.

The power of platforms

As mentioned above, the participants of both visual focus groups spent a significant portion of their respective discussions trying to articulate their Marxist, conflictual, dialectical reading of society, of the internet and of how power operates on the internet. Activists tackled this theoretically complicated discussion through some individual sketches, which represented different ways of thinking about capitalism and power. For instance, in the first visual focus group Emanuele drew the internet as an interregnum, which he represented graphically as the overlap of two rectangles, as can be seen in Figure 10.

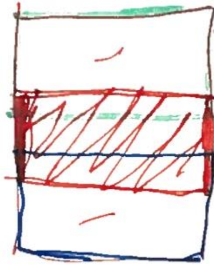

Figure 10. Emanuele's drawing of the internet as an interregnum, an in-between entity between the powerful and the powerless. First visual focus group (November 8th, 2018).

In his words, the internet-interregnum represents:

> on the hand, the users, who are the ones that could actually make it a space of freedom and democracy, and on the other, corporations and states. I mean, it's an interregnum in the sense that it's a field of struggle. If I had to imagine it, I would imagine it as something that sits in-between two other things (Emanuele).

Emanuele then went on to clarify the image to explain the powerful and the powerless as two parallel entities, which are both "touched" by the internet, which then becomes the field where the contention between these groups is possible. Emanuele's drawing generated a long debate, within the first visual focus group, about whether the internet should be considered a terrain of conflict or simply a tool of conflict. Here is an excerpt from their discussion:

> Vittorio: Well, I think we can say that we once had conflict in the factories, which then moved to the city, and now it's moving to the internet. I mean, a really dialectical reading.
>
> Paolo: well, I think this a bit hardcore as a statement…
>
> Emanuele: yeah, I don't know, this leaves me a bit…
>
> Paolo: you can use the internet as a tool of conflict, but it can never be your terrain of conflict.
>
> Vittorio: actually, I think the internet is a terrain of conflict in itself.

Paolo: well…

Vittorio: the conquest of the internet is a terrain of conflict.

The debate raised in this focus group touched upon several key questions that arise in the literature that tackles issues of digital labor (Andrejevic, 2013; Cote & Pybus, 2007; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Lazzarato, 1996; Terranova, 2000). The activists, in fact, spent time debating whether the internet operates as a factory (echoing the literature that describes corporatized internet services as digital factories). They also could not agree on what would be the means of production in the internet landscape. For instance, Emanuele used Spotify as an example, and worked through the idea that users' listening decisions could be harvested by the platform to generate value. However, he was also quick to admit that he did not really see this reading as fully satisfying:

> Now, I don't know how to explain it well, how to make a comparison with accumulation or the fact that those who control the means of production… I mean, all of Marx's materialist reasoning. But you could certainly come up with an analogy. Considering data as the means of production, I mean considering that the machines of the factory could become the data, with all the evident differences. But then… I mean… I have to admit that I am finding it a bit difficult (Emanuele).

Emanuele's and everyone else's attempts to put together a Marxist reading of the internet speak to the complexity of identifying precisely how power operates on the internet. Paolo initially proposed to draw

> a worker who is modelling some clay, in which the internet is society, so the internet is the one who is shaping the clay, but he's actually not a worker, he's a puppet… while the one holding the reins… so those who have the tools to build the internet and have people use it are the ones who actually have the capacity to direct the puppet to create what they want (Paolo).

Paolo's idea was never drawn, partially because of its complexity, partially because the activists found it did not account for the multiple sources of power that operate online. Maria proposed a revised version of the drawing, which can be seen in Figure 11.

Figure 11. Maria's drawing of multiple puppeteers, to account for multiple sources of power operating on the internet. First visual focus group (November 8th, 2018).

The drawing used the image of the puppeteer, but allows for the existence of multiple hands – multiple puppeteers – and thus multiple sources of power. These sketches were quickly abandoned because they did not fully encapsulate how the activists see the internet. The main difficulty they found in articulating this Marxist perspective lay in the time-old question of structure vs. agency. In fact, many of the objections they raised to each other had to do with the agency of internet users and the necessity to account for the possibility of creative and resistant uses of the internet. Graphically, this was rendered in the drawing shown in Figure 12, which represents the interaction of

different actors around a central circle, the internet. Which actors should be represented in the corners varied in the course of the discussion; this representation was quickly abandoned, too.

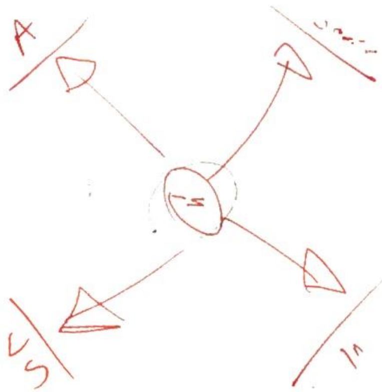

Figure 12. Paolo's drawing of multiple actors, represented as vectors, interacting with the internet, represented as the circle in the middle of the drawing. The actors represented in the drawing changed during the discussion. First visual focus group (November 8th, 2018).

As explained in the previous section, the activists converged on the image of the distorting mirror. This helped them settle their complicated theoretical discussions. The key conversation that led to this agreement is the following:

> Vittorio: [the internet] is a space to conquer. That we want to conquer.
>
> Emanuele: In any case, it's a space in which many actors are fighting for…
>
> Vittorio: Hegemony!
>
> Paolo: where it's easier to create counterpowers…
>
> Vittorio: it's a place of conflict, in that it simply is also the meeting place of various subjectivities, where there can be a conflict of thoughts. Or a clash of points of view, for instance election campaigns fought on social media. That's what it is, for me. But because for me it's mirroring society. It shapes it and mirrors it.

This line of thought then coalesced in the drawing of the internet as a distorting mirror, which was described in the previous paragraph: a drawing that attempts to represent the mutual shaping occurring between society and the internet.

Activists in the second visual focus group wrestled with similar questions related to power and the commodification of the data and labor of internet users. These processes became a central component of their final drawings: commodification is a key element in the hidden part of the iceberg, while the power of corporations and of the state are represented as an oil platform and a submarine, respectively. The image of the oil platform, used to convey the extractive processes with which corporations generate revenue from internet activities, was brought up many times during the focus group. It emerged in conjunction with another image – one that was never quite put on paper by the activists: the "money machine" (*una macchina da soldi*), a machine that makes money. At one point in the discussion, they thought that would be their entire drawing: the internet as a money-making machine. Alessio described it as such: "We could make an allegoric drawing of the corporation that takes data out of the Facebook world or of the internet world and makes money of them. Like a money machine… But it's a bit challenging [to draw]". Their discussion used different images but touched upon many of the themes articulated by the first visual focus group – speaking to a common dialectical, Marxist view of society and of the internet, that permeates LUMe as a collective. Stefano's heated remarks highlight this aspect:

> Alright, yes, but I mean, for me the biggest problem of the information on the internet is not that Salvini [leader of the Northern League]… that Salvini yells or spreads populism on Instagram. For me it's the fact that, I mean, over the last five years it has become the biggest money

> machine of the world, out of nothing. Like a money factory out of nothing, basically… making you work on… I mean, making you create value on the internet, which you can't actually benefit from. And all of this through this "Okay, you are doing this, and I'm letting you do this, because you are using my service, so you are lucky that I am allowing you to do this". That's why I am saying that… the situation has gotten out of hand (Stefano).

As Stefano eloquently argued, the power of corporations to control our online interactions and to generate revenues out of them is a key problem for LUMe's activists. As he underlined, this power is reinforced by a certain discourse used by these corporations, one which does not acknowledge the digital labor of users and seeks to justify their exploitation of users' labor through their provision of "free" services. As highlighted when talking about the discussion that took place in the first visual focus group, these issues have been central to the scholarship on digital labor (e.g. Andrejevic, 2013; Cote & Pybus, 2007; Dean, 2005). But this reference to the legitimizing discourse of corporations is also a nudge to the strength of the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley and its promise of empowering and democratic technologies. LUMe activists are deeply skeptical of this discourse.

The "reality" of the internet

In addition to explicating LUMe's materialist focus on power, the two representations of the internet that LUMe activists produced in the visual focus groups – the distorting mirror and the iceberg – also show how the activists perceive a disconnect between reality and the internet. Although this disconnect takes different shapes for the interviewees, the activists all converge on the idea that something is flawed in the way that the internet is talked about as a free and democratic space. LUMe activists are deeply

skeptical of the idea that the internet can be thought of as democratic, for two main reasons: on the one hand, because they know that structures of power and inequality exist online, on the other, because they feel that information and relationships online are filtered and distorted.

A question in the questionnaire distributed during the visual focus groups (see Appendix B) asked activists whether they thought that the internet was a democratic space. It generated intense discussion among interviewees and criticism of the wording of the question itself. In general, activists felt that it was impossible to disagree or agree with the statement and sought to qualify it. One of the respondents in the first visual focus group added a comment next to his answer:

> It is democratic in terms of the possibility of sharing and accessing content, but its potentialities are threatened by the control over information and by the fact that a 'web democracy' presupposes a universal level of participation, something that seems utopic (Anonymous).

This nudge towards the promise of a "web democracy" is to be taken as criticizing the core of the technological imaginary of Silicon Valley: LUMe does not see digital technologies as inherently freeing or democratic. It also shows how LUMe stands in stark contrast with the "myth of the web" (Natale & Ballatore, 2014), on which the Five Star Movement constructed its early following, and which pitched digitally mediated participation as a form of direct democracy, intended to replace representative democratic processes. This mythical view of the web, communicated through slogans such as "one equals one" (*uno vale uno*), meant to underscore individual's equality online, is very much criticized by LUMe. As highlighted in the previous section, in the visual focus

groups, LUMe activists discuss at length the presence of structures of power and exploitation on the internet. It is this fundamental lack of real equality that drives their critique of the democraticness of the internet. Emanuele explained it in these terms:

> It's true that we have the freedom to post messages, but if you, Maria, write your political opinion on Facebook, it's seen by your 600 friends. If you are the Minister of the Interior, your message lands in a different way and the possibility of accessing it is different. So we always have to… I mean, again, it's illusory to say that the internet is democratic. It is, potentially. But in reality… (Emanuele)

Notice that Emanuele's critique is framed as a take-down of the illusion of democraticness, which is contrasted with a reality of power and inequality. Maria echoed Emanuele, calling the internet "illusorily democratic". Alessio, in the other visual focus group, argued that whether people can experience a democratic internet depends on how good they are at using digital technologies:

> I mean, it depends on how well you can use the internet. Because you can use it democratically, in the sense that it is open to everyone, because everyone has… according to how well one can use the internet, a possibility to express themselves. If you don't know how to use it, and you just see what the internet shows you, it's not that democratic (Alessio).

In so doing, Alessio cast digital literacy and savviness as a significant barrier to the achievement of a truly democratic internet.

Furthermore, it's LUMe's daily experiences with the internet, and social networking sites in particular, that push them to question the democraticness of the internet. In particular, the activists lament how the internet seems to distort how information is transmitted, and thus also distort human relations. Most of the examples

that the interviewees gave me, in this respect, arise from their reliance on Facebook and Whatsapp for their internal communication. Boris, for instance, talked about "filters" that "virtual means of communication" introduce in conversations and political discussions; he told me that "if we were arguing on Facebook about the government, you and I, we would certainly express ourselves in a different way that we are doing now or in a café". Other interviewees also contrasted online modes of communication with offline, face-to-face meetings. They spoke of the existence of filter bubbles (Ilaria) and echo chambers (Paolo). Ilaria's quotes are representative of this set of concerns. She argued: "You know, social network sites really distort the mode in which you relate to others". In particular she talked about Whatsapp as an "anonymous and misunderstandable medium", and relayed that it

> created very violent things. It was a bit dystopic to observe. I mean, you realize that these are tools that… I don't know how to define them, but they are even a bit violent in certain ways, because they really bring out the worst in people (Ilaria).

The negativity identified by Ilaria ("violence", in her words) is felt by other interviewees, too. Many of them, when telling me about their internal communication channels, mention disagreements and misunderstandings that LUMe encountered in using Whatsapp and Facebook; they typically explain them as problems that are created by how these services are built. If for Mario, LUMe's internal Whatsapp group chat can be "confusing and messy", this is not something that has to do with the activists themselves but is rather "inherent to the Whatsapp group chat" as a digital space. Given these concerns over the quality of information and interactions, it is easy to understand why

LUMe activists would be highly critical of any attempt at depicting the internet as a democratic space.

It is crucial to highlight that these concerns go hand in hand with their Marxist reading of the internet, which I explained in the previous section. In fact, even their concern over "fake news" – better termed viral deception (Jamieson, 2017) – is reshaped in terms of the power of different actors to shape how people receive information online. But far from being a concern over Russian interference or bots, activists see this problem as one of power that is not necessarily confined to the internet. Interviewees in the second visual focus group talked about this issue extensively. One of them, Giulio, explained how we should not be worried about "fake news" as "totally invented items of news", but rather in terms of "half-truths" that are spread by political actors: "it's the political game itself, and how it's being practiced, that leads, that has always led, even before the internet, to creating news that are not necessarily false, but favorable to one's political side". He argued that the public discourse around "fake news" has omitted this dimension of power, favoring a discussion over hoaxes and erroneous information. Conversing with him, Alessio clarified what Giulio was getting at: "What you mean is not really wholly invented fake news, but how news can be influenced by the powers that be. And in case too, the internet is elitist and not democratic". Activists thus seem to read several negative aspects of their online experience as consequences of the way power operates in society and on the internet and to circle back to the idea of a democratic internet as an illusion.

No alternatives

Despite LUMe's strong criticism of internet technologies, the collective uses these technologies extensively, as detailed above. LUMe activists attribute their reliance on social network sites, and Facebook in particular, to their power, reach, and ease of use. Activists explained that "everyone has Facebook now" (Boris) and that "they reach more people… simply because today it's the easiest way to reach the most people" (Valeria). Boris argued that social media "have a strong power because they can reach many people, because they already have their own public, that maybe hates what movements do. But it's like they have them underneath their window, very close, it's very easy to connect then": social media offer a general audience to movements, one that is not necessarily already politicized. Several activists also pointed to the fact that it is easier for a collective to be found on Facebook than by simply searching the web with a search engine. Activists thus consider social media a great opportunity to get more people interested in what they are doing. Jessica stated that "social media have great potential" and that they are "a great tool". Maria used a powerful metaphor to explain the key role of social media: she defined social network sites as mass communication channels, as "the new television". The comparison between Facebook and the television is particularly significant in the Italian context, where Berlusconi's dominance in the TV landscape of the 1990s-2000s was object of heightened contention. The metaphor helps to clarify how LUMe can be both critical of Facebook (talking about it as a new form of television has a negative connotation in this context) and dependent on it, for its mainstream appeal.

In summary, for LUMe social media are a powerful tool to connect with other youth. As Boris schooled me, after my objections: "I wouldn't demonize social network sites in this way, though, because they nevertheless allowed us and still allow us to

become known and to let people know about our events and what we think" (Boris). Ilaria was even more explicit in highlighting the political potential of mainstream social media platforms:

> I'm saying something obvious, but the great revolutions… I'm thinking about the women's revolution in general, the path forged by "Not one woman less", the Arab Springs, etc, the use of social media was propulsive, absolutely. So I think we should 'do politics' through social media. Actually, we should only do that. I mean, social media should be a public square, meaning a space full of content, politics, and culture. I couldn't care less about what someone ate for lunch, honestly (Ilaria).

The potential of social media is thus very clear for LUMe's activists, who, like Ilaria, wish that Facebook could be even more of a space for political debate. However, while the interviewees are unanimous in underlining the positive aspects of social media for their political activity, many of them also raise individual objections of different kinds. Some have taken breaks from Facebook or created ad-hoc accounts to avoid data collection. Boris deactivated his Facebook account for four years after discovering how much of his free time he spent using the service; he now has a Facebook account, activated prior to joining LUMe, which he reportedly uses mostly to find out about events and interact with LUMe's social media. Mario told me he has a Facebook account he shares with a friend; although this shared account was born out of necessity, when Mario did not have reliable internet access, he now seems to enjoy having an account that can confound Facebook's algorithms by being operated by different people: "I always found funny the idea of messing up the algorithm" (Mario). Jessica spoke of the relief she felt when her Facebook account was temporarily suspended. Some of the activists openly spoke of their fear of the power of social media; they reported that fights which broke out on social media had taken a toll on their personal lives. Maria and Ilaria relayed their

impression that social network sites exacerbate loneliness. Maria experienced a moment of estrangement with her family that was due to hidden political tensions that manifested as a fight over Facebook posts and comments and Maria's unfriending of her father on the platform. Jessica talked of her fear of surveillance, of the fact that so much data is being collected through this platform. She described herself as using social media "in a terrible way". By this she meant to convey that – even though she was aware of their power and their problems – she could not stop feeling the need to rely on them. In her own words:

> And so, it frightens me that my information is out there in the open, without me really knowing about it. Because… And anyway, the fact that I know… it actually makes me feel worse, quote-unquote, because anyway this awareness does not lead me to safeguarding myself (Jessica).

Like Jessica, many LUMe activists express their frustration at social media. Stefano even questioned their utility: "it's a useful tool to hang in there, Facebook, but not to create an impulse, I think. But then it is also a fundamental part of what we do…" (Stefano). These objections, which arise from activists' individual experiences of social media, supplement the more purely political objections, which I describe in the previous sections.

It is somewhat of a paradox to hear LUMe activists relay that they should use Facebook "because everyone is there", while they are themselves scared of social media or not fully committed to using Facebook. Most of them also reported joining LUMe because a friend introduced them to the collective or brought them to an event. But despite not having themselves joined LUMe because of Facebook, they seem convinced

that this is the privileged avenue for getting to know about them. The belief in the importance of Facebook is also reinforced by the sense that there would be no alternative to Facebook.

Although they do not state this lack of alternatives explicitly, it emerges from many of their arguments. Jessica, a bit embarrassed, told me she did not know how to respond to a person potentially interested in LUMe who did not use Facebook: “I did not know what to tell him”. But she also rationalized that something like this would happen rarely: “one in every 1500 that come through” (Jessica). After talking about the difficulty of the political moment, especially for social centers, Stefano bitterly commented: “the internet is all we have” – and as explained above, “the internet” largely means Facebook for these activists.

The belief in the power, reach and ease of social media generates this sense of a lack of alternatives to these platforms. This leads activists to grapple with their individual and political objections – to find ways to rationalize their use of these platforms because of the lack of alternatives to them. I call this process negotiation.

Negotiating the tensions

LUMe’s technological imaginary breaches the inherent contradiction of believing in the usefulness of digital technologies while rejecting many of their aspects: for LUMe, digital technologies are simultaneously flawed and indispensable for social change. These technologies are flawed for the reasons that LUMe activists articulate in the interviews and visual focus groups: chiefly because they are embedded in a capitalist system of power and because they distort interactions. Yet, they are also indispensable, because

activists believe in their power, reach and ease of use: there are no alternatives to these technologies, because they are held to be the most efficient way to get in touch with other people. While this imaginary might appear simple, if not simplistic, in practice this requires constant political discussion and fine tuning. In their own words, LUMe activists rationalize this technological imaginary through variations of the sentence "using the tools of the system against the system". Valeria's quote fully expresses LUMe's technological imaginary:

> Our idea has always been to use the tools of the system against the system, let's say. We did not pass value judgments on the thing itself, we thought about the fact that it was available to us and how we could exploit it to our advantage. It was this. And we have mostly used Facebook, and I have to say that it works. I mean, many people come to us because they saw something on Facebook. And this shows you that it's a tool that reaches many many people. But I mean, we use it with reason and awareness. And always in line with our principles (Valeria).

The internet, and Facebook in particular, are identified as being representative of a capitalist system that provides tools that activists can turn against the system. Paolo explicitly called internet technologies "the tools that capital gives you", which he argued "can be used to spread diametrically opposed content". Ilaria illustrated how LUMe navigates this:

> We thought about using those tools – obviously in a critical manner, meaning that we know we are… in the end, we are incoherent, in using these media to then go and criticize the system. I mean, it's a dog biting its tail. We had a lot of scruples at the beginning. We had a political discussion. And we agreed that our position was that of exploiting the system to fight the system. Not to be hermits that keep out of social media, that retire, that give up on communicating, and thus give up on creating consensus, on a popular base for consensus. Because that's what social networks are today… Instead, we want to use them in a critical way (Ilaria).

Ilaria's words capture the political work that LUMe puts into making digital technologies work for their political ideology and objectives. This is why I argue that LUMe's technological imaginary can be classified as one of "negotiation". LUMe rejects the core of Silicon Valley's dominant technological imaginary: they are critical of the neoliberal underpinnings of digital technologies and they refuse to see the internet as inherently freeing and democratic. Despite rejecting the system (in their terms) and the imaginary (in mine) of capitalist Silicon Valley, they nevertheless rely on Facebook and the other commercial digital platforms for their activism. The process is not frictionless; it requires a constant negotiation: among themselves, and between themselves and these technologies. The frictions they encounter are generated by the clash of two technological imaginaries – LUMe's and Silicon Valley's – which come to the surface when LUMe attempts to use digital media tools in accordance with their political principles, and not Silicon Valley's. Silicon Valley's imaginary is encoded in its technologies; and by using these technologies, LUMe activists have to negotiate with an imaginary they do not endorse. This negotiation entails the use of both practical and ideological arrangements that can temper the clash between LUMe's and Silicon Valley's technological imaginaries and allow the activists to justify their use of digital technologies.

Negotiation can be politically challenging – both internally and externally. An example of internal challenge can be found in LUMe's internal discussions on the appropriateness of employing "sponsored posts" on Facebook. These posts, that Facebook calls "boosted", look like regular posts in users' News Feeds, but Pages administrators need to pay for them to be displayed. The advantage of investing in a boosted post, as opposed to an ad, lies in the placement of the content directly in users'

timelines and its appearance as organic to the timeline. The use of boosted posts on Facebook generated discussions among LUMe activists. Ilaria summarized this contentious conversation:

> When we were reflecting on this thing, the 10€ sponsorship… I mean, on whether we should spend 10€ to sponsor a post, rather than spending 50€ to print out some flyers, through a website that is anyway an industrial exploitation of an art form… that cuts forests down… I mean, it's all a contradiction. So in the end, the lesser evil has always been that of investing on social media, and that's what we do (Ilaria).

In Ilaria's words you can clearly see the practical and ideological considerations that go into LUMe's negotiation. The choice of calling Facebook a "lesser evil" encapsulates the difficulty of this process of negotiation, as well as the generally negative outlook held by activists with respects to Silicon Valley.

Externally, LUMe activists sometimes feel challenged by militants of other social centers, especially older ones, for their reliance on commercial social media. Ilaria mentioned that creating an Instagram page was regarded as a bad look for a social center. Mario recalled his meeting with an "old hacker militant" who vehemently objected to LUMe's use of social media, that he saw in stark contradiction with the tradition of social centers and grassroots culture. Mario engaged with the hacker's objections, but concluded:

> Yeah, that's one way of seeing it. It is a very purist way of seeing it, I'm not sure how to say this. It has its charm. But if you want to spread an idea, you do it through whatever channel allows you to do it. You even do it through Facebook (Mario).

Boris encountered similar objections, which he explained as follows:

> I mean, if you are against certain things and you fight… [you have] your politics, your ideals, and if the company whose services you utilize doesn't respect them, you should… I mean, ethically, in your militancy, in your political activity, in your contestation, you should boycott it, or contest it. And that's fine. But this leads you to certain problems (Boris).

Boris, as well as other activists, associate the ideological refusal to use social media with older activists. The "certain problems" to which Boris refers are those that LUMe identified with older generations of social centers, namely their perceived lack of openness to nonactivist circles. Thus we can also read LUMe's technological imaginary of negotiation against the grain of their criticism of the inward-looking nature of older social centers. LUMe's reliance on social media thus becomes another way of guaranteeing that their social center will be more open to newcomers and innovate the tradition of occupied spaces.

LUMe activists draw on two resources in their negotiation of the technologies of Silicon Valley: the experience of occupying (offline) spaces and the idea of "awareness".

Occupied spaces as anchors

LUMe activists are anchoring their use of corporate social media platforms to their occupied space. Although they are very open about the crucial role that Facebook plays for them, they frequently contextualize it within their offline practices: their assemblies, their horizontal decision-making process, their self-management of the occupied space. Activists often repeat that, even if extensive conversation and exchange of information happens in their internal Facebook group and WhatsApp group chat, decisions can only be taken in an assembly. It is such a cardinal rule that almost all

interviewees repeat it to me. The offline space – particularly the political space of demonstrations or the occupied space itself – is where politics happens. Ilaria encapsulated this idea, by arguing that LUMe's use of social media cannot be divorced from LUMe's presence in offline political spaces:

> I mean, to me Facebook is making an event, inviting people, and then seeing them in real life (*dal vivo*) and "doing politics" in real life. To me Facebook means posting an article on migrants dying in the Mediterranean, so that people can develop some critical thoughts and then come to demonstrate the following week. (…) For me Facebook is not the only place where politics happen, absolutely not, otherwise it would be terrible. (Ilaria)

Ilaria's quote shows how LUMe rationalizes its use of Facebook as a prelude to actual political engagement, not as a locus of political engagement in itself. Maria even went a step further and suggested that LUMe's spike in popularity on social media is tied to the interim period between the eviction from the Santa Caterina building and the occupation of the Cinema Orchidea, in summer 2017, when LUMe did not have a physical space. She detailed:

> LUMe's first social media boom was after the eviction. The eviction period, the new occupation, that's the moment LUMe's social media… because not having a space, not having a place to gather, and the spaces were usually secret… I mean, the spaces where we were meeting… it was important to meet in a plenary assembly to decide on the occupations or… mostly, the occupations. [Social media] were the only way to interact and to interact with the outside. Since we didn't have a space where people could come and talk to us. And that's when it boomed. (Maria)

Maria thus traced a link between LUMe's peak use of social media for external communication and the absence of a physical offline space. Ilaria made a similar connection with respect to LUMe's internal communication, comparing the last phase of

the occupation of the Santa Caterina building – when they "spent so much time together, all day, every day" – to the current occupied space, which is far less hospitable – and activists can spend less time there. Ilaria thus remarked that the current occupation needs online communication more than the Santa Caterina one did: "if we had the physical space to spend time together… since we don't, we use [online communication] more" (Ilaria). Although this link does not emerge explicitly from other interviewees' accounts, it serves to further highlight the importance of offline, occupied spaces in LUMe's technological imaginary. The occupied space grounds LUMe's negotiation of the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley: it puts the activists' reliance on digital media in perspective. It allows LUMe to understand their use of digital media as subordinate to the self-management and enjoyment of the occupied space.

As previously explained, the occupation is part of LUMe's political identity, and it locates LUMe within a long history of Italian occupied social centers. Foregoing the centrality of occupied space in favor of virtual – and corporate-run! – spaces would seriously violate some of LUMe's political principles. Stefano clarified the stakes:

> The elimination of sociality, let's say… that's a plague you run the risk of spreading yourself, if you begin to only do everything in a virtual manner… then the space doesn't exist anymore. It's a different space, but it lacks the main component of what you initially wanted to do – to share a different model of culture. We never thought it would make sense to build our own universe on the internet. It's always been a tool for us. I mean, it would go against everything we believe in, at all levels. (Stefano)

According to Stefano, investing totally into online tools would not only be against the collective's beliefs, but could also jeopardize the occupied space, as well. The fear of

contributing to the demise of occupation as a political tactic that Stefano spoke to might also be at the core of older militants' objections to LUMe's use of social media. However, for LUMe this concern is not grounds for the avoidance of social media; offline occupied spaces are a way of anchoring their negotiation of digital media platforms.

Awareness against capitalism and populism

The second resource that LUMe activists draw upon in their negotiation of Silicon Valley's technological imaginary is the notion of "*consapevolezza*". *Consapevolezza* does not have a satisfying direct translation into English: here I will translate it as "awareness", but in reality, it sits at the intersection of the words "awareness", "consciousness" and "literacy". Awareness is crucial to how LUMe thinks of its use of social media, and Facebook in particular:

> We try to fill this container, this container that is given to us, with as much content as possible. Because in the end, that's how you make a difference. While many only use this with a profit logic, only with a logic of banality and… I mean, despite everything we know about demagogy, and populism, and how much Facebook can be shit, you can try to fill it up with content. Because it allows you to reach a wider audience than if you didn't use it. Then at that point you have to try… to "trick the system", quote-unquote. Because you are trying to transmit something of value on this platform that would otherwise become the shitter of the internet. (…) That's the mission. Trying to make as meaningful as possible what you do on that platform. I believe that's the only way to use it with awareness (Mario).

Mario's words show how LUMe believes that they can use Facebook in a self-aware manner, to insert political content into the discussion, to promote an engagement with the news, and ultimately to criticize the system. This way of using Facebook is a way to put meaning into this otherwise terrible platform, while allowing the collective to

still be themselves, to still maintain their political identity. Other interviewees express this idea as "using Facebook in line with our own principles" (Valeria) or using social media "in a critical way" (Ilaria). When they speak about awareness in these terms, it comprises both a certain level of digital literacy and an awareness of the role of corporations online.

Some of these themes emerged in the visual focus groups, where activists talked at length about how "awareness" changed one's relationship to the internet, especially in terms of experiencing a more democratic internet. As shown above, activists are skeptical towards the idea of the internet being democratic also because they perceive that many people lack the literacy and savviness – the awareness – that would (maybe) allow the use of digital tools in a more democratic way. In the second visual focus group, Alessio even proposed to represent the internet as a ship leaving the port, "where someone got stranded, because someone always misses the ship".

They, however, claim awareness for themselves: "we have this awareness I was talking about. Some more than others, but in some way, we know how it works, we know how it is" (Maria). Sometimes awareness becomes a generational trait, which LUMe activists possess because of their generation's familiarity with digital media. Ilaria said that she wishes digital literacy was taught more, because she is worried of how both her 12-year old brother and her mother use social media. She added:

> When the Zuckerberg scandal on the selling of information happened… I mean, as a digital native, I know that everything I do on Facebook can be used for ends I have no control over, but my mom doesn't – she clicks, she plays Candy Crush, and she doesn't know that those clicks help Putin win, right? So being aware of this is very important for me, to be able to create educational systems that can give this literacy… at this point, we can't ignore that this exists (Ilaria).

Awareness thus distinguishes the younger generation to which LUMe belongs, according to Maria, Ilaria, and others. The interviewees often talk to me about their parents, or other older people, to explain how they see their own self-aware use of Facebook as different: savvier, more detached, more strategic. However, this contrast between self-aware and unaware uses of social media also has a stronger political connotation – not just a generational one. The lack of awareness that they perceive as problematic – especially in terms of experiencing the internet in a democratic way – can be tied directly to the Five Star Movement and their use of social media. In fact, in the Italian popular imagination, supporters of the Five Star Movement are associated with a lack of digital literacy (and sometimes of literacy as well), like the spreading of fake news or the intense use of Facebook in a cringeworthy way, including bad grammar errors and the extensive use of "caps lock" and exclamation marks (Boni & Ricci, 2015). So even if LUMe activists are rarely explicit in connecting it to a critique of the Five Star Movement, their idea of awareness is a response to the perceived poor use of the internet among the 5SM's supporters. This is what Valeria was referring to when she commented:

> If you approach the internet without knowing what you are going into, you run the risk of being maneuvered, rather than being the master of your own self. Maybe you even think that your idea comes from that, but… I don't know, personally, I'd rather be informed, to find things out from other channels as well (Valeria).

In Valeria's mind, a lack of awareness in approaching the internet is dangerous because it may lead people to be taken advantage of. In the second visual focus group, Stefano made a similar point, but tied a lack of awareness to the belief in the

democraticness of the internet, to highlight how it can make people vulnerable to political exploitation:

> There are generations who don't have the same way of disentangling online things that we have, who think that something they read on the internet is way more authoritative. And then there's the fact that the internet has opened to… I mean, it's cause and consequence of the enormous opening towards populism that we have seen in recent years. I mean, it's true that it is not the primary engine of the phenomenon – the fact that we have fake news online – but it comes full circle, with the model that the internet chose, in terms of information (Stefano).

Stefano then went on to note that the ability to create and circulate false pieces of information greatly aggravates this difficult situation. In making a connection between social media and populism, Stefano is more explicit than others in critiquing the lack of awareness of ample swaths of the Italian population – with the implication that this lack of awareness makes them more exposed to populism.

By linking a lack of awareness to the illusory democraticness of the internet and then to populism, Valeria and Stefano are criticizing the Five Star Movement and the ideas about the digital that it has popularized. As Natale and Ballatore (2014) suggested, the Five Star Movement's technological imaginary is an adaptation of the Californian Ideology (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996) for the Italian context. Beppe Grillo and the late Gianroberto Casaleggio, the creators of the party, have used a powerful technoutopian "myth of the web" (Natale & Ballatore, 2014) to differentiate themselves from other Italian parties, seeking to cast the Five Star Movement as a revolutionary force that will destroy old party structures, just like the internet has destroyed older technologies. However, as Treré (2018) argued, the appeal to digital utopianism has only served to authoritarian, top-down practices within the 5SM itself. Treré (2018) has convincingly

termed the imaginary of the 5SM as “authoritarian sublime”, by which he described how “the cyber-libertarian discourse of the 5SM, based on the myths of horizontality, leaderlessness, and digital democracy, was used to conceal and legitimize political practices associated with authoritarianism, populism, and strong leadership” (p. 124).

LUMe draws on the notion of awareness, as articulated in this section, to rescue their social media practices from the danger of succumbing to both Silicon Valley’s and the Five Star Movement’s technological imaginaries. By using this idea of awareness, they can understand their social media presence as one that produces meaningful political content, which allows them to “use the tools of the system to fight the system”. At the same time, they are able to distance themselves from the presumed democraticness of the internet, which they see as instrumental to contemporary forms of populism.

Conclusion

The technological imaginary shared by the young radical activists of LUMe fully expresses their ambiguous relationship to digital technologies, and commercial social media platforms in particular. For these activists, these technologies are unavoidable – there is no credible alternative to them. Yet, these technologies are also deeply problematic for LUMe. As this chapter shows, the activists in the collective wage a strong critique of web technologies: they identify a strong connection between capitalist structures and online processes, they reject the idea of a democratic internet reality, they question how internet technologies mediate and distort human interaction. Their critique hits at the core of Silicon Valley’s technological imaginary: it uncovers its connection with neoliberal capitalism, it rejects its belief in an inherently liberating and democratic

nature of internet technologies, and it refuses its technological solutionism. And yet, by relying on the same technologies that were created within the dominant imaginary, LUMe activists end up having to navigate how Silicon Valley's imaginary manifests in the affordances of those technologies. LUMe's technological imaginary is thus one of negotiation: activists are actively engaged in tweaking and justifying their use of Silicon Valley's technologies so that it can best match their beliefs and praxis. In the activists' words, as highlighted above, this process comes to be described as "fighting the system with the tools of the system".

For LUMe, negotiation draws on two resources, which allow the activists to reimagine and qualify their use of social media. First, the activists anchor their relation to technology in the existence and self-management of offline occupied spaces; this allows them to frame the internet as an important, but residual space for politics. LUMe's political action is thought to be facilitated by the use of social media, but social media are not the locus for this political action: politics is what happens offline, in the occupied space and in the streets. Second, LUMe holds on to the notion of *consapevolezza*, translated here as awareness, as a resource that allows them to maintain their political identity while using social media. Such awareness is to be understood as enabling a critical use of social media that rejects the technological imaginaries of both Silicon Valley and the Five Star Movement.

In this dissertation, I argue that how social movements' technological imaginaries respond to the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley is shaped by their political ideology, the political context in which they are situated, and the presence of other prominent technological imaginaries. In the case of LUMe, negotiation is shaped by

LUMe's (implicit) Marxist orientation, their existence within a long historical trajectory of political occupied spaces (the social centers) and the mainstream appeal of the technological imaginary of the Five Star Movement. First, this chapter examined in detail how LUMe activists apply a Marxist reading to the internet, which drives their criticism. It is data commodification and the power of online corporations that interviewees identify as the main problems of the internet. They do not, for instance, talk about internet companies violating users' privacy as a violation of civil liberties – they understand surveillance within capitalist processes of exploitation. Their articulation of their technological imaginary as being about "fighting the system" while using its tools is also a clear reference to a Marxist understanding of social struggle. Second, the importance that LUMe attributes to offline, occupied spaces, including as a resource through which it can support its negotiation with the imaginary of Silicon Valley, shows the importance of the tradition of the occupied social centers in guiding the activists' relationship to technology. LUMe activists are conscious of being part of a long tradition of occupying spaces for political reasons. They are committed to the political occupation of spaces – their use of social media is functional to the goal of sustaining their occupation, not supplanting it. Yet, activists are also conscious that their choice of using Silicon Valley technologies is also controversial, if seen through the lens of the typical countercultural practices enacted by social centers. Activists often talked to me about being criticized for this by older militants of other social centers. This political context – so peculiar to Italian social movements – thus plays an important role in how LUMe situates itself in relation to the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley and its technologies. Third, LUMe's technological imaginary stands in opposition to Silicon Valley's imaginary, but

also to the imaginary of the Five Star Movement, the populist party that is part of a government coalition with the right-wing populist League party. As highlighted in this chapter, in their critique of democraticness and in their reliance on "awareness" as a key for navigating in their use of social media, LUMe implicitly – and explicitly, at times – rejects the 5SM's imaginary of sublime (to keep with Treré's characterization). Indeed, it even seems that LUMe activists interpret Silicon Valley's imaginary through the lens of their experience with the Five Star Movement, thus reinforcing their rejection of both imaginaries. Silicon Valley's dominant imaginary is untenable, for LUMe, also because it enables and justifies the kinds of authoritarian and populist practices that the 5SM has been enacting and that Treré (2018) examined. The influence of LUMe's Marxist orientation, the legacy of occupied social centers and the prominence of the technological imaginary of the Five Star Movement thus shape how LUMe's negotiation of the imaginary of Silicon Valley unfolds.

Negotiation is not unique to LUMe's technological imaginary. In the next chapter, I will analyze how a different movement – the Philly Socialists – articulates an imaginary of negotiation that looks and feels different from the one put forward in this chapter. For the Philly Socialists, negotiation is shaped by an appeal to the tradition of socialist organizing and its agnostic use of the available mainstream media technologies and a concern with the technological imaginary of contemporary leftist-liberal online activism.

Chapter 4 – Negotiation: the Philly Socialists and the American “socialist moment”

Introduction

The Philly Socialists (PS) are a socialist organization committed to revolutionary politics. They are based in the city of Philadelphia. They have a dues-paying membership system and run a number of projects in different neighborhoods, which they think of as “serve the people” work. Their membership is varied in terms of age, gender and race, although the core organizers serving in leadership positions have mostly been white and/or male. Although the Philly Socialists have been gaining traction in recent years, within a general trend towards increased national visibility for American socialist organizations, they have been active since 2011.

As explained in the Introduction, this chapter is based on research conducted between 2018 and 2019. In particular, I conducted five semi-structured individual interviews with Philly Socialists organizers; the average length of the interviews was 70 minutes. In addition to the interviews, I observed four public or semi-public meetings or events, taking notes and collecting printed materials when available; I analyzed documents published by the Philly Socialists, with particular attention to documents that detailed their political positions and their organizational and technological practices; I also observed and occasionally collected the content that the Philly Socialists created on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and their own website.

In this chapter, I explain how the Philly Socialists articulate a technological imaginary of negotiation, which I summarize as “organizing where people are”: while the PS find digital media far from ideal, they regard them as good enough for recruiting

people into the organization. It is a technological imaginary of negotiation because it rejects the triumphalistic tones of Silicon Valley's visions of technology, but it allows for the use of the digital technologies produced by Silicon Valley. In particular, the Philly Socialists contextualize their technological practices through the notion of "organizing", which allows them to downplay and justify their use of corporate digital technologies. The imaginary of negotiation of the Philly Socialists is articulated differently from LUMe's negotiation; even if both groups end up choosing to use Silicon Valley's technologies, LUMe negotiates their technological practices in response to the tradition of the Italian occupied social centers, as well as another salient technological imaginary in the Italian landscape – that of the Five Star Movement. In contrast, the Philly Socialists' negotiation is shaped by an appeal to the heritage of socialist organizing and an opposition to the technological imaginary of "activist networking" (that we might better qualify as "lifestyle activism" or "slacktivism").

I chronicle the history of the Philly Socialists from their founding in 2011 to their recent involvement in the Occupy ICE protests that opposed Trump's immigration policies in 2018; I also detail the different "serve the people" projects that the PS have promoted in the city of Philadelphia. I then examine the politics of the Philly Socialists, which are a multi-tendency socialist organization oriented towards a revolutionary approach, as opposed to the electoral process. I contextualize the PS' politics within what looks like a "socialist moment" in contemporary American politics, i.e. a period of heightened attention to socialism and socialist organizations, likely spurred by Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders' participation in the Democratic Presidential Primaries in 2016. Although this "socialist moment" has brought media coverage and

interest to the Philly Socialists, the group is not necessarily thrilled with how the mainstream conversation about socialism has been coopted by the electoral politics of the Democratic Party. Partially in response to this socialist moment, the Philly Socialists have been more forceful in articulating how their political approach is distinct from other organizations; they do this through the notion of "base-building", which explains their commitment to "fighting the power and serving the people", as opposed to running candidates in elections. Base-building is also the keyword that characterizes the formation of a new national organization that unites different local socialist organizations: the Marxist Center. The effort to create the Marxist Center was spearheaded by members of the PS, which remain very influential in the national network. Further, I explain how the organizational structures of the Philly Socialists blend the centralized structures typical of socialist groups with more decentralized processes that are inspired by neo-anarchist movements.

I then examine the technological practices of the Philly Socialists, as they pertain to external and internal communication. The organization's practices are geared towards the recruitment and retainment of members; while the PS tend to downplay their reliance on corporate digital platforms, they utilize extensively both corporate social network sites and other collaboration and campaigning tools, such as Slack and Nationbuilder. In the last part of the chapter, I describe the technological imaginary of the Philly Socialists, which I condense in the sentence "organizing where people are", through which I highlight how digital technologies are not ideal for the PS, but they are good enough for recruiting people. The PS' technological imaginary is one of negotiation, because the organization rejects the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley, while

relying on its technologies. Their negotiation is based on a strategic use of the notion of "organizing", which allows them to frame their technological practices as one piece of a more complex online and offline strategy. As such, their imaginary of negotiation is shaped by a) the heritage of socialist organizing and its use of mainstream technologies and b) the rejection of a technological imaginary, akin to "slacktivism", that they see as widespread in the American Left, and which they call "activist networking".

The Philly Socialists

The Philly Socialists were founded in the Summer of 2011, right before the beginning of the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States, by a handful of white male activists, who had recently relocated to Philadelphia and had prior experiences in radical social movements, student organizing and anti-war demonstrations. The PS can thus be considered as part of the wave of mobilization that brought young Americans to the streets after the financial crisis of 2008 and after the subsequent loss of trust in the Obama administration's capacity to steer the country in a more progressive direction. But while many of the movements of the post-recession period have long been gone, eight years after their founding the Philly Socialists are still gaining new members and implementing new projects. In January 2019, their dues-paying membership amounted to 170 individuals; additionally, dozens more people participate in their projects in the city, even if they do not hold formal membership.

Immediately after their founding, the Philly Socialists participated in the Occupy Philadelphia movement, which set up an encampment near City Hall, in the heart of the city, for two months, before being evicted in November 2011. A number of current

members got to know the Philly Socialists through their participation in Occupy Philly. Besides their participation in Occupy Philly, the first project that the founders of the Philly Socialists put in place was that of offering General Educational Development (GED) and English as Second Language (ESL) classes – a project that still continues today. Additionally, they started their organizing work in North Philadelphia, where the recession had left many lots vacant. Canvassing the neighborhood, the organizers found that the residents were interested in having a community garden; they identified a piece of land that had been abandoned due to tax delinquency and turned that into a garden. Since then, the Philly Socialists have established several community gardens in Philadelphia, which they maintain with the involvement of the neighborhoods.

After what one of the founders described as a "lull period" between 2012 and 2013, the Philly Socialists directed their efforts towards tenant organizing in the city in 2014-2015. Inspired by the Seattle Solidarity Network, the Philly Socialists started to organize tenant fights against landlords in West Philadelphia. What began as support to one resident's struggle against a negligent landlord (Thompson, 2019), later became a full-fledged organization, the Philadelphia Tenants Union (PTU), founded in 2016. The PTU is now an independent organization, but their membership and, at times, leadership overlap significantly with the Philly Socialists.

Between 2015 and 2016, in the long campaign leading up to the Presidential Primaries and the Presidential Elections, the candidacy of Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders got people more interested in "democratic socialism" and socialist organizations, as one of the PS interviewees reported. While, as I will explain below, the Philly Socialists do not support Sanders or other candidates for office, they benefitted from the

national media attention to Sanders and his reclaiming of the label of “socialist”, albeit within the confines of the Democratic Party. After the election of President Donald Trump in 2016, the Philly Socialists saw another spike in the number of people who showed up to their public events or showed interest in other ways. In particular, one of the interviewees recalled that:

> after Trump got elected, then there was a huge, huge mobilization almost instantaneously on the night of the election or the weekend of. We were planning to have a meeting already in advance, probably the weekend after the election and we had to change venues because on Facebook we found 300 people were going to show up, so we had to rent a bigger space. We had this big mass meeting of several hundred people. We were trying to plug in the energy into doing concrete work. We had several mass meetings after that. (Tyler)

As Tyler explained, the Philly Socialists tried to channel the frustration (and excitement) of the early anti-Trump protests into their different projects. The PS also took part in the rallies of late January 2017, when thousands of people took to the streets to protest against Trump, who was visiting a Republican Party retreat that was taking place in a hotel in downtown Philadelphia (Hesse, 2017; Tesfaye, 2017).

Since 2017, the efforts of the Philly Socialists have gone into different directions. On the one hand, the organization continues to expand and experiment with new projects. One of the projects that the PS is currently incubating is that of a worker organizing initiative, called Dignity, which PS leadership hope to turn into a permanent structure similar to that of the Philadelphia Tenants Union. The organization also had a change in leadership in 2018, which signaled the “retirement” of the PS founders from leadership roles and the emergence of a more diverse cohort of leaders in the elected positions of the organization. On the other hand, the Philly Socialists are also spearheading the creation

of a socialist organization at the national level, intended to be a network of local organizations that share the Philly Socialists' values and political orientations to organizing, chiefly the attention to base-building, as opposed to the electoral process. The first national meeting that began to plan for a national network was held in Philadelphia in Summer 2017. In December 2018, a second national meeting held in Colorado officially founded the new organization, called the "Marxist Center". The PS have taken a leading role in the creation of this new entity, as shown by the fact that the organization sent a delegation of 13 people to the conference in Colorado and several PS members led workshops.

In Summer 2018, the Philly Socialists were one of the organizers of the Occupy ICE protests in Philadelphia. These protests were part of a nationwide surge in activism against the repressive immigration policies of the Trump administration and the targeting of immigrants by ICE, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (Lang, 2018; Levin, 2018). Portland (OR) was one of the main centers of the protests. In Philadelphia, organizers such as the Philly Socialists, the Philadelphia branch of Democratic Socialists of America and Reclaim Philadelphia[30] started occupying the area in front of the ICE offices at 8th and Cherry St. on July 2nd. Despite the summer heat and the rain, the protesters continuously occupied the site for four days, building an encampment and collecting monetary and in-kind donations (Gammage & Irizarry-Aponte, 2018a; Orso & Feliciano Reyes, 2018). The protesters were forcefully evicted on

[30] According to press releases distributed via Facebook, the original sponsoring coalition included: Socialist Alternative, Philly Socialists, Party for Socialism and Liberation, Montgomery County Socialists, Liberation Project, Philly DSA, Reclaim Philadelphia, Green Party of Philadelphia, International Marxist Tendency, POWER, IWW Philly, Bucks County Socialists; however, 215 People's Alliance, Juntos, and New Sanctuary Movement of Philadelphia also joined the coalition in different capacities (Philly Socialists et al., 2018).

July 5th, when the police used their issued bicycles to push away protesters, effectively separating them from the tents and equipment (Feliciano Reyes, Orso, Palmer, & Tornoe, 2018) – an action that the protesters dubbed “bikedozing”. A second encampment was created next to City Hall on July 6th (Sasko, 2018); the new encampment spurred a mass meeting on July 10th, where activists attempted to create a more stable structure of working groups. The occupation lasted for 22 days. In Philadelphia, the Occupy ICE protests supplemented the nationwide demand to “abolish ICE” with two more local claims: 1) a request to governor Tom Wolf to “shut down” the federal detention center in Berks County, which holds parents and children who are awaiting immigration or asylum decisions and 2) a request to mayor Jim Kenney to end PARS, e.g. a data-sharing agreement which allowed ICE to access information about arrests in the city of Philadelphia (Gammage, 2018; Gammage & Irizarry-Aponte, 2018a). The protests were successful on the local level, in that mayor Kenney announced on July 27th that the city would not renew its contract with PARS, which terminated on August 31st, 2019 (Allyn, 2018). The announcement put an end to the encampment outside City Hall (“‘Occupy ICE’ activists vacate City Hall after Kenney won’t renew PARS agreement,” 2018). The local success of Occupy ICE Philadelphia brought an increase of media attention to the Philly Socialists, who were recognized as one of the main actors behind these protests (Brey, 2018a, 2018b; Dixon, 2018; Orso & Feliciano Reyes, 2018; Wang, 2018).

Besides protests and direct action, the Philly Socialists work on many projects at the same time: each of them is coordinated by a working group, typically composed by dues-paying members, but open to non-members; the General Assembly and the Central Committee oversee all of the activities and allocate a budget for them. When I attended

an open “mass meeting” of the PS, directed at introducing the organization to potentially interested individuals, in July 2018, PS members presented ten different projects that they were running. First, the Philadelphia Tenants Union, “fighting slumlords through direct action campaigns and working to expand tenants' rights in Philadelphia” (Philly Socialists, 2018e). Second, the ESL classes, which are run by PS volunteers and directed at immigrants. They are free and take place in two community spaces, one in South Philadelphia and one in West Philadelphia. This project was presented as a vehicle for solidarity between immigrants and non-immigrants in a Philly Socialists’ pamphlet available at that meeting: “Philly Socialists have been providing free English classes for the past six years, with the intention of beginning to build a foundation of trust and mutual respect between these communities” (Philly Socialists, 2018b). Third, the worker organizing project – Dignity. The pamphlet mentioned above describe the project as such:

> **Socialists must be at the forefront of a revived labor movement.** [sentence in bold in original] Philly Socialists has launched a Workers’ Center to do just that. We are taking the fight straight to the bosses and seeking to build a united anti-capitalist front between labor socialists and radical working-class organizations. (Philly Socialists, 2018b)

Since Dignity is still a work-in-progress, the organizers did not share any other details at that meeting. The fourth project presented in the July mass meeting was that of the Philly Socialists’ own quarterly alternative magazine, *The Philadelphia Partisan*. The *Partisan* is run by an editorial collective, whose members write under pseudonyms; articles are authored by the editorial collective, Philly Socialists members and other interested activists. The fifth project is the Cesar Iglesias Community Garden in North

Philadelphia, which the Philly Socialists call their "land redistribution project" (Philly Socialists, 2018e) and which "provides a community gathering space, fresh local food, and shows both our allies and our enemies that land and resources can be put to use productively by the people" (Philly Socialists, 2018b). Sixth, PS organizers introduced their different student organizing efforts at Drexel University and Temple University (now in decline). Over the past year, the PS' student branches have expanded: the Drexel Socialists launched a Student Tenants Union to organize the residents of student housing and fight landlords in the gentrified areas of University City; and a small group of students at the University of Pennsylvania also started organizing as "Penn Socialists". Seventh, given that the Occupy ICE protests in Philadelphia had just ended with a victory by the organizers, the Philly Socialists talked about their participation in the coalition of Philly leftist groups that led those protests. The eighth "project" highlighted in the meeting is less of a project, and more of a working group: the "Design collective", which is responsible for designing print and digital materials, including posters, flyers for events, banners, pamphlets, and t-shirts, and is always recruiting new members, with or without design experience. The ninth project, still under development, is the creation of a Domestic Violence Rapid Response Team, which emerged from the PS' Dolphin Caucus, i.e. the working group for non-cismen members. The mission of the Rapid Response Team is that of "supporting the immediate needs for survivors of domestic and sexual abuse, without police involvement" (Philly Socialists, 2018f). The last project presented at the meeting is that of the Marxist Center, previously introduced.

In 2018-2019, the Philly Socialists also worked on other new activities: they expanded their political education programs, which now include a reading club that gets

together to discuss recent books on interest to the PS (so far, the reading group has read the 2018 “Can the Working Class Change the World?” by David Yates); in 2019, the PS have held their first two public events in Spanish, in January and March 2019. The PS also launched their “Prison Organizing Project”, which has been coordinating drop-in letter writing sessions, providing materials, postage, as well as advice, on how to write to incarcerated people (Philly Socialists, 2019b). Additionally, the “Prison Organizing Project” has been working on “outreach, coordinating support for court dates, and connecting with other groups and networks” (Philly Socialists, 2018f). According to a March 2019 newsletter (Philly Socialists, 2019a), a legal defense team and prisoner solidarity project is also in the works.

The politics of the Philly Socialists

> We are… we accept people who identify as anarchists, people who identify as Trotskyists or Stalinists or what have you. We don't have like a specific strongly held ideological core belief, but generally, the organization moves in a revolutionary direction, the long-term stated goal is a revolution and the tactics tend to downplay the importance of elections and to focus more on direct action, mass action, right? Mass struggles, protests and community organizing. Our approach to elected officials tends to be more oppositional and antagonistic. (Tyler)

In this quote, Tyler clearly articulated the politics of the Philly Socialists. They are a broadly inclusive socialist organization, which relies on protests, direct action, and “serve the people” work. They are not interested in taking part in the electoral process at the local, state or federal level – they prefer to think about their organizing work as leading to a socialist revolution in the United States. The politics of the Philly Socialists are presented in slightly different ways on their outreach materials; while not hiding their

socialist and revolutionary orientation, they attempt to spell out its meaning in lay terms, focusing on what they stand for as socialists. On their website, the "Who we are" page states that "We are dedicated to building the base for socialist politics by organizing the unorganized" (Philly Socialists, n.d.-e). Until recently, the "About" section on their Facebook page declared, in both English and Spanish: "We are committed to creating a just and sustainable future for ourselves and our planet. We fight to extend and deepen democracy within our society — to transform our political and economic system into one befitting of basic human dignity" (Philly Socialists, n.d.-b); it also stated that "Philly Socialists is a working class political organization. / Philly Socialists es una organización política de la clase obrera. Sí luchamos, ganamos [If we fight, we win] (Philly Socialists, n.d.-b). In more detailed terms, under the humorous title "Join Us and Fight for a Just, Sustainable, and Equitable Society (*cough* *cough* Socialism)", they add:

> Philly Socialists is a political organization committed to creating a just and sustainable future for ourselves and our planet. As socialists, we believe in freedom, democracy, and the right to basic human dignity. Capitalism denies us all these. Only revolutionary change that ends capitalism will win us the future we deserve. And only a massive, organized force can get us there. (Philly Socialists, n.d.-b)

In their outward-facing materials, it is clear that the Philly Socialists are making an effort to explain what socialism means in plain language, and how the PS might be different from other socialist organizations. A small pamphlet distributed at an open assembly in July 2018 devoted a third of its space to an explanation of the "values" of the Philly Socialists (Philly Socialists, 2018b) in a (relatively) simple way. First, they juxtaposed three "We are" – "socialists", "building a political base", "serving the people, fighting the power" – and three "We are not" – "a political theory club", "funded by

grants", "supporters of the two capitalist parties" (Philly Socialists, 2018b). Under the first heading, "We are: Socialists", the pamphlet echoed some aspects of what Tyler reported in the quote above:

> Socialists believe in democracy and the right to a decent human life. The "right" to profit and private property should never impinge upon our basic rights to human dignity. We all have different ideas about the specifics of what socialism means or looks like. However, we are bonded by the basic ideas and the tradition of socialist politics. (Philly Socialists, 2018b)

In explaining what socialists believe in, the Philly Socialists aim to be inclusive of different definitions of socialism. In many ways, their view of socialism is best represented by the concept of "base-building" and their "serve the people" work (e.g. their projects), which I examine later in this section. The three instances of "We are not" articulated in the pamphlet are a direct way for the Philly Socialists to distinguish themselves from orthodox, sectarian, socialist groups ("political theory club"), from non-profit organizations ("funded by grants") and from the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) ("supporters of the two capitalist parties") (Philly Socialists, 2018b), which have recently become more directly involved in the politics of the Democratic Party, particularly after the Bernie Sanders presidential primary campaign in 2015-2016. It is as important for the Philly Socialists to describe who they are as it is to describe who they are not; this necessity to differentiate the PS from other groups is a recurrent theme of the interviews, too. This might be especially crucial in this moment of unexpected media attention to socialist organizations in the United States, which has led the PS to receive more media coverage.

The pamphlet mentioned above also states three values – science, human rights, and democracy – which are enshrined in the Constitution of the Philly Socialists (Philly Socialists, 2017). Curiously, while the Constitution does not mention the word "socialism" or "socialist" at all, these "core values" are placed prominently in Article 1:

> 1. *Science — Prove it*
> Science is our guiding methodology. We reject all dogma and orthodoxy, seeking instead to encourage critical thinking among the masses.
> 2. *Human Rights — Everybody matters*
> The rights of the people are the supreme law. The fulfillment of basic human rights is the responsibility of any legitimate government.
> 3. *Democracy — Everyone decides*
> Democracy is a fundamental desire of all people. Democracy is a process and a set of institutions which rests on this foundation of individual and collective rights and liberties. Disagreement is a fundamental right, and a social good (Philly Socialists, 2017, art. 1).

According to the article, these values "inform and direct [their] actions, strategies and goals" (Philly Socialists, 2017, art. 1). I do not have any empirical material that would allow me to speculate on how these values came to be so prominent in the Constitution of the Philly Socialists[31]. What seems evident is that they do not necessarily appear as defining principles of a socialist approach – even a broadly inclusive one like that of the Philly Socialists – and that they would not be out of place in the Constitution of a progressive or even liberal political organization. This might be a tactical decision on part the of the Philly Socialists, to avoid tying themselves too rigidly to a specific

[31] These three values, with the exact wording, appear in all previous three versions of the Philly Socialists Constitution, dated 2012, 2013 and 2014. They can be accessed through the (no longer updated) personal website of a former member of the Philly Socialists ("Philly Socialists Resources," n.d.).

definition of socialism – which would then be difficult to amend, given that the Constitution can only be amended through the Constitutional Congress, which requires a quorum of 50% + 1 members and a 2/3 majority vote (Philly Socialists, 2017, art. 2c). It might also be a way to shield the organization from trouble, given the problematic status of "socialism" in American political culture for most of the 20th Century.

In the rest of the section, I will contextualize the Philly Socialists within what mainstream commentators have called – sometimes with alarm – an American "socialist moment". Then, I will articulate the importance of the idea of base-building to the politics of the Philly Socialists. Afterwards, I will focus on the efforts by the Philly Socialists to spearhead the formation of a national organization of socialists, which is now called the "Marxist Center". Lastly, I will explain the intricate organizational structure of the Philly Socialists, which blends traditional socialist centralization and neo-anarchist horizontality.

A socialist moment in the United States

Is the United States living a socialist moment? The question has been preoccupying mainstream media for the past couple of years. PBS Newshour asked: "Is socialism having its moment in U.S. elections?" (Greenfield, 2019); a segment on NPR's program Fresh Air declared that "Socialism isn't the scare word it once was" (Nunberg, 2019). The pages of *The New York Times* have also hosted discussions on the rise of socialism in the American political landscape: in August 2018, an opinion column was titled: "The New Socialists: Why the pitch from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders resonates in 2018" (Robin, 2018); in May 2019, the *Times*' website hosted a

conversation with Bhaskar Sunkara, who is the editor of *Jacobin*, a quarterly socialist magazine founded in 2010, under the title "The United States of Socialism?" (Douthat, Goldberg, & Leonhardt, 2019). But the predominant frame that news media have used to cover the "resurgence" of socialism is undoubtedly that of defining it in generational terms: the emergence of "millennial socialism" in the US was announced, for instance, by the *Economist* ("Millennial socialism: The resurgent left," 2019), the *Chicago Tribune* (Chapman, 2018), The US edition of the *New Statesman* (Jacobson, 2019; Ypi, 2019), the *Guardian*, that declared that US millennials "fell in love with socialism" (McGreal, 2017), and the *Nation* (Mead, 2017).

In 2018, a Gallup poll[32] showed that the percentage of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents who regarded socialism favorably was higher than the percentage of those who regarded capitalism favorably (57% vs. 47%)(Newport, 2018). According to the same poll, 51% of younger Americans, regardless of political affiliation, had a favorable opinion of socialism, while only 45% had a positive opinion of capitalism (Newport, 2018). Whether in a positive or negative way, Americans also seemed interested in knowing more about socialism, as evidenced by their Google searches. Google Trends data are useful to show the variation in the volume of Google searches that contain a given keyword within a time period; the numbers attached to the data vary between 0 and 100, with 100 representing the highest volume of searches that contain the keyword within the time period, and all other values as a proportion of that maximum value (Stocking & Matsa, 2017). As can be seen in Figure 13, Google searches that

[32] The survey was conducted between July 30th and August 5th, 2018; a random sample of 1,505 adults aged 18 and older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia was surveyed via telephone (landline and cell phones) (Newport, 2018).

include the term “socialism” and that originated within the United States over the last 15 years, seem to spike in three moments: October 2008 (95), February 2016 (100), and February 2019 (79).

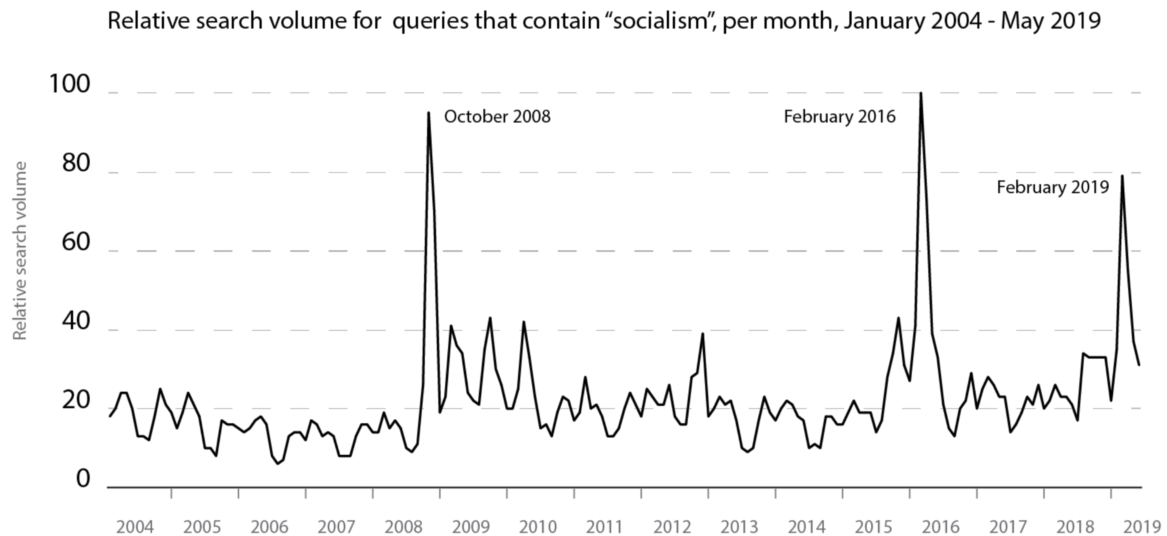

Figure 13. The graph shows the changes in the relative search volume for Google queries, originating in the United States, that contain the word “socialism” and were performed between January 2004 and May 2019. Data source: Google Trends (https://www.google.com/trends)

Each of these coincides with a moment in which “socialism” entered the mainstream discussion. In October 2008, the late Republican Presidential candidate John McCain defined then candidate Barack Obama’s policies as “socialist” in a radio interview (“McCain, Palin hint that Obama’s policies are ‘socialist,’” 2008); this fed a long-term obsession within right-wing communities about Obama being a socialist (or a communist) (see Berlet, 2010). February 2016 saw the first four Democratic primaries of the 2016 cycle, where Sen. Bernie Sanders performed fairly well, losing Iowa to Hillary Clinton by a narrow margin and winning in New Hampshire. In February 2019, a couple of events might account for the attention to the word “socialism”. First, the media gave ample coverage of progressive new Members of Congress, including Congresswoman

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (a former member of the Democratic Socialists of America and Sanders campaign staffer) throughout January and February 2019; in a notable interview on "Meet the Press", Ocasio-Cortez was questioned by Chuck Todd about her stance on Democratic socialism and capitalism (*Full interview: Rep. Ocasio-Cortez on the Democratic Party, Green New Deal, 2020 candidates [Video file]*, 2019). Second, and in no small part due to the media frenzy surrounding Ocasio-Cortez, during the State of the Union address, on February 5, 2019, President Trump talked about the rising popularity of socialist ideas in the United States:

> Here in the United States, we are alarmed by the new calls to adopt socialism in our country. America was founded on liberty and independence, and not government coercion, domination, and control. We are born free and we will stay free. Tonight, we renew our resolve that America will never be a socialist country. (Graham, 2019)

Trump's remarks on the threat of socialism in the United States undoubtedly contributed to the continued media coverage of socialist ideas and organizations. In particular, given their connection to Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) have beneficiated from this intense media attention. The DSA were founded in 1982; as of now, they are the largest socialist organization in the United States: their membership has grown from 6,000 members in 2015 to more than 50,000 in 2019 (Henwood, 2019; Stein, 2017).

The national attention that "socialism" has received over the past four years, by both mainstream media and the public, has repercussions on the local level, too. Recently, the Philly Socialists have been experiencing a surge in membership, public participation, and media coverage. Their dues-paying members went from 32 in 2014 to

72 in August 2016 (Philly Socialists, 2018a), to 170 in January 2019. As highlighted above, in the period immediately after the 2016 Presidential election, the PS saw an increased level of participation in their public events and assemblies, including from individuals who had never joined such events before. Lastly, particularly after the Occupy ICE protests in Philadelphia, in Summer 2018, the Philly Socialists also received a lot more media attention (Brey, 2018a, 2018b; Dixon, 2018; Orso & Feliciano Reyes, 2018; Wang, 2018). Several members were quoted – and even photographed – in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*'s coverage of the protests (Gammage & Irizarry-Aponte, 2018a, 2018b; Orso & Feliciano Reyes, 2018); the *Philadelphia Weekly* put the Philly Socialists on the cover of the magazine, with the title "A full-fledged Socialist Party in American politics. Just a dream? These folks beg to differ" (Brey, 2018a).

While the Philly Socialists are pleased with both the opportunity to be featured in the media and the growth in membership and participation, they are not necessarily happy with how the national conversation about socialism has been going. In particular, given that a lot of that conversation has been about the participation of socialist candidates – whether Sanders or Ocasio-Cortez – to the electoral process and within the Democratic Party, the Philly Socialists feel that the way in which people are talking about socialism right now is not representative of what they think socialism is actually about. One of the interviewees, Michael, reacted like this to my questions about this socialist moment in mainstream media:

> One day maybe somebody will write a chapter heading and they'll be like, "From 2010 to..." or whenever Occupy began, 2012 to 2020. The resurgence of the US left, American Socialist Moment. The contemporary American Socialist moment. Maybe somebody will write that heading. I think it's yet to be seen, because I think you can say socialism as a word has gained resurgence, but if that just means [it

> was] whipped into the Democratic party, that's not a socialist moment. Socialism means independent working-class power, at the end of the day. That's like one of the... there are a few things that it means, and that's one of them. And if we don't have an independent political base ready to mobilize – and I don't mean a party at the end of like 2020 or 2030… I'm talking about just our own independent political power that is not hung at the collar to the Democratic Party, [if we don't have that] then it's not a socialist moment. (Michael)

While Michael saw this contemporary moment as one that might mark the resurgence of socialism, he was nevertheless suspicious about the way in which the national conversation on democratic socialism had largely been one about Democratic socialism, i.e. about co-opting socialist organizing in the electoral process. He concluded: "I'm gonna wait. I don't think Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is my socialist moment. I don't think Bernie Sanders is my socialist moment. I think they could be the inklings of one, but I'll wait until 2020 and see what happens" (Michael). Michael's stance was echoed by other interviewees, who were skeptical of the way in which the label of socialism has been co-opted by Democratic politics. On the one hand, as Tyler explained, it is a positive improvement that socialism has entered the mainstream: "So when I first moved here around ten years ago, the idea that any politician would say the word socialism in a positive way, people would have thought that was crazy" (Tyler). Yet, on the other hand, Tyler expressed his skepticism of the way in which Democratic officials and candidates, even at the local level, have seized the label: "Now the thing is that a lot of Democrats have seen that socialism as a term excites young people and is something that they can kind of tactically and cautiously move toward appropriating it, depending on the level" (Tyler).

The Philly Socialists' ambivalence about the "socialist moment" has guided the organization towards articulating with more clarity exactly what being socialist means to them through the notion of "base-building", to which I now turn. At the same time, the growing attention to socialism in the U.S. has also encouraged the PS to push for the creation of a national organization of socialists that is oriented towards base-building, as opposed to the electoral process (like the DSA) – the Marxist Center, which I examine afterwards.

Base-building: "Come for the values, stay for the work"

The Philly Socialists put a lot of effort into planning and managing their "Serve the people" projects: ESL classes, community gardens, tenant organizing, etc. This attention to grassroots mobilization is theorized by members of the Philly Socialists with the idea of "base-building", which they frequently oppose to the electoral strategy (i.e. trying to elect candidates through the electoral process). One of the interviewees, Lisa, explained the core advantage of base-building over working to elect candidates:

> A lot of people want to do... I find it the easy route... Of like doing elections and stuff, which is good, people want to do elections that's okay. But I don't think that should be your only focus. Historically, and also just recently, real change comes from when you do a lot of the base building kind of work. So that's the kind of work that I think we should be focusing on, personally. Many people want to do elections and stuff, but that's I feel is more democratic politics. Because there's not a party... like for instance I am not a citizen. None of those parties, I would be able to have any political... I wouldn't be able to vote. But doing the kind of work that I'm doing, I am able to actually move the politics to where I want them to be moved. So that's why the kind of work that I like to focus. So I hope that we do that. (Lisa)

Lisa's quote is helpful to highlight two key aspects of the PS' base-building approach: first, the idea the "real change" comes from the direct, grassroots mobilization of the working class; second, that base-building is the only approach that can actually aim to include all of the working class, given the electoral disenfranchisement of numerous marginalized groups. While Lisa pointed out the disenfranchisement of immigrants, other groups are also excluded from the electoral process, including many Black voters and formerly or currently incarcerated people. The contrast between the inclusive grassroots work of base-building and the exclusionary nature of electoral politics in the United States was also at the core of a chapter that members of the Philly Socialists contributed to a collection of essays from activists and scholars of the socialist left, published by Haymarket Books and Verso in 2019 (Corcione, Yeun, & Diliberto, 2019). In the chapter, titled "Beyond the vote: Base-building for class independence in Philadelphia", PS activists pitched base-building as an alternative strategy to "electoralism" (Corcione et al., 2019). After arguing that "pursuing an exclusive electoral strategy (…) means abandoning class struggle outside of the electoral arena, as well as the possibility to organize with a section of the working class which does not, or simply cannot, vote", they presented base-building as directed towards "rebuilding a *direct* [in italics in original] connection between socialists and the rest of the working class to help foster the working class' political independence" (Corcione et al., 2019). Ultimately, for the PS base-building aims to build power outside of the electoral system (and of the State) to build a working-class movement capable of seizing power for itself:

> We build power outside the electoral system by creating our own institutions and programs. And it is through these, not primarily through electoral efforts, that we build a mass for socialist politics. Our

> projects directly meet people's material needs by "serving the people and fighting the power" (Corcione et al., 2019).

While "serving the people" is accomplished through the numerous projects put in place by the PS, "fighting the power" happens through direct action and advocacy. In the chapter, as well as in one of the interviews (Tyler), the PS credited the Black Panther Party for inspiring their dual power approach of "serving the people/fighting the power" [33] (Corcione et al., 2019). To this day, the Philadelphia Tenants Union remains the best example of the PS' success in bridging direct action and political campaigning: while the PTU promotes direct actions against landlords, such as eviction protections, they also put pressure on elected officials to pass legislation that can help everyone in the city, such as the recently approved "Good Cause" bill, protecting tenants in short-term leases against arbitrary evictions (see Corcione et al., 2019).

But what does base-building look like in practice? In an article penned by a member of the Philly Socialists, it looks like this: "door-knocking, one-on-one conversations, serving the immediate needs of the masses, fighting the power of local oppressors alongside them" (Horras, 2017b). The same activist also described base-building work, in a different article, as "organizing the unorganized" (Horras, 2017a). All the projects promoted by the Philly Socialists operate under the umbrella of base-building; a large proportion of their outreach via Facebook and newsletters is devoted to soliciting participation to the different projects. In an open meeting that I attended in July 2018, this focus on "Serve the people" work was described as being very fulfilling for the members of the Philly Socialists; one of the members conveyed the importance of these

[33] The phrase "Serve the people", which was taken up by the Black Panther Party and other New Left groups, comes from a 1948 speech by Mao Zedong (1967).

projects through the slogan “Come for the values, stay for the work”. In that same meeting, the many projects were presented both as concrete things that members can do to get other people motivated and as “islands of the world to come when socialists seize power”; even though the language of “prefigurative politics” is largely absent from the PS’ theorization of base-building, the latter description is an effective rendering of the prefigurative nature of their projects – at least in terms of creating immediate benefits for the working class outside of the structures of capital.

The Marxist Center

The experience of the Philly Socialists has inspired other local grassroots socialist organizations in the United States, which PS members keep in contact with. The efforts of the PS on the national scene have been channeled into the incubation of a US-wide socialist organization focused on base-building, as opposed to the electoral process like the DSA. The Marxist Center now includes 20 affiliate organizations from throughout the United States[34]. As I mentioned above, the Marxist Center held its first national meeting – the “Conference on base-building” – in August 2017, in Philadelphia; it was officially launched in December 2018 through a National Conference in Colorado Springs (CO). During the three-day conference in 2018, socialists from across the country debated the shape of the national organization. In particular, they discussed and approved the “affiliation requirements”, i.e. the requirements that a group or an individual must meet in

[34] Bucks County Socialists, Chicago Communists, Colorado Springs Socialists, Cooperation Northfield, DSA Communist Caucus (Bay Area), Electric City Socialists, Louisville Socialists, Montgomery County Socialists, Nebraska Left Coalition, New River Workers Power, Organization for a Free Society, Philly Socialists, Red Bloom Collective, Rhode Island Socialists, Roanoke People’s Power Network, Silk City Socialists, Tacoma Communists, United Communists of Lane County, Whatcom-Skagit Communists, Wyoming Red Star Coalition (“Marxist Center affiliate organizations,” n.d.).

order to enter the organization, the “points of unity”, i.e. their political manifesto, and a resolution on the organizational structure and the website to be created (presented by a member of the Philly Socialists)(“Marxist Center National Conference packet,” 2018). The conference also included workshops, held by members of affiliate organizations, to educate the attendees on fundraising, labor and tenant organizing, movement building, cybersecurity, inclusivity, and political education efforts. Four of these seven workshops were led or co-led by Philly Socialists members.

Although the Marxist Center is a multi-tendency organization characterized by ideological pluralism (“The Marxist Center: Base-building toward dual power [podcast],” 2018), base-building is its core principle (Corcione et al., 2019). Base-building is the first of the 10 “Points of Unity” that the Marxist Center adopted in December 2018, although it is not called “base-building” explicitly: the network pledged to “Commit to building institutions for the working class, using local organizing to unite the workers of the world to execute the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism” (“Marxist Center points of unity”, 2018). However, base-building was referenced explicitly in the “affiliation requirements”, which require organizations that wish to join the Marxist Center to be “actively involved in organizing efforts which broadly align with a socialist base-building strategy” (“Marxist Center affilitation requirements,” 2018, art. 2(C)). Base-building is clearly pitched as an alternative to an electoral strategy, as the fourth point of unity explains:

> Reject the strategy of administering or reforming capitalism and recognize that the capitalist state can never be made to serve the interests of the working class as a whole. Work against the interests of the capitalist state even if holding government office (“Marxist Center points of unity”, 2018).

Although there is no prohibition about running for office or supporting a candidate, it is clear that the Marxist Center has no plan to actively engage in electoral politics at the national level. Other contributions of affiliates of the Marxist Center make it even clearer that their organization, "unlike the social democrats", believes that "the existing bourgeois state cannot be reformed or 'transformed', but must be smashed and replaced by a truly democratic workers government" (Horras, 2018).

The Marxist Center has created an online publication – *Regeneration Magazine* – which doubles as website for the organization. The website hosts information about the national organization and articles contributed by affiliated members, several of which are authored by members of the Philly Socialists.

"The most anarchist socialist organization": organizational structures

Michael, one of the interviewees, described the Philly Socialists as the "most anarchist socialist organization" he had ever encountered. What he meant was that the PS operate with a relatively high degree of decentralization, while still maintaining the typical leadership structure of a socialist group. Figure 14 provides an explanation of the different elected positions within the Philly Socialists: the Central Committee (CC), which currently includes 2 co-chairs, instead of one chair, and the arbiters.

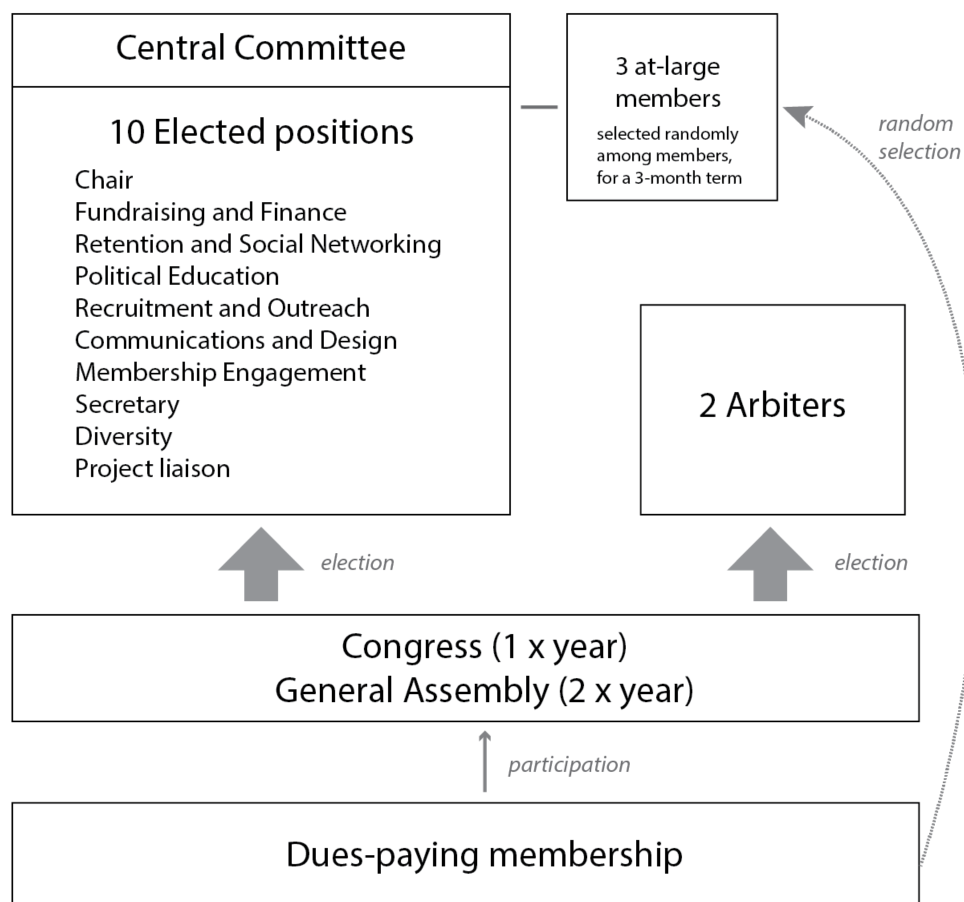

Figure 14. The chart details the elected positions within the Philly Socialists, according to the 2017 Constitution (Philly Socialists, 2017) and the interviews conducted with members of the organization.

A 2018 restructuring turned the CC into a task-based leadership body where each elected member has an assigned set of responsibilities, as can be seen in Figure 14; it also added 3 rotating at-large members to the CC, who are randomly selected from the dues-membership to serve for a period of three months[35]. Within the CC, the chair – currently two co-chairs – serves as the "chief strategic advisor of the organization" (Philly

[35] I was not able to find a document detailing this restructuring of the CC, which was explained to me by Lisa during the interview.

Socialists, 2017, art. II(E)(2)). The membership also elects two arbiters, who serve independently from the CC; they are "responsible for accepting formal complaints (grievances) and handling appeals" and can be approached by any member "to help resolve an interpersonal conflict" among members (Philly Socialists, 2017, pt. art. II(F)).

However, this codified structure of elected positions coexists with more horizontal processes, influenced by neo-anarchist practices, which however remain unsurprisingly unacknowledged. The General Assembly is run by facilitators, not by CC members or the co-chairs. Working groups and caucuses – such as the Dolphin Caucus, which welcomes members who are not cisgender, heterosexual men, and the Ability Caucus, open to members with disabilities – also operate in a less hierarchical way (e.g. they meet whenever they choose to meet and do not have elected leaders). Per the Constitution, members can create autonomous groups and affinity groups (Philly Socialists, 2017, art. 3(B)). After defining the PS as "the most anarchist socialist organization I've ever been in", Michael explained: "we believe in leadership and hierarchy, and the hierarchy of responsibilities and commitments. But we also give a lot of leeway to our projects". Neither the interviews nor the publicly available documents fully account for all of the different working groups and caucuses: it seems that it is difficult even for the Philly Socialists' members to clearly map out this intricate formal-informal structure. However, the coexistence of clear structures and more open processes affords great flexibility to the organization, which can involve newer and older members into the activities that are more suitable for them and experiment with new groups and projects more freely. As Michael highlighted:

> I mean, really the way that projects work in Philly Socialists is that everything is really decentralized, so what is the case is usually if a

> committed member wants to start a project, we will off see funding for them to start the project. And if the project is successful, we can expand funding based upon results, and then those things are all determined by our general assemblies and our congresses (Michael).

According to Michael, while the Philly Socialists retain a centralized leadership structure, the work that goes on in the different projects is largely structured in a decentralized way. Additionally, the different student branches (at Penn, Temple, and Drexel), as well as the Philadelphia Tenants Union, operate as separate entities from the Philly Socialists proper.

The approach outlined by Michael seems to orient the organization towards focusing more on base-building work, and less on internal fights over organizational issues. I argue that, even though they do not acknowledge it, the Philly Socialists blend traditional socialist structures (such as Central Committee) with elements of neo-anarchist horizontality, which are more familiar to younger generations of activists who have been involved with the Occupy movement or other recent social justice movements.

The Philly Socialists adopt a transparent budgeting system, which they describe in detail in a document prepared for the second conference of the Marxist Center in 2018 (Philly Socialists, 2018a). The Philly Socialists also have a member who serves as (paid) chief administrative officer, overseeing the PS finances and the administrative tasks connected to collecting dues, maintaining lists of dues payers and donors, and keeping track of expenses. The budget is proposed by the Central Committee and approved by the General Assembly. The income of the PS comes from two sources: 50% from dues and 50% from fundraisers (Philly Socialists, 2018a). The organization has used both IndieGoGo (Philly Socialists, 2018c) and Chuffed (Philly Socialists, 2018a), two

crowdfunding platforms, to solicit funding from supporters; in 2018, they raised almost $25,000 through one single crowdfunder on Chuffed (Philly Socialists, 2018a).

The technological practices of the Philly Socialists

External communication

The Philly Socialists' intricate organizational structure is mirrored in an equally complex set of technological practices across multiple types of media. Their external communication relies on corporate social media (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram), a website (www.phillysocialists.org) and the *Philadelphia Partisan*, their self-produced magazine and blog. They also use mailing lists, housed on Nationbuilder, and phone banking. There are three actors that coordinate the external communication across these different channels: a Director of Communications, who is one of the elected members of the Central Committee and who coordinates a media team tasked specifically with managing media relations; a social media team; and the editorial collective of the *Partisan*.

The PS website hosts information about who the Philly Socialists are, how to join the organization, and how to get involved in the projects; it includes links to various social media pages and discussion groups of the PS, as well as a link that allows users to pay membership dues or make a donation to the organization; it also hosts a copy of the PS Constitution, their anti-bullying policy, and their sexual harassment policy. The main purpose of the website, according to the interviewees, is to come up in Google searches: "So our website is mainly for people who Google us. It's like, 'Oh I want to know socialists in Philly'. (…) If anybody is interested in socialists in Philadelphia, this is what

they're going to find" (Lisa). Michael also admitted that the PS do not really have "a comprehensive strategy" about the website; he explained that

> our website's kind of like a small little island floating out in the void, 'cause we're like, "People will Google us and try to find out how to get involved." We get probably a handful of sign ups every month through the website, not a ton (Michael).

The website thus serves a very practical focus, as Michael pointed out – making the Philly Socialists show up in Google searches – but it is not really important to the work of the PS. Notice how the Philly Socialists talk about their functioning website in very different terms than LUMe activists, who see creating and maintaining a website as a political practice, although one they cannot commit to at the moment.

The bulk of the external communication of the Philly Socialists happens through corporate social media; as can be seen in Table 5, the PS have accounts on the major social networking sites.

Table 5. Accounts of the Philly Socialists on corporate social network sites.

Social Network Site	URL	Follower/Like count (May 31st, 2019)
Facebook (Page)	www.facebook.com/PhillySocialists/	14,315
Instagram	https://www.instagram.com/phillysocialists/	2,284
Twitter	https://twitter.com/phillysocialist	2,579

The Facebook Page of the PS is by far the most active of the different profiles: they use it to post memes, invite people to meetings and events, share and comment news items. The Instagram profile is mainly used to visually document the activities of the organization, including with the "Stories" function, through which the PS provide short

videos of their events and their organizing work. The Twitter account is less active; Michael commented on the fact that he would like to see it used more: "I think we should be focusing more on Twitter, if we could, but we don't have anybody who's like a Twitter monster". The different social media accounts are managed by the Social Media team; the interviewees explained that different members tend to "specialize" in one of the platforms, but that there is overlap between the people who manage the different accounts. Lisa reported that the Facebook account, in particular, has almost 20 administrators, given the amount of work that tending to that platform requires. Members of the Social Media team are not bound to any particular rules when posting; as Lisa explained: "it's whatever you want to do". In practice, this means that each of them "specializes" in what they like the most, be it posting about upcoming events or sharing memes. The Director of Communication is tasked with inviting people who might be interested – and who are good at posting content – to join the Social Media team.

Lisa provided a description of how the different SNS platforms have slightly different functions for the Philly Socialists:

> Instagram is good for like just kind of putting our politics out there and for reaching out, maybe reaching to have more of a relationship with people. Because you have the stories and stuff, and people send you questions, and you can answer in real time, and things like that. And Twitter is more to put politics out there. But you can really do events on either of those things. So that's like the big downside to... that's why we're like didn't pay as much attention to Twitter and Instagram before, and we focus a lot on Facebook because you can make events. But now we're trying to branch out because you can share the links on Twitter and you can share them on... So that's the difference (Lisa).

Although Twitter and Instagram are also considered important, as Lisa underlined, it is Facebook that provides the most useful tools to the Philly Socialists,

including the Event feature and the discussion groups, which I will examine when describing the PS' internal communication practices. However, despite the high volume of content posted by the PS pages and their intensive use of Events, there does not seem to be a specific Social Media strategy. As Michael argued:

> we have like no strategy for social media, other than it should just be not super controversial. It should not be... we should avoid... we should have a professional demeanor with how we use our social media, and specifically when we receive intake messages through our Facebook page. But I guess what I would say is when I was in student organizing, I had this whole thing about like, "Oh, you should have a strategy about social media." And then Tyler was like, "Yeah, well your strategy's dumb, because basically I sit on the toilet at my work and I post random things at the interval of one every two hours, or like one every hour sometimes, and now we have like 10,000 likes" (Michael).

Although lamenting the lack of a more coherent social media strategy, Michael also admitted that the PS must be doing something right, after all, given their many social media followers. Most interviewees also commented on the increased relevance of memes for the American Left and specifically mentioned memes as a way in which the Facebook presence of the PS is being noticed. Andrew then went on to elaborate:

> basically, it's like we just post so much that eventually it ends up building our social media following. And basically, what we've realized is... I think it's like, we definitely get returns from our social media, but especially given the amount of effort we put in, which is like almost nothing. I think a lot of people would think because we have 11,000 likes or something like that, that we would get a ton of returns from it and we just don't, because the level of engagement that you get out of people who are on social media is pretty low (Michael).

According to Michael, social networking sites are not a crucial arena for recruiting or organizing, but they do offer the PS a low-effort way to be visible.

The Philly Socialists started publishing *The Philadelphia Partisan* in 2017. Its print version is a visually appealing, colorful 16-page stitched booklet, which the PS distribute for free at their events and leave at cafés in Philadelphia. It is also possible to subscribe through the *Partisan*'s Patreon[36] account and receive a physical and/or digital copy of the magazine. It is published quarterly. The *Partisan* also has its own website, which publishes articles in-between the print issues, a Facebook Page (1023 likes) and a Twitter account (636 followers). The magazine is expensive to produce – almost $2 per copy, as reported by Michael – and requires the contribution of many PS members and sympathizers. According to its website, the latest number of the *Partisan*, published in March 2019, was put together by an editorial collective of 5 people (which seems to mostly remain stable across issues), an arts director, a layout director, and with the contributions of 15 people who wrote articles ("From the editors: Winter/Spring 2019," 2019).

While publishing a newspaper or a magazine is a conventional tactic for a social movement, and one that has been crucial to socialist organizing for a long time (see Lenin, 1902), the Philly Socialists tried to make *The Partisan* different from other publications of the socialist left. In presenting the magazine, they offered:

> We are committed to quality journalism wrapped in a well-designed magazine. Most importantly, we are committed to making sure the vast majority of our physical copies are available for free. With over 40 distribution locations, we want to provide an independent socialist voice that is focused on the issues relevant to Philadelphia (Philly Socialists, 2018b).

[36] Patreon is a crowdfunding platform that allows content creators to run a subscription content service. It is popular with artists and writers.

The magazine is thus supposed to be accessible, both in terms of its free availability and in the style in which it is written and designed. During the interview, Michael spoke extensively about the *Partisan* and explained how the PS put a lot of work in making it enjoyable, not a heavy read:

> we try to write like around an eighth-grade level, and we try not to write... we have like maybe one theory piece per issue, and that's always been our goal. That's why we also write exclusively about Philadelphia issues, we don't write about national issues. (…) I mean, that's also like why it's free, why we focus on making sure it's well designed. We wanted to make sure that people wanted to read the thing they were picking up. I think we wouldn't wanna compromise on quality... (…) I think that we're very much aware that people pass over these kinds of things all the time, and we wanna make sure that... our focus isn't to just document things for the sake of documenting it, to document things for the far left, it's to document things for people who otherwise have very little or tangential experience with the organized left (Michael).

Michael's quote provided an explanation of the aims of the *Partisan*: to be appealing to people who would not otherwise be interested in a social movement publication or in radical politics, to cover issues related to Philadelphia, and to do so without the jargon that so often characterizes socialist publications – as Michael added, "we're not trying to write a theory journal". In terms of what is covered in the magazine, Michael argued that the main focus of the *Partisan* lies in documenting the struggles that are happening in Philadelphia: "We're trying to write a paper that can convince somebody who's like out there in this world who doesn't know tremendously about what's going on, that in fact there is a lot going on in terms of struggle" (Michael).

The Philly Socialists also use a mailing list service, Nationbuilder, to communicate with members and with people who have come in contact with them. None

of the interviewees talked extensively about the mailing list, which they only mentioned in passing, at best. After attending one of the open meetings of the Philly Socialists in Summer 2018 and volunteering my contact information, I have received regular newsletters with updates about the organization and their projects, usually weekly, on Sunday night. The newsletters are written in an informal tone and include reminders for upcoming assemblies and events, accompanied by social media links (usually to access the Facebook Events of the gathering they are promoting). Nationbuilder is a nonpartisan political engagement platform, which has been employed by parties and campaigns as diverse as Donald Trump's and Jill Stein's 2016 campaigns, the UK Labour Party, the US Republican State Leadership Committee and both the pro-Leave and pro-Remain campaigns in the Brexit Referendum of 2016 ("Correcting myths about NationBuilder," n.d.; McKelvey & Piebiak, 2016). As McKelvey and Pieback explained, the appeal of NationBuilder for election campaigns lies in its all-encompassing nature and seamless integration of the key organizational aspects of a campaign: "email, website, voter database, donations, volunteer coordination, and communications" (McKelvey & Piebiak, 2016, p. 902). Besides being on the receiving end of the PS newsletters, I do not have any additional elements to assess how the Philly Socialists employ Nationbuilder, especially given that they are not engaged in traditional election campaigning activities.

Lastly, the Philly Socialists also organize phone banking sessions, where members reach out to other members and potentially interested individuals to invite them to upcoming events and assemblies. After volunteering my contact information at a PS event in Summer 2018, I received several phone calls (and voicemails) from PS

organizers over the next few months; the calls were all directed towards inviting me to or reminding me of an event or activity.

The multi-medium external communication practices of the Philly Socialists should be understood within the group's multi-step recruitment and retention strategies. Lisa explained it in detail during the interview:

> On a regular month, we have what will be like a recruitment kind of like event. We will go table to a festival or do something. And then we would do what's called a "Cadre Meeting," where we call those new people that we get information from and then we invite them to an event that is either on Facebook or something. And then after that we invited to that event, then we have retention kind of thing which would be a social. So that's how we usually do it. And then the social and those events will be usually on Facebook and things because it's easy. You have the map, they can easily find the map, they have all the information on there. So, it's part of a whole plan thing. So, it works. It works pretty good, I think (Lisa).

As can be seen in the quote, the recruitment process blends online and offline components. PS organizers collect contact information at events where they set up a table with information about the organization; they then follow up through phone calls with the people who left their contact details, by inviting them to an upcoming event, which they can typically also find advertised on Facebook. Besides the event – which would usually be either connected to the different projects or an open assembly –, interested members are also invited to a social event, such as a picnic, a potluck at an organizer's house or a concert in a bar or venue. In a document that contains organizing tips compiled by the Philly Socialists, the organization outlined its recruitment and retention strategies (Philly Socialists, 2018c). The tips include a detailed explanation of best practices for tabling; among those is the advice to focus on collecting phone numbers over emails. In talking

about retention, the Philly Socialists also noted: “phone calls to invite new recruits to meetings and events has proven to be the most successful way to get people in the door once they sign up/express interest” (Philly Socialists, 2018c, p. 6). Retention is obviously not just about calling interested individuals, but rather involves creating a steady stream of activities of different kinds that people can join to get involved with the organization: a) “regular meetings, events, projects to keep people involved”; b) “political education events to build a shared culture and understand the diversity of opinions and approaches on the Left”; c) “socials to create strong ties within the organization” (Philly Socialists, 2018c, p. 6).

The extensive web of external communication practices of the Philly Socialists should thus be framed in the context of this recruitment-retention process. Seen through this lens, the PS’ extensive social media production is less about expressing how the group feels about different political issues and more about drawing in as many potentially interested people as possible. Michael articulated this with a metaphor:

> I always think of social media as the dragnet, it's the big net that you cast to bring in as many people to your circle as possible, and then the job of an organizer is to be like a good fisherman of people, I guess like Jesus. That would make you fisher of men. And it's like, go through that dragnet and pick out... throw away the bad fish and some fish will slip through, but make sure you catch the right fish (Michael).

Tabling at events and social media content serve the same aim, according to Michael: helping the PS drag in as many people as possible; however, the organizing work only begins once these people have been caught in the PS’s net and can then be involved in the work of the organization. The highly structured nature of the recruitment-retainment process comes into play in the Philly Socialists’ technological imaginary: in

fact, it is the crucial idea of "organizing", predicated on a recruitment-retainment process, that allows the group to imagine their use of internet technologies as only one aspect of their political work.

Internal communication

The internal communication of the Philly Socialists is characterized by the same multi-platform approach that applies to the group's external communication. In particular, the PS employ Facebook groups (some secret, some public), internal listservs hosted on Google groups, Signal, Slack (in the case of the Penn Socialists and the *Partisan* working group), and informal messaging through texting and Facebook Messenger.

The Philly Socialists employ two types of Facebook groups: secret and closed groups. A secret group can only be joined through an invitation extended by a current member of the Facebook group and cannot be found through Facebook's search function. In contrast, Facebook users can see the name and description of a closed group, but its members or the posts they share will not be visible; to join a closed group, a Facebook user can click on the "Join group" button available on the Facebook group page. Group admins (or group members, depending on the settings) need to approve new members in both secret and closed groups. A summary of the different Facebook groups of the Philly Socialists is available in Table 6.

Table 6. Secret and closed Facebook groups managed by the Philly Socialists. Member count current as of June 9th, 2019.

Name	Type	Number of members	URL
Discussion group	Secret	~700	-
Partisan group	Secret	unknown	-
Jobs, Housing and Survival	Closed	178	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1517376318385014/
Dolphin Caucus	Closed	83	https://www.facebook.com/groups/146052499246149/?ref=br_rs
Political Education	Closed	142	https://www.facebook.com/groups/794505984062684/
Non-White Caucus	Closed	35	https://www.facebook.com/groups/2005584376367234/
Disability Discourse and Outreach	Closed	39	https://www.facebook.com/groups/261714284318859/
Design Collective	Closed	53	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1925750687694697/
FREE ESL classes organizing group	Closed	68	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1509904035710537/
César Andreu Iglesias Community Garden	Closed	77	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1342482062477839/
Social Event Planning Collective	Closed	24	https://www.facebook.com/groups/2019546581612777/
Arts and Culture group	Closed	224	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1324789917566202/
Labor Caucus	Closed	51	https://www.facebook.com/groups/530172960510959/
Childcare collective	Closed	21	https://www.facebook.com/groups/530172960510959/
Drexel Socialists	Closed	180	https://www.facebook.com/groups/825102524270198/

Temple Socialists	Closed	113	https://www.facebook.com/groups/templesocialists/
Penn Socialists	Closed	18	https://www.facebook.com/groups/312342072903695/

The most important Facebook group for PS organizers is a secret one, called the "Discussion group". In the interview, Donna reported that this internal group includes 700 members and that it feels "more personal" than the Facebook Page of the Philly Socialists, which is being utilized for external communication; Lisa also explained that it is used to debate about all sorts of topics. Michael detailed the kinds of posts that get shared in the discussion group: memes, reminders about events, articles, updates from ongoing actions (such as the Occupy ICE protests) and "general calls for last minute help". On the PS website, the secret" nature of the group is explained as such: "Unfortunately, the group is 'secret' to avoid a massive influx of requests and to make sure that the group is mostly people who are interested in supporting our work" (Philly Socialists, n.d.-c).

As can be seen from Table 6, the other Facebook groups have a more specific target, either a specific project (e.g. the community garden or the Design collective) or a specific group of organizers (e.g. the non-white caucus). In particular, Donna talked about the importance of the Facebook group of the Dolphin Caucus, which, as described above, offers a space to non-cis-men PS members; compared to the general PS discussion group: "the non-men caucus group is even more, like another layer of more personal than that. We have, like, sometimes playful discussions, and sometimes very serious ones". Another closed group which has been mentioned by the interviewees is called "Jobs, Housing and Survival". It is not only meant for PS members, but rather aimed at

connecting “members, supporters, and volunteers of Philly Socialists with the things that help us survive in this cruel capitalist world” (Philly Socialists, n.d.-d).

The other major channel for communication within the Philly Socialists is the “strategy” listserv, hosted on Google Groups. On the website, the PS invite all members to join the listserv:

> the strategy listserv is **exclusively for dues-paying members** [bold in original]. This is where members have internal discussions about strategy. If major events are happening that are not public, we discuss them on this listserv. Additionally, we discuss occasionally discuss event planning and debate political decisions on this listserv. **IT IS CRUCIAL THAT ALL MEMBERS BE ON THIS LISTSERV!!** [bold and uppercase in original] (Philly Socialists, n.d.-c)

The “strategy listserv” is thus seen as a crucial way to spread information within the PS, discuss what needs to be done (hence the “strategy” label) and remind people of public and non-public events. The Philly Socialists also run a “theory” listserv, directed primarily at discussing organizing theories and approaches to socialism.

The other platforms that the Philly Socialists utilize in their internal communication are Slack, a cloud-based collaboration tool, and Signal, a privacy-oriented encrypted messaging app. Slack is used by the *Partisan* working group and the Penn Socialists organizing collective. Signal is used throughout the organization. Interviewees have mentioned the use of Signal but have not discussed in depth. This might be accounted by how widespread Signal has become within contemporary organizing – LUMe activists report using it, too. Michael, in fact, told me that the PS “obviously” use Signal; he did not add any more explanation of why that would be a good platform. Lisa said that Signal is important for how the PS organize but did not add

details. Signal is likely only one of the platforms that the PS organizers use to message each other: different interviewees mentioned the role of one-to-one messaging/texting – e.g. “texting and Facebook messaging people” (Michael) – as a crucial tool in their internal communication.

Organizing where people are

> The social media we have is just full and cluttered and it's really distracting, and a lot of people don't wanna be on it, but they're like, "We have to be on it," because this is the most effective way to do mass communications and centralized communications. (Michael)

This quote from Michael expresses the core of the technological imaginary of the Philly Socialists: the idea that socialists should organize where people are, even if this means organizing on social media. As Michael showed in the first part of the quote, digital technologies are far from being an ideal space for radical politics, but they are good enough – for now – to recruit people into the socialist camp. A longer quote by Michael further elaborated on the technological imaginary of the Philly Socialists:

> some of the reasons why social media is so ineffective is it's geared towards profit. It's not geared towards actually building social relationships. There's no way that my Facebook newsfeed is geared towards building social relationships, because I've turned that off because it's full of garbage, it's full of ads, it's full of these posts that have nothing to do with my life but the algorithm determined that they'd bring me back and get me addicted again, back into social media and stuff like that. I mean, yeah, I'm more than well aware that social media is not designed for social relationships and not designed at all for socialists. But until the day comes ... I mean I always say the Communist party in China, they have their own little app. Until the day comes where like Philly Socialists can do something like that, where we can build our own apps and we can build our own social media platforms… And until we have that kind of organizing capacity, and those kind of resources, I have to work with what I have. Like I'm not

> gonna give up email because Google runs email. I'm not gonna give up my cell service because the capitalists run cell service. That's just how I feel, you gotta use the tools you got. (Michael)

In the first part of the quote, Michael described some of the problems of corporate social media platform that he and other Philly Socialists members identified, chiefly their being designed in a way that does not support genuine social relationships or in-depth debate. He then explained that under the present conditions, since the PS do not have either the resources or the capacity to build alternative technologies to support their organizing, they should try to make social media work, because that's all they have. In the final part of the quote, he also added that these technologies should be used by groups like the Philly Socialists even if they are run by corporations. The themes that emerge from this quote are also echoed by other interviewees. In general, Philly Socialists interviewees see digital technologies as a space that is not ideal for radical politics for three main reasons: because of law enforcement surveillance, because of the toxic nature of some of these online spaces, because digital technologies do not offer the same possibility for interaction as offline spaces. Unlike in the case of LUMe, the Philly Socialists are less forthcoming in criticizing digital technologies for being an expression of neoliberal capitalism; when their pursue this line of critique, they usually present it in the context of their concerns about surveillance.

As in the case of LUMe, the technological imaginary of the Philly Socialists is one of negotiation. In fact, the PS organizers do not endorse the key principles of Silicon Valley's approach: they do not regard digital technologies as free and democratic, but most importantly, they reject the technologically deterministic idea that social problems can be solved through the development of (new) technologies. For the Philly Socialists, it

is only slow and consistent organizing on the ground that can bring about the kind of social change they are interested in – a socialist moment and (eventually) a socialist society. However, while they do not espouse the visions of Silicon Valley, they still use the digital technologies of Silicon Valley: not just corporate social media, but also Google Groups, Slack, and NationBuilder, which, as McKelvey and Piebiak (2016) argue, emerged out of the culture and venture capital of Silicon Valley (p. 903). They frame their reliance on these corporate digital technologies within their approach to organizing for base-building and appeal to the tradition of socialist movements and parties: socialists have always used the most effective technologies available to them, why would the Philly Socialists do any different? In the interviews, they tend to downplay the importance of these technologies for their organizing work, but my analysis of their technological practices clearly shows that they rely on these tools extensively. Their downplaying of the meaning of these platforms should be understood as a way of articulating what distinguishes their organizing from what they call "activist networking" – which in academic terms we could liken to "lifestyle activism" (Johnson, Jones, & Haenfler, 2012; Portwood-Stacer, 2013a): in contrast to these activists, whose use of social media platforms is their chief political practice, the Philly Socialists see social media as one of the tools that allows them to more effectively organize and build a base for socialist politics, but not as a form of political engagement in itself. The Philly Socialists' negotiation is thus shaped by the tradition of socialist organizing (or at least their interpretation of it) and their opposition to a prominent technological imaginary in the American Left, that of "activist networking".

In this section, I describe the technological imaginary of the Philly Socialists, showing how digital media are not an ideal space, but a good enough space, for now, for socialist organizing. I first articulate the ways in which, according to the PS, the internet is good for radical politics. I then examine the different reasons for which it is not such a good space for radical politics; I detail how the PS interviewees criticize the internet for being less conducive to human relations than the offline world, a space for surveillance, a toxic environment, and (less prominently) in service of capitalism. Through these critiques, I show that the Philly Socialists reject the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley, while using the technologies of Silicon Valley in their organizing. I then explain how this imaginary of negotiation is shaped by the socialist tradition of organizing and by the opposition to the technological imaginary of "activist networking", which is widespread in the American Left and harshly criticized by the Philly Socialists.

A good enough space for now…

In the interviews, Philly Socialists members argue that the internet can be a relatively good space for socialist politics, in particular because it makes it easier to spread information and to organize events, since people already use digital technologies for other reasons. They are largely not enthusiastic about using corporate social media for politics or in their personal life, but they highlight the useful features of these platforms. While the interviewees also consider "the internet" more broadly, they tend to focus on Facebook – as already highlighted in the case of LUMe activists. For instance, Michal argued that "most socialist groups don't have independent, fleshed out, comprehensive communication structures. And Facebook just offers that to us. So, we're just trying to...

in the absence of having something built, this is like what we're gonna use...”; Facebook thus functions as an all-encompassing platform that supports organizing. Donna echoed Michael’s words and claimed: “I think that part of organizing is making connections and getting information and spreading information. I think Facebook is one of the best tools we have for it right now”. As in the case of LUMe, Facebook looms large in the Philly Socialists’ technological imaginary.

Several interviewees praise the internet for its usefulness in making information more accessible and organizing/recruitment more efficient. Tyler compared the internet to earlier technologies:

> Technology, overall, is much more helpful. I was very fortunate to have mentors who came up in the movement in the '80s and '90s. At that time, if you wanted somebody to come to a rally, you had to call them. If they weren't around, they didn't have answering machines, so you had to actually physically meet them. It was more difficult to move people. (Tyler)

Although Tyler has no direct experience of pre-internet organizing, his sense is that coordinating people was way harder without digital technologies. Lisa also argued that the internet is “good for information sharing. Like, ‘Hey there's this really good article about this book, about this thing, read it.’ And a lot of things I have learned, I have learned through the internet”. Donna also explained that the internet increased their access to political content – and political engagement itself:

> I definitely feel like I have had more access to information and more involvement in radical politics through the internet, especially like… (…) like I'll literally just add random people who have good mutual friends on Facebook. You know, people who I would've never met before and I think it's also really helpful for those of us who have like chronic medical conditions and yeah, confronting ableist ideas of

> organizing where you have to be like out all the time, while not all of us can. So, I think it's been really helpful with that. (Donna)

In relaying their experience with digital technologies and radical politics, Donna underlined the importance of the internet for people who have disabilities and chronic conditions that limit their possibility of being physically present. According to Donna, digital technologies thus help challenge the ableist assumptions about participation that still shape politics. They further underscored this point by adding: "as someone who's episodically both mentally and physically disabled, like, I think technology is honestly one of the saving parts of community for me" (Donna). Alexander, who has been part of several socialist and leftist organizations in addition to the Philly Socialists, also contended that the internet has been empowering for radical politics:

> There are people who are far away from anyone else that shares their same concerns, far away geographically, so meeting face to face is hard, or they have children, or they have physical disabilities, or they're kind of like me, fairly introverted, so I'm not gonna go to social meetings so much. (Alexander)

For Alexander, the internet can thus allow radical groups to be more inclusive for those that, for different types of reasons, cannot always commit to physically participating in events or assemblies.

According to the interviewees, the reason why digital technologies – and Facebook in particular – are so effective for information dissemination and organizing is that people already utilize them, independently of their interest in radical (or even mainstream) politics. That "people are already there", i.e. on social media, is a mantra repeated by Philly Socialists interviewees, as well as by LUMe activists, as I explained in

Chapter 3. Michael spelled it out in these terms: “you'd have to force people to uptake these independent structures. And people are on Facebook, people are on Twitter, they don't wanna switch”. Alexander concurred:

> you should just be using Facebook. It's where everyone is. You go to the people; you don't try and build your own platform. So, for me it's always that, I use Facebook because it's what everybody else uses, and you wanna get a message out, Facebook's really good for getting a message out. (Alexander)

Because Facebook is where people are, socialists should be using Facebook to recruit and spread information. The Philly Socialists seem to have taken this idea to heart, given how much of their internal and external communication is channeled through Facebook.

In sum, Facebook, social media, and the internet in general offer several advantages to socialist organizers: “right now, those social media platforms seem like the easiest best tools that we have” (Michael). Although they have very clear problems, which make them less than ideal spaces, digital technologies are so useful and efficient that organizers cannot afford not to use them. As Michael emphatically argued: “I don't know if the correct question is, ‘Is [the internet] better or worse for the left?’ It's just like, the left has to use it.”

… but not an ideal space

Although the Philly Socialists endorse the use of digital technologies by socialist groups, they point out a few limitations of these online spaces. Lisa’s quote fully

expressed how the Philly Socialists regard digital technologies as good enough, but not ideal:

> Yeah. I think it's a great space for radical politics. I think it gives people a lot of access to different ideas that they didn't hear before, but it also can be a little toxic. People can get a little... can try to debate online. I personally don't think it's the best space for debates. (Lisa)

Lisa raised two of the limitations that the Philly Socialists ascribe to digital technologies: the fact that they can be toxic and that they are not good spaces for debate, unlike the offline. In this section, I discuss these two limitations, as well as the third crucial one, which concerns the threat of online surveillance; I also highlight how, in contrast to LUMe activists, the Philly Socialists do not explicitly articulate a critique of digital technologies as functional to capitalism.

Toxic environment

The first critique of digital technologies that was raised by Philly Socialists interviewees pertains to the perceived toxicity of digital spaces and to the meanness that they experience in these spaces. Lisa articulated the kinds of toxic situations in which the Philly Socialists find themselves in on social media:

> Most of our followers ... a lot of them are very far left and if you post the most... We had people who just don't like the memes, or they will just complain. Sometimes we have a lot of right-wing people leave really mean... people who have the opposite of the politics, or who are too far into the politics and it's like, "Oh that's like not Marxist enough," or something like that. But that's just silly, that's harmless. But then there is people who are going through our stuff and they would try to haze our members or people who comment on our things because they have the opposite politics. (Lisa)

As Lisa explained, the Philly Socialists have to navigate both “purist” attacks from people who perceive them as not Marxist enough and harassment from right-wing users. Donna, who is part of the social media team, also recounted how often they sees hateful content when managing the PS Facebook page: “I think you always get the trolls, you always get like Nazis coming in and like trying to say whatever bullshit or a lot of transphobic people, they see”. They also explained how they decide whether to ban or block individuals that are being offensive:

> If they're just saying some like bullshit that's like still reactionary but like kinda harmless, not directly like being transphobic or racist or sexist, then I let them spout whatever bullshit. (…) But if someone gets to the point of like what I would consider like hate speech towards someone, I usually block them. (Donna)

That Donna, as reported in the quote, feels the need to draw the line between “harmless reactionary content” and “hate speech” is in itself telling of the intensity of problematic content that the PS encounter in online spaces. Michael said that social media are “very toxic” and that “sometimes people are just mean. I don't know. And social media creates social distance that allows you to be meaner”. Lisa also spoke of how mean people can be online: “it's just like the worst of people comes out. They're just really mean. They're like, ‘Look it feels like we are agreeing on this topic, but you're being really mean right now, I don't understand why’”. Alexander concurred: “if you start debating people you don't know, it goes downhill really quick”.

But it is not just individuals who disagree with the politics of the PS – from the left or the right – that can be mean online, to use the PS’ terms. Digital media facilitate meanness even among the PS members. As Alexander argued:

> if you start debating over something, Trotsky, Marx, Lenin, you know, should we work with the unions or focus on something else? Then it becomes a lot harder. So, having a discussion on proposals like what do the Philly Socialists do can become pretty messy. Yeah. So, the other thing, and I... So, it reinforces the gender dynamics in the organization, and the dominance. Like men, I think us men have an even easier time dominating online discussions than they do in person discussions, and they dominate both, so... And also, people of color. (Alexander)

Alexander's quote suggests that online spaces, especially when used to debate strategy or political positions, can become unruly and end up replicating inequalities; in particular, he found that women and people of color might even have a harder time to break through in online discussions, since white men are very comfortable in online spaces.

Although, as I argued in the previous subsection, the Philly Socialists see digital technologies as efficient and useful in making political information and political discussion more accessible, they also experience the online as a highly toxic environment.

Life happens offline

The second limitation of the internet identified by the Philly Socialists lies in its inability to generate the same kind of connections that can be fostered offline. The organizers mostly talk about this in terms of the impossibility of truly debating ideas online. For instance, Lisa, who talked about how mean and toxic people can be when talking online, concluded: "I can have the same debates with people in real life and I feel that it's more interesting, it's more engaging". Similarly, Alexander argued that in social movements "people… most of the decisions are made face to face. And that's when you

can really get the debate and the discussion. People actually listen to each other face to face, I think, a lot more”. He also added that, while it might be easier to discuss politics online if one lives in a small town, even in a small place “you need to recruit people and you need to have face to face conversations with them and learn from them. You don't want to build a base online. It's just a waste of time” (Alexander).

Echoing Alexander, other interviewees remarked on how the internet cannot be the only space where organizing happens, because the offline is still crucial. Michael, in fact, explained:

> The reality is that our lives are not lived on social media, our lives are lived... an eviction occurs in real life, it doesn't occur on social media. Like losing your job occurs in real life, sexual assault and sexual abuse, that occurs in real life not in social media. And so, we need to be able to... if all your organizing is online, then I do think that you will inherently run into this issue of “how do I know that you'll show up in the real life where my real problems are?” (Michael)

In his quote, Michael upheld a distinction between online activities and “real life” offline, which is shared by other interviewees. In his explanation, organizing cannot be an entirely online activity because the challenges that people face – evictions, joblessness, sexual harassment – have a strong bodily and material component; because these problems happen “offline”, organizing also needs to happen “offline”, so that people will know that the Philly Socialists will be *physically* there for them. This quote reveals how the Philly Socialists think of the internet as an inferior space compared to the offline spaces of meetings and protest actions; it also highlights the assumptions about embodiment and materiality that support the kind of ableist conceptions of political activism that Donna, another Philly Socialists interviewee, criticized.

The disjuncture between the online and the offline seems particularly salient to the Philly Socialists; for instance, it plays a role in how they distinguish their political practice as “organizing”, which has both an online and an offline component, from “activist networking”, which they see as a purely digital form of engagement.

Surveillance

The third major critique waged against digital technologies by the Philly Socialists brings to the fore their potential for surveillance. The Philly Socialists interviewees mostly think of surveillance in terms of law enforcement surveillance (not corporate surveillance): they worry about how using social media might expose them to law enforcement agencies, how law enforcement agents might try to collect information on them by posing as activists, and how the U.S. Government might have the capability to detect and redirect traffic. Their worries are certainly driven by the Snowden revelations (Lyon, 2014), but are also reinforced by the long history of surveillance and infiltration of social movements by US government agencies (see Ferrari & Remensperger, forthcoming).

Tyler talked about how people involved in social movements worry about being surveilled: “there's a lot of security concerns, right? Concerns about being able to track people. Being able to... the government being able to spy on them, which are legitimate”. He also added that sometimes those who worry the most about surveillance are the least likely to actually be a target of surveillance, but that does not make their concerns less valid. Lisa reported how she and other prominent Philly Socialists organizers receive “a

lot of fake friend requests from fake people" on Facebook; the profiles of these "fake people" are usually easy to spot:

> some kind of random person who has like 20 friends in common with you. Like 15 out of their 20 friends are like your friends in common. And they have a suspicious picture that is like a very hot girl or like some really nicely taken picture, no other pictures... it's just obvious. Like it's just very obvious to tell them. (Lisa)

Lisa showed no doubt that these fake friend requests were generated by cops, using made up profiles to gain access to closed Facebook groups and to keep an eye on activists whose profiles are not publicly accessible. She reported that she and everybody she works with receive such requests. However, Lisa also argued that she is not personally worried, although "people generally worry about surveillance". She also added:

> Look, if they wanted to know what we're doing, they already know what we're doing. We are like all over social media. So, if we going to be using social media, which is a very public space, we just have to be upfront with the things that we're doing. (Lisa)

In Lisa's view, social media are so public that no one should have any expectation that their information will not be seen and/or recorded; for an organization like the Philly Socialists, this means being "upfront", i.e. assume that whatever they say online is fully public and thus also visible to law enforcement. Donna agreed with Lisa's remarks: "ultimately you should just, like, assume we are being surveilled and like, it's just about not saying illegal shit or that when you're going to do illegal things but using it to make connections".

Donna was the only interviewee to weave together Facebook's data collection and law enforcement surveillance. However, as can be seen in the quote below, they showed resignation to Facebook's policies:

> I mean of course, like, you give your information to Zuck, the Zuckerberg gods, but it's just like this looming figure that controls all our data but I personally feel pretty able to say whatever the hell I want via Facebook even though I'm sure my FBI agent isn't happy about it… but yeah, I think technology is overall a good thing as long as you know boundaries, like don't talk about illegal shit. I've had people who've had like FBI agents show up at their work just saying some like, what I would consider like a petty, not a real threat. He said he wanted to punch Donald Trump in the face and the FBI showed up, which sounds like something else was... yeah. I think as long as you know boundaries and also know in cases like that what to do, it's ultimately a good thing (Donna).

In that long quote, Donna showed how they thinks of Mark Zuckerberg as an entity in control of all the data of Facebook users, but that they still feels like their freedom of speech is somewhat guaranteed on the platform, as long as they accepts specific boundaries, e.g. what they can and cannot say. This is striking, particularly because during the interview Donna also explained how they had been unjustly banned by Facebook for a few days. However, the most salient element that emerges in the quote, is how Donna has internalized both the need to adhere to Facebook's content policies and the presence of law enforcement monitoring and surveillance on the platform, which lead them to feel free to speak their mind, while actually self-censoring themselves. The joke about making their assigned FBI agent unhappy, coupled with the story about their friend being investigated for a Facebook message about President Trump, point towards the crucial role that surveillance plays in how Donna – and the Philly Socialists in general – think about digital technologies.

A minimized Marxist critique

One of the most surprising elements of how the Philly Socialists think of technology from a political standpoint is the scarce presence of a political-economic critique of digital media. In other words, in contrast to LUMe activists, the PS interviewees rarely connect their critique of internet technologies to the corporate, capitalist nature of these platforms. When some of these concerns about the connection between digital platforms and capitalism emerge, they are usually subsumed by the preoccupation with surveillance. See, for instance, how Tyler approached the topic:

> The other part of how the internet works is it's channeled through and controlled by big corporations, which doesn't usually have the effect of the government directly stepping in and censoring us. Although, maybe someday, but more that maybe they hold the keys and can. They have that ability. There's the ability to trace back everything that's happening and identify people, which could be problematic down the road. They have the, more importantly, the ability to kind of direct or redirect traffic. (Tyler)

Here Tyler was interested in how big tech corporations control and channel content on the internet, and how that can be used for monitoring and surveillance of political activities. That internet technologies are powered by processes of data extraction and commodification is not part of the criticism that Tyler waged. In another moment in the interview, Tyler went back to explain how the internet has become very centralized. He said:

> As time has gone on, as anything under capitalism, things become more consolidated. Now you have issues where the vast majority of traffic gets funneled through a couple of websites and that gives enormous

> power to these, the owners of those websites, whereas before maybe traffic had been more spread out. (Tyler)

Once again, Tyler is concerned with the power of tech corporations only insofar as it allows for a concentration of traffic and attention, but he did not question the connection between digital media and capitalism per se.

The scarce presence of a Marxist, political-economic critique of digital technologies does not necessarily mean that the Philly Socialists ignore this aspect. The fact that only a limited number of interviews could be conducted with PS organizers might also contribute to downplaying this line of critique, which might be very salient for other PS members that I was not able to reach. However, when I asked Michael directly about whether there had been any ideological opposition to social media within the Philly Socialists, along an anti-capitalist line, he replied that these are not the kind of discussions about digital technologies that the PS are having. He then explained:

> I don't think we think about it at the level of... we're not thinking, I don't think most… any of us are thinking about it at the level of, these are the tools of capital and therefore we shouldn't use them. It's kind of like... I mean, is it a little... is it wrong? I feel like a little bit, there are a lot of tools of capital that we need to use, because the tools of capital are really effective. The tools of capital are used really effectively to oppress us and to control us, and it goes back to the thing of you don't have... it's not about whether or not you like it or not, it's what does it take to compete and beat the capitalists? And I'm in this game to win, and I'm willing to use whatever tools I need to win. (Michael)

According to Michael, the Philly Socialists are not really interested in discussing how digital media are part of a capitalist system and thus how utilizing them might be inconsistent with their ideological beliefs. For Michael, the fact that digital media are "tools of capital" means that they are effective and that they must be used to compete

with the capitalists. In contrast to LUMe activists, whose imaginary of “using the tools of the system to fight the system” is at the center of prolonged discussions in the collective, the Philly Socialists appear unconflicted about the necessity to use “the tools of capital”. Tyler even dismissed this conundrum by saying that it is not a concern for socialists, but only for the anarchist Left:

> There is like a… more on the anarchist left, there is more of a Luddite element that some people, but not all of them certainly, share. That's not really been a big part of the socialist movement more broadly or communists don't really share that. (Tyler)

By calling these concerns “Luddite”, which is a label that holds a traditionally negative connotation among socialists, Tyler downplayed the relevance of a refusal to use technology for anti-capitalist reasons, rather than seriously considering it as a possibility. Thus, while the Philly Socialists are aware that digital technologies have negative sides, they do not even entertain the idea that it might be “wrong” to use these tools; in particular, they do not extend their Marxist critique to the internet, and they do not appear to be thinking about the capitalist underpinnings of digital technologies in a particularly negative way.

Negotiation: using technology for organizing, not activism

The technological imaginary of the Philly Socialists is one of negotiation. They do not subscribe to the principles that underpin the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley; as highlighted in the previous section, when they talk about digital media, there is no specific condemnation of Silicon Valley’s imaginary, but there is also no endorsement of it. In particular, it is evident that for the Philly Socialists digital

technologies are not a space of freedom or liberation, as evidence by the threat of surveillance and the toxicity, and they are not the solution to any social or political problems. As argued above, while the PS do not articulate a particularly strong critique of the relationship between capitalism and Silicon Valley, they nevertheless identify digital technologies as being tools of capital. Despite disagreeing with the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley in its three key aspects, the Philly Socialists still employ the digital technologies that emerged from Silicon Valley in their organizing work.

Michael can help us make sense of how this imaginary of negotiation unfolds:

> it's kind of like we're in competition with the ruling class, and if the ruling class is using this tool and that tool is productive then we have to be at the same level as them in terms of being able to compete with them. So, somebody can come up to me and say, "Oh, yeah but it was so much easier or better to organize before there was all this chatter from social media," and I'd be like, "Yeah, sure. Tough." Well guess what, whether or not it was better or worse or things are easier or harder, if we wanna compete, we have to be on the internet. That's just it. The idea that you wouldn't be organizing on Facebook or you wouldn't be... like some people wouldn't be on Twitter or stuff like that, it's silly. It's ultra-left, or it's not even ultra-left, it's just nonsensical. So, I don't think things are... I don't know if I would think of the internet as a good tool, I would just think of it as a necessary tool. (Michael)

Michael's quote detailed how the Philly Socialists negotiate their technological practices, based on Facebook, Twitter, and other digital media, and their dislike of these platforms. He dismissed the idea of not using corporate social media as "ultra-left" and/or simply nonsensical. He contextualized the use of these platforms in the political competition between socialist organizers and the ruling class: if the ruling class relies on Silicon Valley's technologies, why shouldn't the socialists do the same?

Throughout the interviews, it became evident that the way in which the Philly Socialists rationalize "using social media despite the fact that we don't like them", to use Michael's words, is through downplaying their importance in the life of the organization and contextualizing their use within their multi-platform organizing strategy. Notice how Lisa explained how Facebook is only a small part of the PS' organizing process:

> Yeah [Facebook is] definitely very useful, but it doesn't yield the same kind of results in real life. Because you could have 10,000 followers, but those 10,000 people are not going to show up to your event. So, you still have to do the social media kind of thing to kind of bring attention to the things that you're doing, but also... Because people come through social media, but we also do a lot of tabling, we do a lot of phone calls, we do a lot of emails, and we always encouraging people to follow us or by share stuff. We use the social media together with the recruitment kind of like strategies. It's not on itself, otherwise we'd just be like a meme page because we wouldn't... So, if we didn't have an event to invite people on the Facebook, those 10,000 followers would be kind of useless. (Lisa)

In Lisa's words we can trace a way of thinking about Facebook and other digital media as a component in a recruitment and organizing process that takes place online, but most importantly offline. Lisa also underlined how only relying on Facebook for their political activity would be like being a "meme page"; her choice of words was hardly coincidental, given the large amount of Facebook pages that are broadly affiliated with progressive and radical ideas and which share political memes. The Philly Socialists generally like leftist memes and share quite a few on their own Facebook page, but Lisa made it clear that there is a difference between posting political content on Facebook and *actually* organizing. Michael supported her point of view, by saying:

> people have this tendency to just post on our Facebook group for help, and it's like that's not how organizing works. Organizing works when you... you have to reach out to those people who are on the fringe and

> pull them in, and that's a lot of the work that you're doing, and that requires meeting people in person. Going past the social media wall and building an organic connection with them. (Michael)

In line with Lisa's quote, Michael explained how, however tempting it might be to consider posting on Facebook as a form of organizing, the work of building connections is what really matters – and that work needs to happen outside of social media. Thinking of digital media as one piece of more elaborate strategies for organizing and base-building allows the Philly Socialists to negotiate their relationship to the digital technologies of Silicon Valley: they use their commitment to the notion of organizing as a resource for making sense of how they rely on social media, even if they don't like them.

The notion of "organizing" is crucial to the Philly Socialists' negotiation of Silicon Valley's technological imaginary and Silicon Valley's technologies. Their imaginary, which I have theorized as "organizing where people are", is shaped by their relationship to the heritage of socialist organizing and their rejection of another technological imaginary, common in the American Left, which they call "activist networking". In this long quote, Tyler explained how both the history of socialist organizing (or how the PS imagine this history) and the salience of "activist networking" influence how the organization thinks about technology:

> Every revolutionary movement takes advantage of the technologies they have. If you read about the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks back in the day they would smuggle in printing presses and they would set them up. Then being able to get their political... to articulate their politics was a really important component of what they did. They used the technology that was most accessible to them and most efficient. However, obviously, 100 years technology has changed so the groups some still they try to sell their newspapers and that's not really, we

> think, the most effective approach. We're definitely in favor of using technology, but also there's a tendency sometimes among activists to see it as a cure all, especially during the Occupy period. Well, if we just get everybody on these forums then we can do whatever. Probably somewhat similar to how Five Star became a big thing. Occupy was like, there were a lot of people who were techno-utopians. It was like if we can direct democracy online… and then every… It's not really... it sort of misses a key component of sociality or social interaction, which is that people need to have bodily presence and face-to-face communication is still really important. Yeah, we've kind of avoided that. (Tyler)

At the beginning of the quote, Tyler compared the Philly Socialists' technological practices to those of the revolutionary socialist movements of the early 20th century; in this comparison, social media are for the Philly Socialists what the printing press was to the Communist revolutionaries in 1917 – the most accessible and most efficient technology available. Tyler thus appealed to the tradition of socialist organizing to explain how the PS conceptualize digital technologies. Further, Tyler also contrasted the PS's approach to the "techno-utopian" impulses of other contemporary social movements, including the Occupy Wall Street Movement and the Italian Five Star Movement (which Tyler had asked me about during the interview). In Tyler's view, these movements have focused exclusively on online activism, assuming that digital technologies could supplant more tiresome offline processes of organizing. The Philly Socialists, as Tyler concluded, have avoided this overreliance on the digital. Occupy Wall Street is not a casual reference. In fact, Occupy can be considered emblematic of the category of contemporary Leftist political engagement that the Philly Socialists call – with a negative connotation – "activist networking". A member of the Philly Socialists, who authored an article that makes the case for the base-building approach, characterized "activist networking" as such:

> Activist networking is what might be called lifestyle activism, in the sense of individuals who form their identity around being an activist and derive the majority of their social life from activism. These are the type of people who do not engage with, are not comfortable around and are not friends with non-activists or non-theory types, and whose weekly and monthly schedules are a busybody itinerary of meetings, discussion groups, protests, and conferences. (Horras, 2017a, para. 9)

Activist networking, as defined by Horras (2017a), is more concerned with giving a social identity to individual activists, then it is with organizing for social change (or revolution). This is also why the Philly Socialists do not call themselves activists or their activities activism[37]. Although the article that discussed “activist networking” does not mention digital media as a crucial component of this political tendency, I argue that “activist networking” carries a specific technological imaginary that the Philly Socialists recognize as opposed to theirs. An infographic, posted by the Philly Socialists Facebook page in July 2018 and showed in Figure 15, contrasted “cool kids” with “organizers” (with the implicit endorsement of the category of organizers, of course); the image generally conveyed the point that “cool kids” are activists interested in cultivating their own individual identity and popularity, while “organizers” do the tough work of building grassroots power (Philly Socialists, 2018d). One of the dimensions on which the two categories are compared is that of the use of technologies: while “cool kids” “get people to follow them on social media”, organizers “get people to show up IRL [in real life]” (Philly Socialists, 2018d).

[37] I follow their self-characterization and do not refer to them as “activists” in this chapter. However, for the sake of brevity, I do refer to the Philly Socialists with the term “activivists”, when I consider them together with LUMe and the Hungarian internet tax protests.

Figure 15. "Cool kids vs. organizers" (Philly Socialists, 2018d). Infographic posted by the Philly Socialists' Facebook page, July 28th, 2018. Author unknown.

The infographic thus reproduces a distinction between online activism as slacktivism and offline "real" organizing, which also resurfaces in how the Philly Socialists talk about organizing and digital media. Closely echoing the infographic, Tyler argued: "there is kind of a culture of media celebrity that bleeds over into activism somewhat and that can be a problem". He then expanded on the relationship between digital media and "activist networking":

> [the internet] helps to contribute to a culture where people aren't necessarily politically active, or they're out on the street or they're out in their communities but instead they're tweeting from home or they build a personal brand or reputation as an individual. Like, "I'm an individual activist"… but they're not really representing a community. They don't have any real loyalties or accountability to any community. (Tyler)

Tyler's harsh assessment directly linked a certain narcissistic political activism – which corresponds to "activist networking", even if he did not call it that in the interview – to digital technologies; in line with the infographic examined above (Philly Socialists, 2018d), Tyler argued that this type of "activist networking" privileges online participation to on-the-ground organizing. "Activist networking" thus has a very specific technological imaginary attached to it; in how the Philly Socialists characterize it, this imaginary is not opposed to Silicon Valley's: while oriented towards social justice, it sees digital technologies as the primary vehicle for political engagement, as conducive to democracy and as offering solutions to social issues.

It is through the notion of "organizing" for base-building that the Philly Socialists negotiate their technological imaginary; this allows them to discursively downplay their technological reliance on corporate social media and framing it as choosing to be where

people are. Their technological imaginary conceptualizes their use of technologies as supporting organizing and base-building, not merely activism. This imaginary of negotiation is thus constructed in opposition to the technological imaginary of "activist networking", which they see as unfortunately widespread in the contemporary American Left; yet, it is also shaped by a certain appeal to the tradition of socialist organizing, from which the Philly Socialists take away the imperative of making use of mainstream media technologies.

Conclusion

In this chapter I offered an analysis of the technological imaginary of the Philly Socialists, a socialist organization in Philadelphia. In explaining the politics of this group, I emphasized their commitment to the strategy of "base-bulding", i.e. to build working class power through direct action and "serve the people" work. I also showed how their technological practices involve the use of multiple digital technologies for both internal and external communication; these technologies also include corporate social network sites and organizational platforms such as Slack and Nationbuilder. Facebook, in particular, plays an important role in both how the Philly Socialists communicate and organize, and in how they think about technology in their work.

In their technological imaginary, which I have labeled "organizing where people are", the Philly Socialists downplay their reliance on corporate digital platforms by framing it as just a small piece in their elaborate recruitment and organizing strategy; they justify their use of these digital technologies by identifying all of their technological practices as "organizing" and insisting on the importance of offline political practices. In

their strategic use of the notion of "organizing", they show how their technological imaginary is shaped by the lessons they drew from the long history of socialist organizing, i.e. the need to use whatever available mainstream media technology to disseminate socialist ideas to the masses; they even explicitly compare what corporate social media is for them to what the printing press was for the Russian Revolution of 1917. In drawing on the keyword "organizing", the Philly Socialists also seek to distinguish their technological imaginary from that connected to "activist networking", which is their way of defining some strands of American Leftist activism that could be more accurately described as "lifestyle activism" (Johnson et al., 2012; Portwood-Stacer, 2013a) and/or "slacktivism" (Gladwell, 2010). The PS thus justify their use of corporate digital media by deploying their idea of online-offline "organizing" in contrast to the purely digital and somewhat narcissistic characterization of "activist networking".

Taken together, Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 illustrate how negotiation can work differently for different social movements, based on their political ideology, the political context they inhabit, and the kinds of technological imaginaries that are salient in that given environment. LUMe and the Philly Socialists develop two imaginaries of negotiation that feel different from each other, even if they are both underpinned by the use of the same corporate digital technologies, chiefly Facebook. However, while both groups might be using the same technologies, these technologies hold different meanings for them. For LUMe, Facebook and other digital media are the tools of system, which the activists feel they need to use in order to take down the system. For the Philly Socialists, the same technologies appear like the most recent tools in a long history of socialist

organizing that has traditionally used any technology at its disposal. In this chapter, I have also highlighted how LUMe and the Philly Socialists differ in how salient the political-economic critique of internet technologies is for them: while for LUMe activists this is a crucial part of their technological imaginary of negotiation, for the Philly Socialists this does not appear even a meaningful discussion.

One aspect that emerges forcefully in the technological imaginaries of both LUMe and the Philly Socialists is the importance of the offline for thinking about digital technologies. In both cases, offline interaction – political discussion, demonstrations, recruitment, face-to-face conversations – plays a crucial role in how the activists assess the possibilities and limitations of digital technologies; thinking about their offline political spaces allows the interviewees to criticize Silicon Valley's dominant technological imaginary, especially in its promise of democracy and liberation through the digital. While the scholarship has insisted on dismantling the distinction between the online and offline, for instance talking about "hybridity" (Chadwick, 2013; but also Treré, 2018), the distinction is still very real for LUMe and the Philly Socialists. While they live fully hybrid lives, in which they can be constantly involved in digital communication while attending to offline activities, they still perceive the online as something separate from the reality of the offline. The upholding of the offline as an important component of contemporary activism is yet another aspect of the relationship between social movements and technology that can only be uncovered through an investigation of the technological imaginaries, and not merely an analysis of the technological practices of these movements.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

Appropriation, Negotiation, Challenge

In this dissertation I brought together scholarly literature from media and communication, science and technology studies and social movement studies to propose a new theoretical framework for analyzing the relationship between social movements, technologies, and social change. Through the notion of "technological imaginaries", defined as sets of practice-based beliefs, individual and collective, implicit and explicit, about the role of technology in social life and social change, I argued for the need to investigate not only how technologies are being used by social movements, but also how they are being envisioned politically. I characterized technological imaginaries as being political, having material consequences, being constructed by both practices and discourses, being held by ordinary people, not corresponding to social imaginaries as envisioned by Taylor (2004), and as being visions of both the past and the future. While social movements are not the only actors that construct and deploy technological imaginaries, using this theoretical framework allows us to make sense of the growing body of literature about activism and digital technologies and to highlight the political tensions that arise when technologies are used to challenge power holders. By focusing on the ways in which social movements make sense of technology in relation to social change, my dissertation addresses a gap in the literature on social movements and digital technologies.

I argued that technological imaginaries are plural and conflicting in society. However, it should be possible to identify one specific technological imaginary that is

dominant at a specific point in time, in one or more geographic locations. In Chapter 1, I described the current dominant technological imaginary, developed and popularized by the Silicon Valley technology sector, since the 1990s. I highlighted how three tenets form the core of this imaginary: digital technologies are believed to be inherently supportive of democracy, freedom, and personal autonomy; the development of technologies is thought to be the avenue for the resolution of sociopolitical problems; the imaginary is embedded into and supportive of neoliberalism. I argued that this technological imaginary has dreams of universality, but it is, in fact, bounded, biased and specific: it perpetuates the biases that characterize the white American men that dominate(d) Silicon Valley. In Chapter 1 I thus offered two illustrations of the biases that we can identify in the dominant technological imaginary. First, I showed how the early enthusiasm about digitally-enabled disembodiment, as it emerged from the pages of *Wired* magazine in the 1990s, downplayed the role of race and gender disparities. This enthusiasm was based on a discourse I termed "selective disembodiment", which postulated that white women and people of color could access "cyberspace" to effectively leave their gendered and raced bodies behind: cyberspace could allow them to experience life as the "default" white male. I contended that, while seemingly emancipatory and inclusive, this idea of "selective disembodiment" allowed Silicon Valley to ignore issues of race and gender, by just assuming that access to technology would take care of any and all disparities. These early discourses about disembodiment have percolated into the current dominant technological imaginary; they legitimate the – still current – visions of the internet as a free and equalizing space, transcending differences of race, age, gender, and geographic location. Second, I suggested that the dominant technological imaginary brings together

technocratic ambitions and populist justifications; I showed how they can be traced in an open letter published by Facebook's founder and CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, in 2017. I drew on Winner (1977, 1986) to sketch the contours of the Facebook technocracy envisioned by Zuckerberg, based on the idea that politics should model itself on how Facebook operates. I explained how these technocratic ambitions are justified through populist ideas; in this document, the "Facebook community" becomes a stand in for the populist notion of the "people". Far from being politically neutral, the dominant technological imaginary envisions a specific relationship between people, Silicon Valley, and the state: while on the one hand, it pitches market-driven technological development as the only way to solve people's problems, it casts states and representative politics as unfit to govern the complexities of the world, while justifying its power through its efficiency, scale, and democratic ethos. Taken together, these two illustrations showed that the dominant technological imaginary is not universal at all: it is grounded in the politics of the Silicon Valley of the 1990s and it promotes a white, male-centric, American view of technology.

I then turned to the crucial questions animating this research: how do contemporary leftist social movements make sense of the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley? What are their own technological imaginaries? And how do these imaginaries have an impact on their technological and organizational practices? I offered a typology of social movements' technological imaginaries, based on whether they accept or reject the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley and whether they use or refuse the digital technologies of Silicon Valley. With the category of "appropriation", I identified technological imaginaries which embrace the key tenets of

Silicon Valley's imaginary and envision the use of digital technologies for activism. Through the label of "negotiation", I described cases in which social movements construct a technological imaginary which at the same time rejects the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley but accepts the use of the technologies that have been conceived within that imaginary. Finally, I called "challenge" the type of technological imaginary which envisions a rejection of both the imaginary and the technologies of Silicon Valley.

In Chapter 2, I reconstructed the technological imaginary of the Hungarian internet tax protests of 2014. I argued that the ways in which the interviewees talked about the internet reproduced classic tropes of Western modernity, which connect technology to equality and development, rationality, and the future; I explained how these ideas about modernity were strengthened by the mundanity of the internet. I thus theorized the imaginary developed and deployed by the Hungarian activists as "mundane modernity". I suggested that mundane modernity is an imaginary of "appropriation", because it embraces the key aspects of the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley and envisions the use of Silicon Valley technologies. I argue that this imaginary of appropriation reinterprets Silicon Valley's imaginary for a post-communist context, such as that of Hungary, in which the modernity vs. tradition cleavage has recently been rediscovered; further, the fusion of political freedom and market freedom that characterize Silicon Valley are appealing in a country where the transition was promised to simultaneously deliver democracy and prosperity (and ended up not fully achieving either). In this context, the left-liberal Hungarian activists used the technological imaginary of mundane modernity to legitimize their opposition not only to the internet

tax but to the Orbán government in general. I then argued that this imaginary of appropriation is constructed to respond to the peculiarities of the current Hungarian political context – the return of political cleavages, such as modernity vs. tradition, pro-West vs. anti-West, cosmopolitan vs. ethnonationalist – and to the technological imaginary of illiberal democracy, which is represented by the internet tax itself. I then analyzed how the imaginary of mundane modernity was performed during the protests: one the one hand, through the illuminated mobile phones that protesters lifted in the air (an action that originated in the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement); on the other, through the trashing of the headquarter of Orbán's party, when protesters used old electronic devices to "attack" the building. To further underscore the resonance of mundane modernity in post-communist societies, I showed how the most visible symbol of the internet tax protests, the raising of illuminated phones to the sky, was used by other demonstrations in the region, even if they had nothing with the internet. However, I concluded by arguing that mundane modernity (and appropriation in general) has its limits: interviewees from my two other case studies in Italy and the United States did not really relate to the imaginary of mundane modernity. While some of them thought it would make sense in the Hungarian context, they overwhelmingly rejected the idea that smartphones could be taken as a symbol of freedom. Further, mundane modernity did not support the Hungarian activists in creating a full-fledged social movement.

In Chapter 3 and 4 I explored how social movements construct technological imaginaries of negotiation. Both LUMe and the Philly Socialists reject the core tenets of the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley; at the same time, the technologies of Silicon Valley power their daily activist work. Both movements are thus

engaged in a negotiation: they try to make their technological practices fit with their politics, not the politics of Silicon Valley. How this negotiation happens, however, varies between the two movements.

In LUMe's technological imaginary, digital technologies are seen as both flawed and indispensable for social change: these technologies are "tools of the system", but they can and should be used to take down the system itself. The Italian activists fiercely criticize digital technologies: they associate them with capitalist power structures, they refuse to see them as democratic spaces, and they question their impact on human interaction. In so doing, they reject Silicon Valley's ideas about the democratic nature of technology, its technosolutionism, and its seamless integration with neoliberalism. However, they employ these technologies for their perceived efficiency and reach: they believe them to be unavoidable. To make sense of the contradictions generated by their technological imaginary, they rely on two different resources, which support their negotiation: first, they anchor their technological practices in their physically occupied spaces, which are thought of as the primary locus of democratic decision making and sociality; second, they deploy the notion of self-awareness (*consapevolezza*) to justify how their use of corporate social media is different from both the use envisioned by Silicon Valley and by the Five Star Movement. Their negotiation is influenced by LUMe's vague, but meaningful, Marxist orientation, which leads them to question how corporate power operates online; by their collocation among the Italian social centers, which emphasize the importance of physically occupied political spaces; and by their resistance to the peculiar technological imaginary of the Five Star Movement, which Treré (2018) conceptualized as authoritarian sublime.

In contrast, the technological imaginary of the Philly Socialists can be summarized as "organizing where people are": the PS organizers find digital technologies to be less than ideal, but good enough for recruiting people to the socialist cause. The PS offer three major critiques of digital technologies: they enable law enforcement surveillance, they are toxic, and they are not as supportive of interaction as offline spaces. The Philly Socialists thus also reject the tenets of the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley; in particular, they eschew technosolutionist approaches and, as their three aforementioned critiques suggest, they refuse to think of digital media as spaces of democracy and freedom. At the same time, they use a wide range of corporate digital technologies – from Facebook to Slack. Their technological imaginary of negotiation is predicated on a discursive downplaying of the role of corporate digital media in the life of the organization: while organizers use these tools a lot, they prefer to think of them as just a small component of their multi-platform, offline-online organizing process. It is thus the notion of "organizing" that the PS rely on to negotiate the meaning of their use of Silicon Valley technologies. In using the notion of "organizing", the Philly Socialists show that their negotiation is shaped by two factors: first, the lessons they draw from the long history of socialist organizing, namely that socialists have always used whatever mainstream technology was available to them; second, their rejection of the technological imaginary of "activist networking", which they see as prevalent in the American Left and which they characterize as individualistic and narcissistic.

Looking at the technological imaginaries of LUMe and the Philly Socialists can help us highlight how their negotiation is shaped by different political factors: their ideology, the political context, and the prominence of other technological imaginaries

(besides Silicon Valley's). To summarize, I argued that LUMe's technological imaginary of negotiation is influenced by their Marxist, anti-capitalist orientation (ideology), by their collocation within the long history of Italian occupied social centers (political context), and by their strong opposition to the technological imaginary of "authoritarian sublime" (Treré, 2018) of the Five Star Movement (other prominent technological imaginaries). In the case of the Philly Socialists, the most important factors that shape negotiation are the heritage of socialist organizing (which is both ideology and political context) and the PS' critique of the technological imaginary of "activist networking", which they see as dominant in the American Left (other prominent technological imaginaries). Thus, while imaginaries of negotiation are similar responses to Silicon Valley, based on the rejection of its technological imaginary and the use of its technologies, they look and feel very different. My analysis has highlighted how ideologies, political contexts and other technological imaginaries can thus play a crucial role in determining how the technological imaginaries of social movements interpret and respond to Silicon Valley's dominant imaginary. While the dissertation offers examples of different imaginaries of negotiation, we can stipulate that these factors will also account for differences in imaginaries of appropriation and of challenge (which I will discuss in this concluding chapter).

Considered together, the technological imaginaries of the social movements examined in this dissertation provide a strong contrast to the dreams of universality of Silicon Valley. In fact, we can identify the existence of multiple, situated and political internets: far from being universal in their meaning and in their applications, digital technologies are seen in different ways by different social movements. Even in the

Hungarian case, where activists appropriated the dominant technological imaginary, their imaginary of mundane modernity reinterpreted digital technologies in a political way, which made sense in the streets of Budapest and not necessarily in the corporate boardrooms of Silicon Valley. By looking at the political ways in which these social movements imagine technology and the role it plays in their social justice work, we can push back against Silicon Valley's presumed universality. Thinking about the multiplicity, the situatedness and the politics of these internets can help us further question and resist the power of the dominant technological imaginary.

However, the case studies examined in this dissertation also point to the great power and reach of the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley. In fact, even LUMe and the Philly Socialists, who reject the visions of Silicon Valley, end up facing the dominant technological imaginary as it manifests through the digital technologies that they employ. As LUMe activists argued, they are in a complicated ambiguous position: they use the tools of a system they would ultimately want to dismantle; the Philly Socialists similarly acknowledged that they are using the same technologies that the ruling class is also employing. On the one hand, this means that while they are opposing the imaginary of Silicon Valley, they are nevertheless accepting to be part of the online economy of clicks, targeted advertising and data commodification that sustains the business model of Silicon Valley. As some of the activists conceded, while their clicks might be directed at attacking the system, the system is anyway benefitting from them. On the other hand, in their negotiation the activists also end up having to rely on platforms that were not designed to support social justice efforts, but rather further the technological imaginary (and the business model of Silicon Valley). For instance, both

the Philly Socialists and LUMe have to put labor into monitoring or moderating the comments that their posts receive on Facebook. The fact that the activists need to perform this kind of labor is due to the affordances of Facebook, which in turn reflect (among other things) one of the core tenets of Silicon Valley's imaginary: that digital spaces are inherently free and democratic. Yet they are not free and democratic in the way that LUMe and the Philly Socialists think of free and democratic spaces. The peculiarity of the imaginaries of negotiation is that they are still confronted with the dominance of Silicon Valley's idea, because of the way in which these ideas are encoded in digital media. It is difficult to escape from the power of Silicon Valley's imaginary, even when you reject it.

While the cases examined in this dissertation do not include movements that have chosen to eschew corporate digital media, theoretically we should be able to identify technological imaginaries that reject both the ideas and the technologies of Silicon Valley. I now briefly examine the literature available on these cases, which I theorize as "challenge".

Challenge: resisting Silicon Valley's technologies

The third type of response to Silicon Valley's dominant technological imaginary that I have theorized in this dissertation is that of "challenge": the simultaneous rejection of the imaginary and the technologies of Silicon Valley. This type of technological imaginary seems more difficult to find among contemporary social movements, given how much activists have come to rely on corporate digital media. However, when discussing the contradictions of negotiation with the activists of both LUMe and the

Philly Socialists, some of them mentioned the possibility of challenge. In the case of LUMe, challenge was represented by older activists of other social centers, who refused to use Facebook in their activism. In the case of the Philly Socialists, the imaginary was evoked in one of the first projects that the organization tried to set up (and did not manage to finalize): the creation of a "free socialist internet", a non-commercial mesh network, to be built and maintained by the PS, that would provide internet access to people outside of corporate Internet Service Providers (ISPs). Yet these inklings of "challenge" seemed unfeasible, for different reasons, to both LUMe and the PS: LUMe activists dismissed the anti-Facebook stances of older activists as "inward-looking" and the PS recognized the technical difficulty of creating their own mesh network and abandoned the project.

If we look at the literature, however, we can begin to identify attempts to reject Silicon Valley technologies that might qualify as "challenge", in that – we can speculate – they are motivated by a rejection of the technological imaginary of Silicon Valley. Imaginaries of challenge can further be divided into two subgroups: in the first one, challenge entails abstaining from the use of Silicon Valley's technologies; in the second, challenge takes the form of the imagination and creation of technologies that are alternative to Silicon Valley's.

The first category, challenge as refusal, has recently become the object of academic interest (Fish, 2017; Hesselberth, 2018; Kaun & Treré, 2018). While the topic of technology non-use has been more widely considered as an individual action (Hesselberth, 2018; Portwood-Stacer, 2013b), Kaun and Treré (2018) have recently sought to investigate what they call "disconnection", e.g. the choice not to use certain

platforms or technologies, as a political practice that can be adopted by social movements. While they develop a typology of both individual and collective types of disconnection, only one of their categories – "digital disconnection as resistance" (Kaun & Treré, 2018, p. 11) – captures the spirit of what I theorize as challenge: complete or partial disconnection from specific "platforms or digital media formats" (Kaun & Treré, 2018, p. 12). The collective and intentional dimensions of challenge as refusal are crucial. While there has been a proliferation of discourses of disconnection, individualized practices of refusal often eschew a political dimension (see Portwood-Stacer, 2013b) or reinforce neoliberal notions of connectivity (see Hesselberth, 2018). Challenge as refusal is not concerned with individuals' choices to deactivate Facebook (Portwood-Stacer, 2013b), but with social movements deciding to totally or partially collectively refuse corporate social media because they do not fit with their political stances. In addition to being collective, this practice of refusal also needs to be intentional: as Portwood-Stacer (2013b) highlighted, not using a technology because it is not available or too expensive does not count as refusal. So, what does challenge as refusal look like? Kaun and Treré (2018) offer the example of radical Swedish leftist groups (Andersson, 2016). Other movements similarly engaged in challenge as refusal must exist, but it is difficult to point out other examples; as Hesselberth (2018) highlighted, this is certainly a bias of academic research due to the difficulty of locating these groups. A historical example of a movement deploying technological imaginary of challenge as refusal, although clearly not concerned with Silicon Valley, was that of the Luddites; contrary to how Luddites are popularly remembered (see Portwood-Stacer, 2013b), their opposition to technology was

not to the machines per se, but to the "change in the social relations of production" (Hobsbawm, 1952) that were engendered by those machines.

The second category, challenge as alternative, includes social movements' attempts at imagining and building alternative technologies. Gehl (2015) positioned social movements' development of alternative social media platforms in the tradition of social movements' alternative media (see Atton, 2002; Downing, 2008). He presented different cases of activist alternative social media, such as Diaspora and rstat.us, which, he argued, "not only [allow] for users to share content and connect with one another but also [deny] the commercialization of speech, [allow] users more access to shape the underlying technical infrastructure, and radically [experiment] with surveillance regimes" (Gehl, 2015, p. 2). Presenting activist alternative technologies such as Ushahidi, Crabgrass and Hub, Hirsch (2011) suggested that these projects "allow organizations to create communication channels that function independently of commercial offerings" (p. 147) and that they "embody a distinct set of values, meaning that they are shaped by a different set of concerns (or at least, a different weighting among competing concerns) than their commercial counterparts" (p. 136). Activist alternative ISPs, such as Riseup and Autistici/Inventati in Italy have also been examined in the literature (Barassi & Treré, 2012; Milan, 2013). Other movements have also experimented with the creation of alternative technologies, even though they still relied on corporate social media, for instance the Occupy movement (Captain, 2011; Roos, 2011; Valentine, 2012) and the French Nuit Debout (Russell, 2018).

Challenge, as both refusal and alternative, should thus be understood as the third type of response to the dominant technological imaginary of Silicon Valley. It presents

evident challenges: building alternative activist technologies requires resources, such as expertise, funding, and time, that are not always available to activists; choosing to disconnect from corporate social media might also risk alienating some potential members or supporters. These difficulties might account for the seemingly low popularity of imaginaries of challenge among contemporary social movements. However, a more thorough investigation of how activists come to construct imaginaries of challenge is a much needed further step in the analysis of the technological imaginaries of social movements.

Implications for the literature

By bringing together the literature on media history, media and social movements, and STS-inspired approaches to technology, my dissertation provides a more comprehensive framework for the analysis of the relationship between technology and social movements. In doing so, it makes theoretical and methodological contributions that can help us better understand digital technologies, social movements, and media and communication.

I argue that with the concept of technological imaginary and the theoretical framework that I developed around it, we can better account for how digital technologies are already being imagined and experienced as political by social movements around the world. In fact, even if activists do not think about their "technological imaginaries" under this label, the empirical analysis I provided shows that they do critically reflect, either individually or collectively, about the politics of the technologies they use. By accounting for these reflexive processes through the framework laid out in this work, we can

investigate this undertheorized "political" aspect of the relationship between technologies and social movements.

My dissertation thus contributes to the literature on digital technologies by arguing for a discursive approach to technology that can account for the ways in which technologies are discursively envisioned, especially in relation to social change. Furthermore, I also directly intervene in the literature on media and social movements, by offering a comprehensive approach that can help us systematize the abundant recent literature in this subfield. My notion of "technological imaginaries" integrates both practices and discourses, allowing us to take into account how the characteristics of the political environments in which movements are situated can have an impact on how they envision and experience technology, thus contributing to the small, but growing, body of literature on imaginaries (inter alia Barassi, 2015; Treré, 2018).

My approach to the study of social movements relies on Melucci's (1989) constructivist theorization of movements as processes, which emphasizes the importance of movements' collective identity formation. What I contribute to the Melucci-inspired research on social movements, media, and collective identity is the necessity to think about how technological imaginaries are part of these processes of collective identity formation. Melucci (1989) held that such processes are meant to construct an action system which includes the definition of means, goals and environments (p. 27). I argue that technologies should be considered part of this definitional process and thus offer the framework of technological imaginaries as a way to integrate the study of technology into Melucci's constructivist approach to social movements. Technological imaginaries could be a fourth axis in Melucci's action system, in addition to means, goals, and environment

– all elements that movements need to collectively define in order to sustain their collective action. Considering technological imaginaries alongside means, goals, and the definition of the external environment allows us to theorize movements' relationship to technology as one of the dimensions that characterize how collective action unfolds for a given social movement.

My project also provides a methodological contribution by charting a qualitative empirical trajectory for the study of technological imaginaries. First, my dissertation shows that the work of reconstructing the political meaning of technology for social movements cannot be undertaken without engaging activists directly: none of the insights provided by this dissertation could have been reached by simply collecting the content that the activists of the Hungarian internet tax protests, LUMe or the Philly Socialists post on social media. While looking at social media data can help answer some questions about social movements' use of digital technologies, it cannot account for the nuances that emerge through the qualitative investigation of movements' technological imaginaries. My dissertation also shows that empirical qualitative methods can and should be employed to study how movements discursively envision technologies. While textual analysis has been the prevalent method for the study of imaginaries (see Jasanoff, 2015; Mansell, 2012), my dissertation shows how semi-structured interviews and creative methods, such as the visual focus groups, can be used to productively investigate social movements' technological imaginaries. In particular, my dissertation offers the visual focus groups as a useful methodological innovation that can support activists' reflexive engagement with technology. However, this method could also be used more broadly, whenever researchers need to investigate a complex set of ideas that research participants

might have trouble articulating; I could envision visual focus groups as a productive method for research in Sociology and Political Science, for instance engaging participants in drawing "democracy", "the electoral process", or "inequality". Further, in Appendix B, I also show how visual focus groups could also be used not just to support a critical reflection on the current state of technology (or democracy or inequality), but also to encourage the imagination of how technology should be; this particular version of the visual focus groups could thus also be applied in activist and policy settings.

Lastly, there are two further contributions that my dissertation offers to the literature on media and communication more broadly. First, my empirical analysis of movements in Italy, Hungary and the United States shows how much Facebook and the other platforms acquired by Facebook, i.e. Whatsapp and Instagram, are crucial to contemporary activism. While these movements all use a multiplicity of digital media, in addition to other offline media practices, Facebook is central to the way they communicate and organize. But it is also key to how they think about the internet. It is not accidental that so many of the quotes that I presented in the chapters talk about interviewees' experiences with Facebook. Thus, even though the internet goes beyond Facebook, this platform does not only almost monopolize activists' attention when it comes to posting and interacting with others, but also when it comes to thinking about what the internet means for them. What does it mean when one platform so powerfully shapes how activists think about technology? It is time we start thinking of Facebook as holding a monopoly not only on our online communication, but also on our imagination; we thus need more critical and engaged studies that investigate what Facebook means for people and how it shapes the way they think about social and political processes. Even if,

as I commented in Chapter 1, the power of Facebook is being challenged and undermined in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, its monopolistic position can have long-lasting repercussions on how we think about the role of technology in social change.

Second, the case studies of LUMe and the Philly Socialists highlight the importance of the distinction between the online and the offline. Despite living fully connected, "hybrid" lives, activists draw a line between what happens offline and what happens online, between the politics of the online and the politics of the offline. In the cases examined in this project, this does not just mean that activists turn to analog media for their activism (although they do, especially the Philly Socialists), but also that physical political spaces – occupied buildings, assemblies, demonstrations – still matter a great deal. For LUMe, occupied spaces are a communicative space in which activists are free to lay their own ground rules, where interaction is less filtered and political decisions can be taken; for the Philly Socialists, the offline is where "life happens", where the contradictions and injustices of capitalism are felt. Besides reaffirming the continuing importance of the offline, the technological imaginaries of these social movements highlight the necessity to think about what is not digital in order to be able to define and experience what is digital. In fact, in articulating their critiques of technology, LUMe and the Philly Socialists often implicitly or explicitly compare digital technologies to the offline. What I am suggesting is not to reaffirm a dichotomy between online and offline that downplays the role of the online, but to nuance our understanding of what it means to lead fully connected lives and to highlight the political salience of the distinction between the online and the offline.

Failures of the imagination

> "Maybe today no one amongst us really has a revolutionary approach to social media"
> (Ilaria, LUMe)

Ilaria's sentence came towards the end of a long interview, during which the 24-year old talked at length about the ways in which LUMe activists discuss what the digital technologies "of the system" mean to them. Unbeknownst to Ilaria, her sentence captured some of the thoughts that kept coming to me as I worked on this dissertation. What does it mean when social movements do not have a revolutionary approach to technology? What would a revolutionary approach to social media look like? And do movements need a revolutionary approach to technology to have a politically revolutionary approach?

Ilaria could not really tell me what a revolutionary approach to technology would look like. And I could not tell her that either. But it is time for academics and activists to ask themselves what technologies can do for social justice. It seems that the idea that technologies are not neutral is finally becoming more mainstream, for academics and even for the general public. But now we need to take a step further. We need to start asking if the technologies we use are supporting or hindering our visions of social change. We need to start asking how we can imagine technologies as supporting social movements' fights with power and their struggles for social justice. If corporate digital technologies are reinforcing the power of the capitalist system, of white supremacy, of the patriarchy, we need to start unambiguously envisioning technologies that can support those who are already working to dismantle those powers. This might also mean envisioning technologies that obfuscate or sabotage the technologies of power.

Yet, imagining different technologies in service of different futures has been really difficult. Searching for the technological imaginaries of contemporary leftist social movements has left me with the sense that the imagination of these movements has been encountering severe limitations, both when it comes to imagining the role of technologies and when it comes to imagining different futures, beyond neoliberal capitalism. Imagining different technological and social futures seems difficult, or perhaps pointless, for the movements that have emerged in the last decade, in the long tail of the global financial crisis of 2008. Certainly there must be movements out there that are envisioning radically different futures. But they are still marginal – and their marginality cannot entirely be a result of the biases of academic research or media coverage. With all its political limitations, the global justice movement of the early 2000s unambiguously claimed that another world was possible and that a global mobilization could chart the way towards a more globally just future. The movements of the post-financial crisis wave, the Arab Spring, the Indignados, Occupy Wall Street, the European anti-austerity movements, Black Lives Matter, the Women's movement in the United States… they have all, for now, failed to imagine a future that is alternative to neoliberalism. This is not to say that they haven't been important – they have been and they still are very important. But they have not engaged with the need to imagine alternatives; it is no coincidence that most of their slogans and keywords have been about asserting their existence as a neglected constituency and announcing their resistance. They have mostly responded to these failures of the imagination by carving out spaces of critique, resistance and self-organization that criticize neoliberalism from the margins. Critique, resistance and self-organization are meaningful processes and activists should continue to focus on them.

But we also need social movements to begin envisioning a way out of neoliberalism that is not a global dystopian authoritarian regime. We need social movements to draw on spaces of critique, resistance and self-organization to start explicitly imagining different technologies, different societies, and different futures. Because imagining them will be the first step in the long journey towards making them a reality.

APPENDICES

Appendix A – Interview guides

Hungarian internet tax protests

1) Organization of the demonstrations
    a. How did the interviewee get involved with the internet tax protests?
    b. How were the protests organized?
    c. What organizations and groups were involved in the organizing?
    d. What kinds of decisions did the organizers need to make?
    e. Can interviewee recall some of the specific actions that were organized?
    f. Can interviewee recall some of the slogans?
    g. Does interviewee think that the protests were adequately covered and portrayed by mass media?
    h. Interviewee's personal experiences in the protests and the organization of the protests

2) Specific discussion of the content of the tax proposal
    a. Can interviewee explain the tax proposal?
    b. What does interviewee think about the tax proposal?
    c. What does interviewee think would have happened if the tax had been approved?

3) Hungarian political context
    a. What does interviewee think about the political climate in Hungary?
    b. What is interviewee's view of the Orban government?
    c. What does interviewee think are the most pressing problems in Hungary?

4) Political/social involvement of the interviewee
    a. some demographics
    b. has interviewee been socially/politically active before the internet tax protests?
    c. has interviewee been active since the internet tax protests?
    d. What kinds of causes does the interviewee care about?

5) Interviewee's views about technology (internet in particular)
    a. What kinds of internet technologies does interviewee use?
    b. How does interviewee relate to internet technologies?
    c. Does interviewee remember when he/she first used the internet?
    d. Is the internet important to the interviewee? Why?
    e. What does internet freedom mean to the interviewee?

6) Interviewee's views about the role of technology in social movements (Hungary and other countries)
    a. How does interviewee view the role of the internet in Hungarian civil society?
    b. How does interviewee view the role of the internet in Hungarian social

movements?

c. How does interviewee relate to other social movements in the world?

Philly Socialists

7) Political engagement of the interviewee
    a. How did the interviewee get involved with the activist group?
    b. Has interviewee been socially/politically active before joining the group?
    c. What kinds of causes does the interviewee care about?
    d. How does he participate in the activist group? Does interviewee have any role?
8) Interviewee's views about technology (internet in particular)
    a. What kinds of internet technologies does interviewee use?
    b. How does interviewee relate to internet technologies?
    c. Does interviewee remember when he/she/they first used the internet?
    d. Is the internet important to the interviewee? Why?
    e. Can interviewee think of any time in which he/she/they was "creeped out" or "weirded out" by technology?
    f. Has interviewee had some negative encounters with technology?

9) Interviewee's views about technology and politics?
    a. What does interviewee think about using the internet for political/activist aims?
    b. Has the activist group had positive experiences with digital technologies?

c. Has the activist group had negative experiences with digital technologies?

d. Does interviewee know where Figures 16 and 17 (see below) are from?

  i. If yes, discuss how he/she/they encountered them

  ii. If not, ask what he/she/they thinks the pictures mean

Figure 16. See Figure 3. Caption not shown to interviewee.

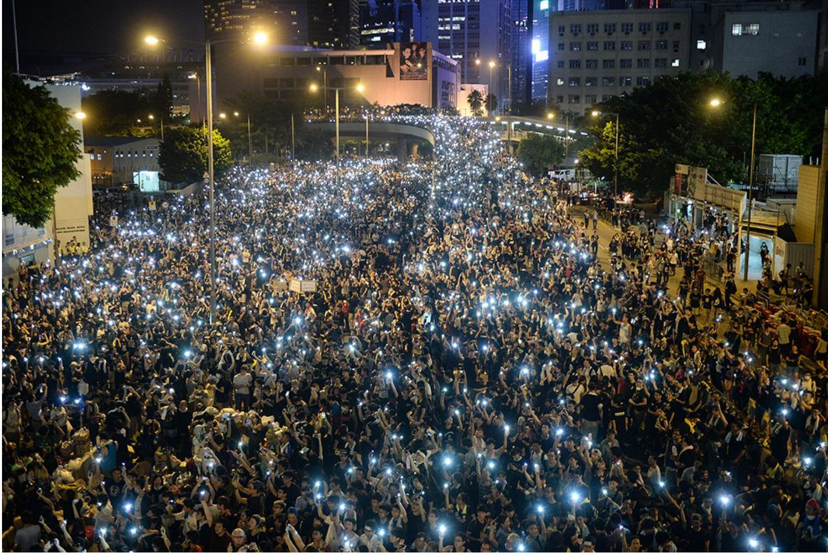

Figure 17. See Figure 4. Caption not shown to interviewees.

LUMe

1) Impegno politico
    a. Come ti sei avvicinato/a a LUMe?
    b. Ti eri già impegnato/a nel mondo politico prima di avvicinarti a LUMe?
    c. Quali sono le tematiche per cui ti impegni politicamente?
    d. A quali attività di LUMe partecipi? Ti occupi di qualcosa in particolare?

2) Opinioni sulle nuove tecnologie
    a. Quali tipi di nuove tecnologie utilizzi?
    b. Come ti relazioni alle nuove tecnologie?
    c. Ti ricordi quando e come hai iniziato a usare internet?
    d. Per te internet è importante? Perché?
    e. Ti viene in mente una qualche occasione in cui, mentre utilizzati internet, qualcosa è andato storto? O qualcosa ti ha infastidito?
    f. Hai avuto qualche esperienza negativa con la tecnologia?

3) Opinioni su politica e tecnologia
    a. Secondo te, come si può usare internet per fare politica?
    b. LUMe ha avuto delle esperienze positive con le tecnologie di internet?
    c. LUMe ha avuto delle esperienze negative con le tecnologie di internet?
    d. Riconosci qualcuna di queste foto? (Figure 16 and 17)
        i. Se sì, parlare di come ha incontrato le foto
        ii. Se no, chiedere che cosa pensa che le foto significhino

Appendix B – Visual focus groups

Rationale

In searching for a methodological approach that could help us uncover the unspoken assumptions about the relationship between technology, politics and social change, I developed an innovative research: the visual focus group[38]. The visual focus group incorporates a collective drawing task within the traditional structure of a focus group. Such drawing task is meant to engender productive conversations between researcher and participants about the intangible assumptions surrounding technology. Crucially, it is not the visual input that should be necessarily at the core of the analysis, but rather the reflections and conversations that emerge around that visual representation.

The visual focus group builds on graphic elicitation methods and mental mapping techniques, which have been developed within the disciplines of psychology, education, critical geography and health (e.g. Copeland & Agosto, 2012; Jackson Foster, Deafenbaugh, & Miller, 2018; Jung, 2014; Umoquit, Tso, Burchett, & Dobrow, 2011; Wilson & Milne, 2016). In these disciplines, graphic elicitation is usually employed in the context of individual, in-depth interviews (for a group version, see Jackson Foster et al., 2018). Gieseking (2013) used mental mapping, a method meant to elicit the production, on part of the research participant, of a "representation of an individual or group's cognitive map, hand sketched and/or computer-assisted" (p. 712). In using mental mapping in the course of interviews, Gieseking (2013) allowed people to create and revise their maps and explain what they represent; they functioned both as

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[38] I am particularly grateful to Jessa Lingel for introducing me to graphic elicitation methods and supporting the methodological development of the visual focus groups in my research.

independent sources of data, but also as prompts that help the interviewees remember events. Gieseking's (2013) work on mapping opens an avenue for experimentation that allows participation and critical reflection on part of the researched, even if maps are not necessarily the most appropriate way of approaching the study of technological imaginaries. The use of creative tasks seems a particularly suitable way of investigating things we are not really good at communicating with words and that "may include elements considered preverbal, affect-laden, metaphoric, and/or relational" (Katsiaficas, Futch, Fine, & Sirin, 2011, p. 123). In fact, Bagnoli (2009) argued that "a creative task may encourage thinking in non-standard ways, avoiding the clichés and 'ready made' answers which could be easily replied" (p. 566). Recently, mapping techniques have also been employed to map the media practices of activists, especially in terms of their reliance on different types of media in their daily activist work (Ceccobelli & Mattoni, 2018).

Such a creative approach thus seems ideal to support activists' reflexive engagement with their own unspoken attitudes towards technology[39]. While the examples of graphic elicitation techniques examined here all take place within the context of individual interviews, my methodological innovation rests on the use of the creative tasks within a group context. To my knowledge, this has not been implemented before. The advantage of embedding the creative task within a group setting is that of eliciting a collective conversation among participants as to how best approach the task itself, as well as to invite participants to compare their own individual approaches and reflect on their practices within their activist community. In the case of the visual focus groups

[39] Mansell (2012) used drawings to support her examination of the social imaginaries of the "information society". The drawings, however, were not contributed by research subjects, but designed as figures for the book.

conducted for this dissertation with the activists of LUMe, this attempt at a collective, yet reflexive and detailed-oriented discussion was highly successful. The collective discussions provided a number of intermediate drawing attempts, both individual and collective, as well as an in-depth discussion of activists' attitudes and beliefs towards technology. The level of detail in the discussion was remarkable; it provided the opportunity for an in-depth analysis of activists' imaginaries and even touched upon fundamental debates in the scholarly literature in lay terms, including discussions of structure vs. agency, the applicability of Marxist theories to the internet, the relationship between power and truth. Such discussions were supported by sketches made by the interviewees, which were discussed within the group. Both groups successfully converged on a final drawing within the timeframe of the focus group. Their final drawings, as well as their discussions and preliminary sketches, are examined in Chapter 3.

Design of the visual focus groups

The visual focus groups include three stages. In the first stage, after participants have given their informed consent, they are asked to anonymously fill out a questionnaire, which can be seen at the end of this Appendix (in both English and Italian). The questionnaire contains a few demographic questions, a "technology diet" component, and five Likert-scale items. The purpose of the "technology diet" component is to encourage respondents to reflect on their daily interaction with digital technologies: how much time they spend online, what kinds of websites and social network sites they use and for what reason, what sort of devices they employ. As can be seen in Table 7, the

five close-ended questions at the end are meant to get activists to think about how they feel about the internet in relation to politics. However, the way in which these questions have been purposefully devised – with responses ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" – is supposed to provoke a reaction in the respondents, since it is hard to provide a straightforward answer to any of these questions. In both focus groups, as intended, activists questioned these items. Some reported that they felt they should pick "neutral" as an answer. Others asked if they could write comments next to their answers and then proceeded to do so. Most participants questioned the wording of the questions and the limited choices, and sought to qualify their answers with "it depends", "but what if?", etc.

Table 7. Close-ended questions posed in the anonymous questionnaire distributed in the visual focus groups. Respondents were asked to choose an item on a 5-item Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

I am concerned about how much control corporations and other private actors have over my personal information/what I say online.
I am concerned about how much control the government has over my personal information/what I say online.
The internet was better a few years ago.
The internet works in a democratic way.
The internet is a space of freedom.

These "trick" questions thus accomplished their purpose: steering participants towards discussing how complicated digital technologies are and how they might hold multiple and contradictory opinions about them. Stage 2 of the visual focus group capitalized on participants' reflexivity, asking them to discuss the limitations of the

survey. In the two focus groups, this discussion stage touched on many themes that would then resurface in the third stage of the session, the collective drawing.

Phase 3, the collective drawing stage, took the bulk of the time of the focus group. Participants were given drawing supplies and asked to collectively draw what they thought the internet was like. They were not given any additional instructions, but they were reminded that the only requirement for the drawing was that, in the end, they should all agree with it: it should be representative of what they thought as a group. They were supplied with pencils, pens, markers, scrap paper and a big piece of paper (70 x 100 cm). In both visual focus groups, activists started discussing and self-organized to find common ground. Before a collective drawing could be agreed upon, activists worked on individual drawings, both as doodles that would support their thinking and their argument, and as mock-ups of the drawings they thought were emerging from the group discussions. In both visual focus groups, a preparatory collective drawing was first agreed upon, and then transferred to the big piece of paper that they were given.

Pilot focus groups

I conducted a pilot focus group with a convenience sample of six Italian activists in January 2018. The pilot was successful: it stimulated a long and intense conversation and provided a number of insights on how to better structure and organize the focus groups for the dissertation research. The participants were able to converge on a shared drawing of the internet, displayed in Figure 18; while drawing, they considered a number of possible options and had to speak about detailed and difficult issues that they were facing in trying to represent the internet.

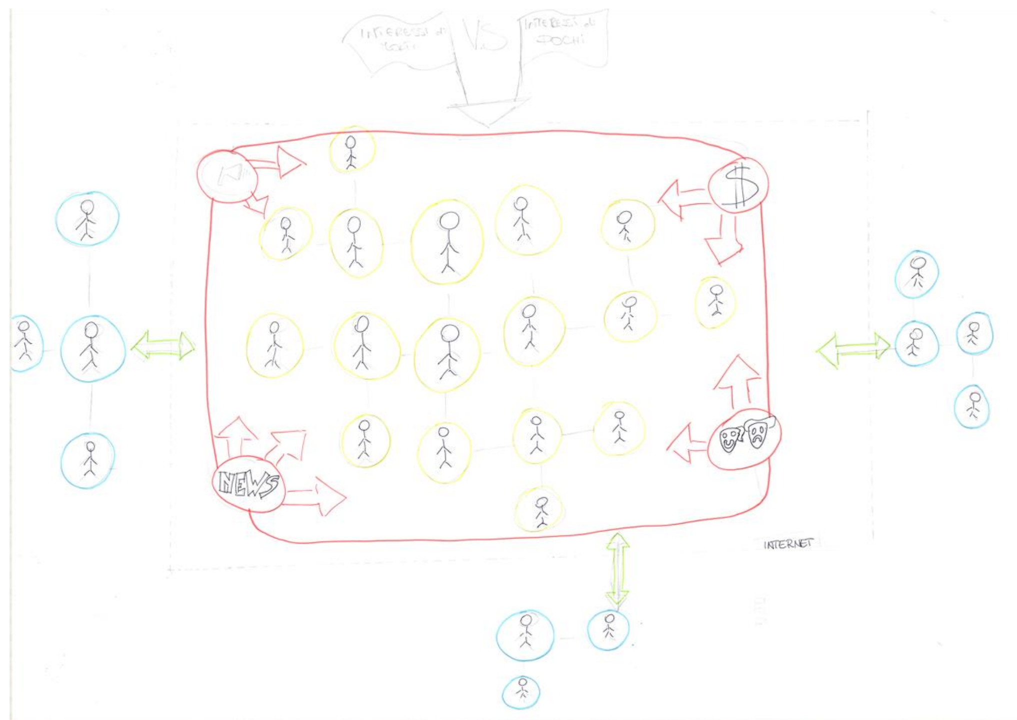


Figure 18. Final drawing. Pilot visual focus group, 6 participants (5 male, 1 female), age 32-40, January 22nd, 2018. The internet is drawn as a rectangular field (red border), where individuals (in circles with green borders) interact. The internet is shaped by four forces (at the corners): (counterclockwise from the lower right corner) emotions, capital, politics, and media. There are also individuals “outside” of the internet (in circles with light blue borders), who communicate with individuals who are within the rectangle. On top of the rectangle, there is a struggle of power, between “the interests of the many” and “the interest of the few”, which influences what goes on inside the internet.

For instance, the focus group participants took a long time before deciding how they could accurately draw one of the aspects of the internet they most wanted to communicate: the fact that “powers” of different kind can shape what happens online. The representation they converged on is at the top of the drawing; there are two flags: one says “interests of the many”, the other “interests of the few”. There is a “vs.” between the flags, that indicates that this is a confrontation between the “interests of the many” and the “interests of the few”, which then influences how the internet works (there is an arrow that links this confrontation to the internet, represented within a red border). Although the

interviewees ultimately were not satisfied with how they drew these "powers", the conversation they had was fascinating, because it addressed both the existence of economic, political and cultural powers that influence the internet, but also the inability of exactly pinning down how these powers work.

I conducted a second focus group, with a convenience sample of undergraduate students at the University of Pennsylvania, in Summer 2018. Students participated to receive extra credit.

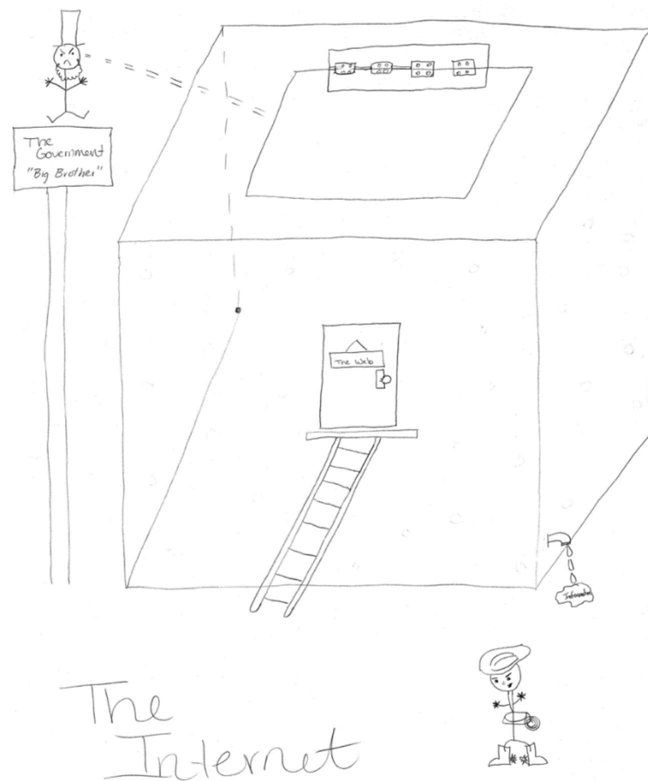


Figure 19. Final drawing. Pilot visual focus group, 10 participants (5 male, 5 female), age 19-29, August 1st, 2018. The internet is drawn as a box. There is a door that opens the box, which represents "the Web"; because it is elevated from the ground, there is a ladder that allows access to the door. To the side, there is a tap, which is leaking a liquid, labeled "information". There is a trap door on top of the box. A puppet, representing "Uncle Sam", is on top of a pole, which allows it to look through the trap door, into the box. There is also a cowboy, outside of the box; it was added because the participants wanted to make fun of the myth of the frontier.

As can be seen in Figure 19, the key idea that this visual focus group worked with is the idea of the internet as a black box; this idea did not satisfy them, so they opted for

drawing it as a blank box, to which many things can be ascribed. However, they represented the access to this internet box as distant from the ground, to stress the fact that there are barriers to entry; they added a ladder to show the way in. Similarly to the other pilot visual focus group, these participants also struggled with representing power: they settled for drawing a puppet of Uncle Sam to represent the United States government; the puppet can see what is happening inside the internet-box through a trap door.

While describing all the insights yielded by the pilot visual focus groups is beyond the scope of this Appendix, it is important to note that the pilots showed that the method appears to support engaged, in-depth and political discussions about the internet; it was intelligible and meaningful both for older Italian activists and younger U.S.-based students. While the method was designed explicitly to engage social movements in discussing their relationship to the internet, the pilot with the students of the University of Pennsylvania showed that it can also be deployed for non-activist audiences.

Using "prescriptive" visual focus groups to imagine better technologies

During the course of this dissertation, I have employed the visual focus group method as a "diagnostic" tool, i.e. to examine how activists think about the contemporary internet and to assess what their critiques of it might be. While working on this project, however, I understood that the visual focus groups could also be used as a "prescriptive" tool: to allow people to imagine better, different internets. In addition to academic research, the prescriptive version of the visual focus group could also be used by the tech policy and advocacy world to generate ideas on how to improve technology or its

regulation. In particular, the visual focus group seems suited to encourage discussions among different stakeholders, across different levels of technological and policy expertise, and even across language competencies. The act of drawing facilitates an in-depth conversation and reduces the use of jargon (which is difficult to draw!).

I ran a workshop that employed the prescriptive version of the visual focus groups at the Internet Freedom Festival (IFF) in Valencia, Spain, in April 2019. The IFF draws participants from different constituencies: tech developers and programmers, policy advocates, activists, and academics, from all over the world. It was a particularly suitable venue for trying out the visual focus group as a tool for imagining technology. The session, called "Imagined internets: a hands-on discussion on how we want the internet to be", attracted 22 participants. The workshop was composed of two drawing tasks and a wrap-up discussion; participants received a handout that explained the structure of the workshop and the drawing tasks and included my contact information. First, participants were asked to draw (on an A4-sized piece of paper, with markers and/or pencils) what they thought the internet was like at the moment. After everyone completed this task, I asked participants to volunteer to share what they drew; a few reported back to the group. Second, the participants were asked to form 5 small groups with people they had not previously met; in these small groups, they were tasked to draw together what they would like the internet to be in the (near) future. They were instructed to discuss with their group members how they could imagine, together, an internet that brings together all their ideas and hopes. After the drawings were completed, each group showed their work to the rest of the workshop participants and explained the thinking behind it. Third, I solicited feedback from the participants. Those who spoke reported enjoying the drawing

tasks. They said that this method encouraged them to see the different ways in which people look at the internet and to push away from merely focusing on the technical aspects of the internet; they also reported that having to choose what to draw was an effective way to highlight people's different priorities, in a more fruitful way compared to compiling a written list. Participants also offered suggestions to improve the tool, chiefly by ensuring that people included in the different groups come from different backgrounds and/or represent different stakeholders and by providing more structure to the discussion in the groups.

In accordance with the policies of the Internet Freedom Festival, the visual focus group held there was not recorded or photographed, although there was a participant who acted as a note taker, as encouraged by the Festival itself. Although the drawings created in this session were never intended to be part of the analysis of this dissertation, I explained to the participants that I would have been interested in collecting and analyzing their drawings in the future. Participants were asked to opt into being part of my research by handing in their individual and group drawings and indicating (on the back of the paper) their age and their "constituency", e.g. activist, programmer, policy, etc., as a way of indicating their consent. I received 20 individual drawings and 5 group drawings. While a comprehensive analysis of their drawing is beyond the scope of this Appendix, Figures 20-22 provide a few examples of individual and group drawings. Given that the group discussions and the groups' presentations of their drawings were not recorded, what can be inferred from the drawings is limited. However, the most important element that emerges by comparing the individual drawings is that while some individual drawings, like that in Figure 20, depict the internet in very technical terms, all of the

group drawings are instead focused on imagining better internets based on people's experiences of the technology, as can be seen in Figure 21a-b and 22a-b.

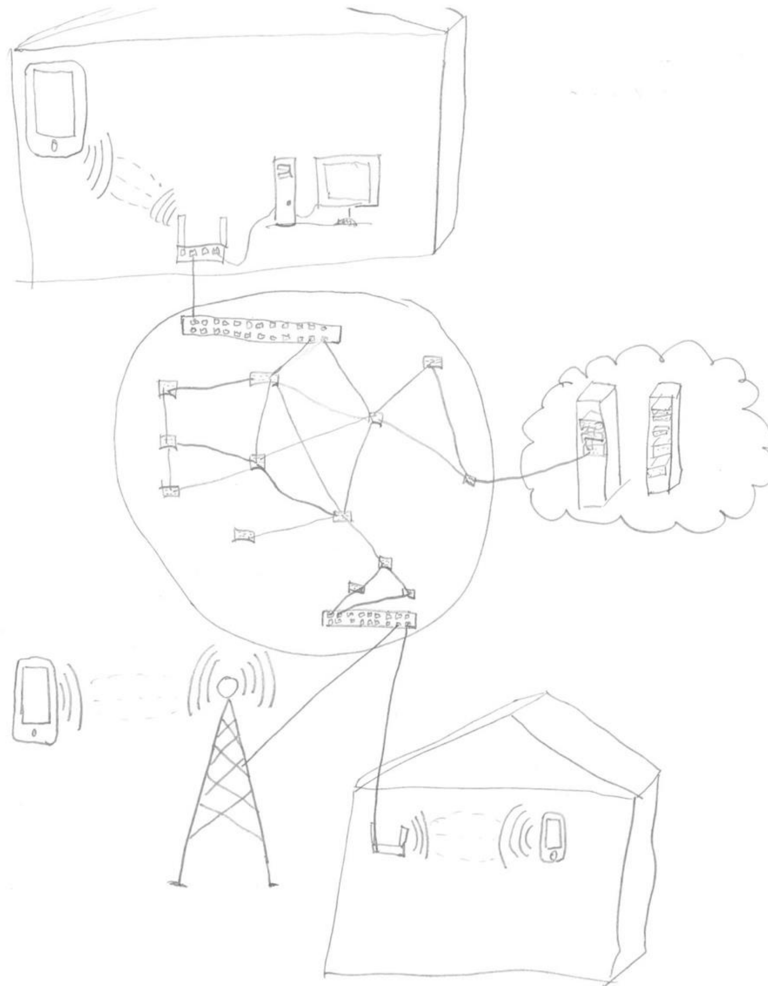
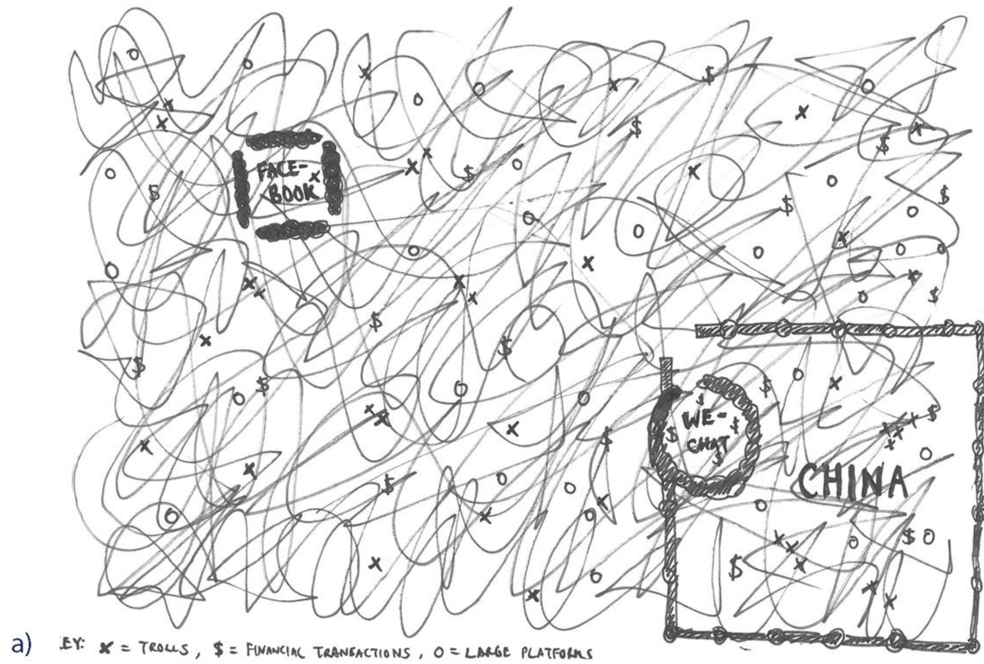


Figure 20. Individual drawing, developer, 29 years old. "Prescriptive" visual focus group, April 6th, 2019, Internet Freedom Festival.



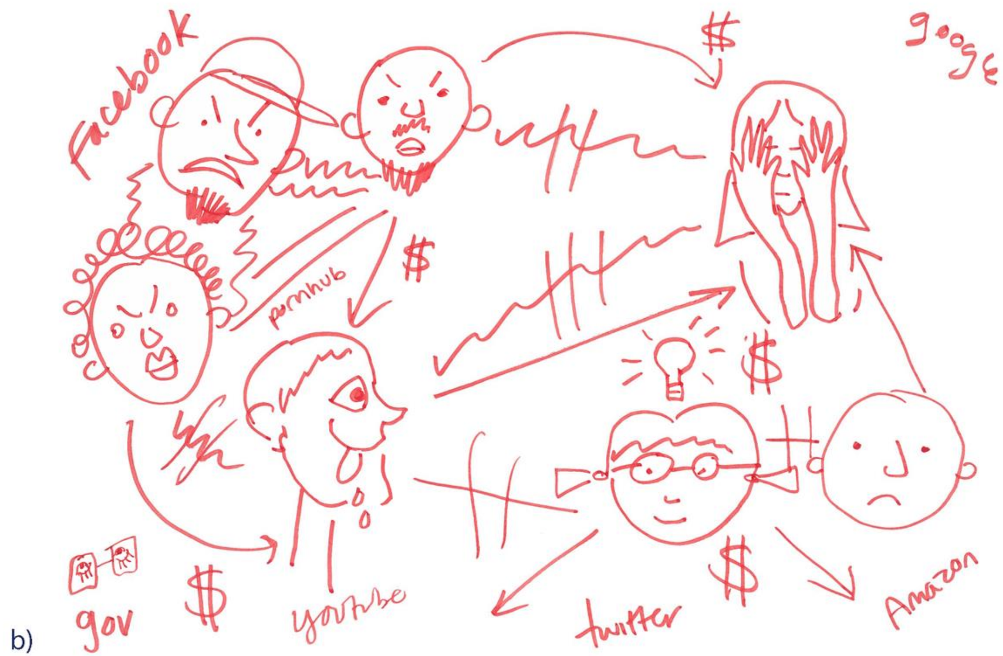
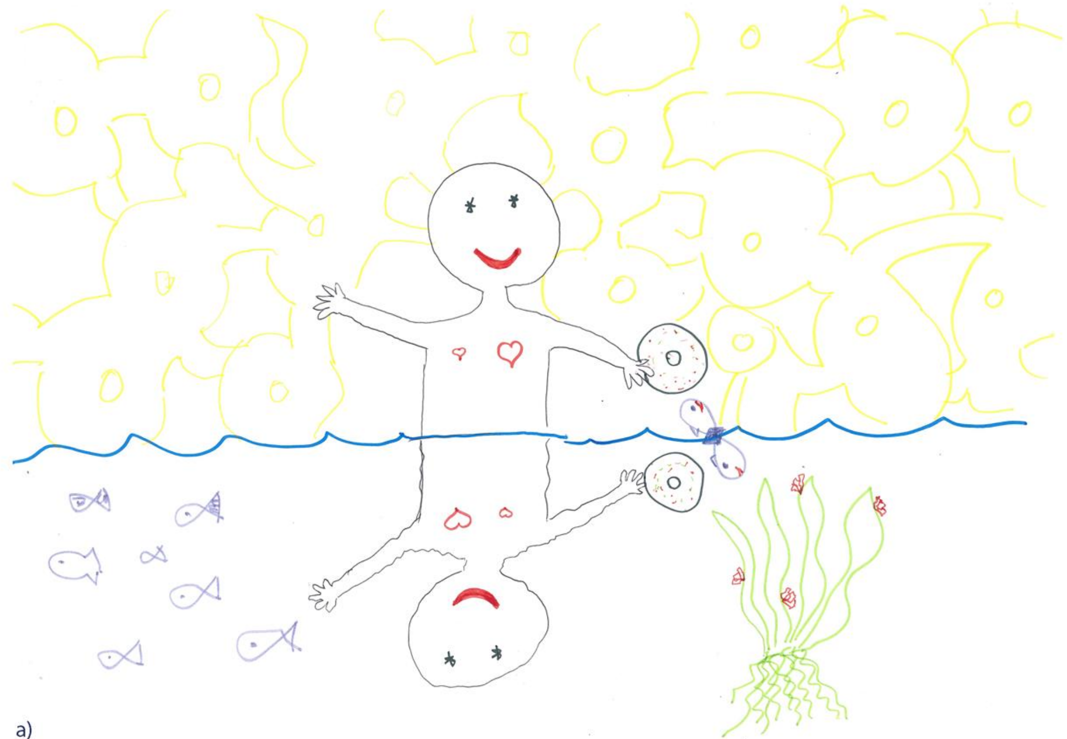
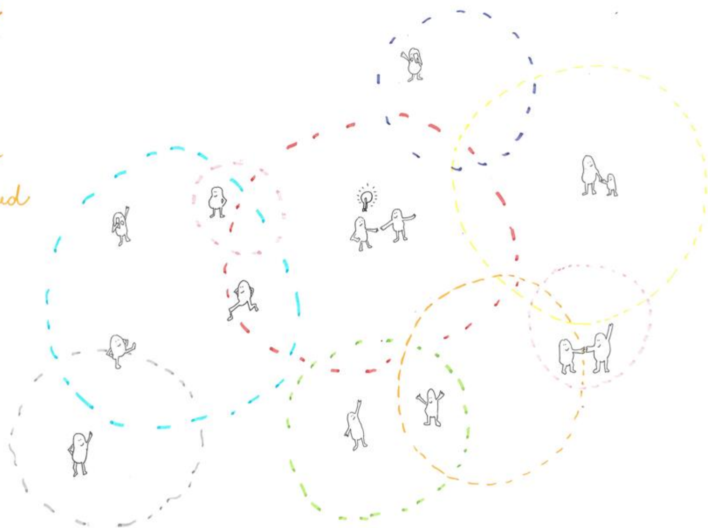


Figure 21a. Individual drawing, designer, 35 years old. Figure 21b. Individual drawing, researcher, 31 years old. "Prescriptive" visual focus group, April 6th, 2019, Internet Freedom Festival.



a)



b)

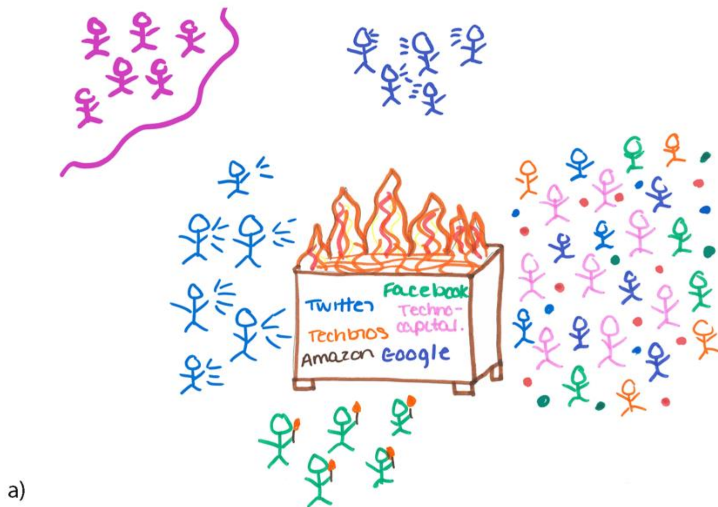
Figure 22a. Group drawing. Figure 22b. Group drawing. "Prescriptive" visual focus group, April 6th, 2019, Internet Freedom Festival.

In other words, this version of the visual focus group seems successful in steering conversations on a terrain where different kinds of experiences can be integrated, and technical expertise is not necessarily the backbone of the discussions. This type of

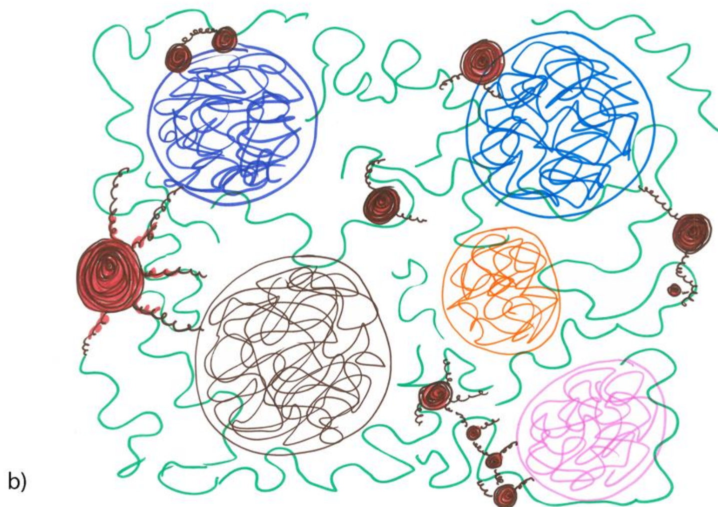
workshop thus seems useful to get different stakeholders to take others' perspectives and knowledges into account.

I also held a pilot "prescriptive" focus group prior to the IFF, drawing participants among graduate students at the Annenberg School for Communication. Predictably, both the individual and group drawings produced in this pilot focus group reflect an engagement with the internet that is based in academic research, as well as personal experience, as can be seen in Figures 23 and 24a-b-c.

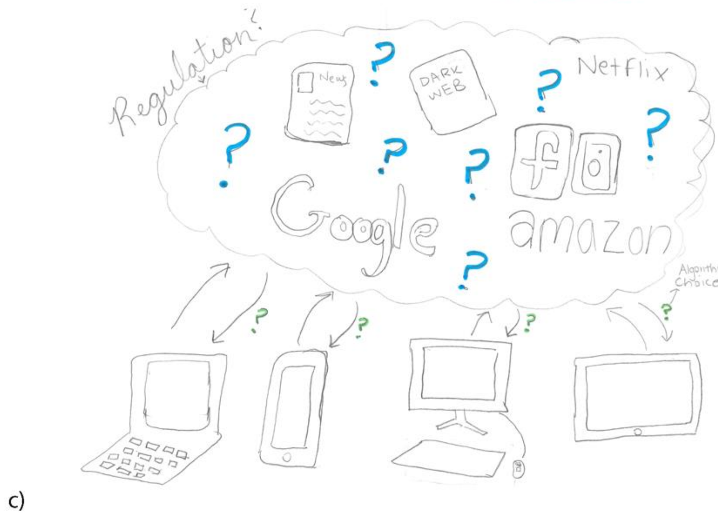
Figure 23. Individual drawing, female graduate student, 26 years old. Pilot "prescriptive" visual focus group, March 26th, 2019, Annenberg School for Communication.



a)



b)



c)

Figure 24a. Individual drawing, female graduate student, 29 years old. Figure 24b. Individual drawing, female graduate student, 32 years old. Figure 24b. Individual drawing, female graduate student, 28 years old. Pilot "prescriptive" visual focus group, March 26th, 2019, Annenberg School for Communication.

In addition to providing me a way to experiment with the structure of this version of the focus group before the IFF, it also allowed me to think about how it could be used for research purposes. To use it for academic research, the "prescriptive" focus group would need some technical and conceptual adjustments. From a technical standpoint, the challenge lies in being able to record the conversations happening in the different groups at the same time; this could be accomplished by either assigning a (confederate) note taker to each group or by providing microphones and recording devices to each group. Both of these technical adjustments have the potential to alter the discussion in the groups but would certainly provide a way to keep track of the group conversations and thus make sense of the final drawings. On a more conceptual level, an academic use of this version of the visual focus group should pay more careful attention to how the groups are formed. One solution would be to ask participants themselves to create the groups, by matching individual drawings that seem to point to the same issues. This would encourage more coherent group discussions and also involve the participants in a hands-on analysis of others' drawings. Given the homogeneity of the participants, I created the groups in the pilot visual focus group according to the similarity of their drawings, but this could be a task that is built in the design of the workshop. However, depending on the type of participants that are involved in the visual focus group, it might still be more productive to structure the small groups to be as diverse as possible – whatever that means for the population considered – in order to maximize the chance of including different perspectives on what the internet should be.

In sum, the "prescriptive" version of the visual focus groups seems well suited for both academic research and advocacy. In particular, it seems to create a more even

playing field compared to usual discussions about technology in advocacy spaces, which tend to privilege strictly technical or legal perspectives; through the visual focus group, personal experiences, rights-based perspectives and activist positions can all be integrated in the discussion of how a better internet would look like.

Limitations and ethical considerations

The visual focus groups present the limitations that characterize focus groups in general and those that pertain to the use of drawing as an elicitation method. First, focus groups are always at risk of being co-opted by one or more dominant participants, who might speak more frequently – or more at length – compared to other participants or otherwise attempt to dominate the conversation. This can be mitigated by an attentive and inclusive facilitation put in place by the moderator of the focus groups. Having been the moderator in all of the visual focus groups I have organized, I can however attest that the task is not easy: sometimes it is difficult to counterbalance the dynamics that already exist within the activist groups that we are working with; sometimes it is tempting to let dominant speakers speak at length if they are speaking eloquently and can give us "good quotes". Having examined the transcripts of the focus groups I conducted with LUMe activists, I do not believe that the conversations in either group were dominated by specific individuals, even though specific individuals might have spoken for longer periods of time. The dominance of certain participants might however be exacerbated in the "prescriptive" version of the visual focus group, in which participants discuss in groups that do not have an assigned moderator and in which the researcher does not intervene directly. It might thus be helpful to provide additional guidance to structure the

conversation in a way that is inclusive of all voices. Additionally, participants could be given the option to write down their reflections on the process at the end of the focus group, providing them with the space to comment on the power dynamics within the group[40]; while this would not modify the existing group drawing, it could still help the analysis by providing new elements.

The nature of the drawing task creates two additional limitations. First, some participants might be intimidated by the drawing task and/or concerned that their drawing skills might not be good enough, as Jackson Foster and et al. also highlight (2018). While this aspect can be mitigated by emphasizing the fact that the quality of the drawing does not really matter for the research (I often told participants that their drawings were not meant for a museum), of greater concern is the fact that the ability to draw might be considered gendered: women might be seen as more capable of drawing or more willing to draw. In both of the visual focus groups conducted with LUMe activists, the women ended up doing the majority of the final drawing itself, even if men provided intermediate sketches. While in these two focus groups the division of drawing labor did not necessarily have an impact on the discussion, the way in which drawing seems to be gendered is a drawback of this method that should be considered. Secondly, as many research practices of the academy, drawing is a task that might be difficult for participants with different types of disabilities. While being able to draw is not a necessary precondition to participating in the diagnostic version of the visual focus groups (someone else in the group could draw), a possible corrective in the prescriptive version (which includes individual drawing) would be to offer a facilitator to participants

[40] I am indebted to María Celeste Wagner for this helpful suggestion.

that might need someone to draw for them or with them. However, I have not attempted this and cannot yet comment on how it would work in practice.

There are two ethical recommendations that I would like to offer to anyone who might think of using the visual focus groups in the future. Firstly, the structure of the visual focus groups can provide a good deal of privacy to the participants, who can choose what to disclose. It is thus important that, in documenting the creation of the drawings, researchers focus on acquiring pictures of the drawings, but not of the participants; furthermore, drawings should not be associated to the names of the individuals that created them. In this dissertation and in my documentation of the visual focus groups, in general, I have not photographed the participants, only the drawings or the process (i.e. I have pictures of arms and hands that draw, but not of participants' faces or other identifiable features). Secondly, to better reflect the ethos of the visual focus groups, it is important that drawings, whether individual or collective, are not analyzed without accounting for the context that generated them. Just like quotes from an interview, they need to be presented and analyzed within the context in which interviewees offered them; the drawings mean certain things to the interviewees, and they should not be artificially twisted to support researchers' chosen narratives. In Chapter 3, I presented LUMe's final drawings by embedding them in the discussions that generated them. In this Appendix, I have offered a brief contextualization of the meaning of the collective drawings produced by the pilot focus groups conducted with Italian activists and Penn undergraduates; I have displayed the drawings collected in the prescriptive visual focus groups, but I have not attempted to account for their meaning, given that I have not recorded the discussions that generated them. Drawings are not self-explanatory:

I thus recommend that drawings collected in the visual focus groups be presented alongside participant quotes or a summary of the discussion that accompanied the drawing.

FOCUS GROUP – QUESTIONNAIRE

(English version)

Year of birth ___________

Gender ____________________

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?

____

Where would you place your political orientation on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 = extreme right and 7 = extreme left? _________________

Through which devices do you usually access the internet? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Smartphone
- ☐ Other type of cell phone
- ☐ Desktop computer
- ☐ Laptop computer
- ☐ Tablet
- ☐ Smart watch
- ☐ Mp3 player
- ☐ Smart TV
- ☐ Other: ________________________

Answer the following questions as best as you can. You can also answer "I don't know" or "I don't recall".

How much time do you spend online every day? ________________________________

When did you use the internet for the first time? _________________________________

When did you start to use the internet regularly? ________________________________

What are the 3 things for which you use the internet the most?

Which social network sites do you use? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ Twitter
- ☐ Instagram
- ☐ Youtube
- ☐ YikYak
- ☐ Snapchat
- ☐ Line
- ☐ Whatsapp
- ☐ Tumblr
- ☐ Signal
- ☐ Google+
- ☐ Pinterest
- ☐ Viber
- ☐ Telegram
- ☐ Other: ___________________

Besides social networking sites, what are the 5 websites you visit the most?

____

____

____

____

Select the most appropriate answer.

I am concerned about how much control corporations and other private actors have over my personal information/what I say online.

1 – strongly disagree

2 - disagreee

3 – neither agree or disagree

4 - agree

5 – strongly agree

I am concerned about how much control the government has over my personal information/what I say online.

1 – strongly disagree

2 - disagreee

3 – neither agree or disagree

4 - agree

5 – strongly agree

The internet was better a few years ago.

1 – strongly disagree

2 - disagreee

3 – neither agree or disagree

4 - agree

5 – strongly agree

The internet works in a democratic way.

1 – strongly disagree

2 - disagreee

3 – neither agree or disagree

4 - agree

5 – strongly agree

The internet is a space of freedom.

1 – strongly disagree

2 - disagreee

3 – neither agree or disagree

4 - agree

5 – strongly agree

QUESTIONARIO FOCUS GROUP

(Italian version)

Qual è il tuo anno di nascita? __________

Qual è la tua identità di genere? __________________

Qual è il titolo di studio più alto che hai conseguito:

____

Su una scala da 1 a 7, dove 1= estrema destra e 7=estrema sinistra, come definiresti la tua collocazione politica? ________

Con quali dispositivi accedi regolarmente a internet? (Indicare tutti quelli utilizzati)

- ☐ Smartphone
- ☐ Altro tipo di telefono cellulare
- ☐ Computer fisso
- ☐ Computer portatile
- ☐ Tablet
- ☐ Smart watch
- ☐ Lettore mp3
- ☐ Smart TV
- ☐ Altro: _________________________

Rispondi a queste domande come meglio ti ricordi. Puoi anche scrivere “non lo so” o “non ricordo”.

Quanto stai su internet in media ogni giorno? ___________________________________

Quando hai usato internet per la prima volta? ___________________________________

Quando hai cominciato a usare internet regolarmente? ____________________________

Quali sono le 3 cose per cui usi di più internet?

Quali social network usi abitualmente? (indicali tutti)

- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ Twitter
- ☐ Instagram
- ☐ Youtube
- ☐ YikYak
- ☐ Snapchat
- ☐ Line
- ☐ Whatsapp
- ☐ Tumblr
- ☐ Signal
- ☐ Google+
- ☐ Pinterest
- ☐ Viber
- ☐ Telegram
- ☐ Altri:

  ____

  ____

A parte i social network che hai indicato sopra, quali sono i 5 siti che visiti più spesso?

1. ____
2. ____
3. ____
4. ____
5. ____

Indica quando sei in accordo o in disaccordo con le seguenti affermazioni:

Sono preoccupato/a per il controllo che le multinazionali e altri soggetti privati hanno sulle mie informazioni personali e/o quello che dico in rete.

1 - molto in disaccordo

2 - in disaccordo

3 - neutrale

4 - d’accordo

5 - molto d’accordo

Sono preoccupato/a per il controllo che lo Stato ha sulle mie informazioni personali e/o quello che dico in rete.

1 - molto in disaccordo

2 - in disaccordo

3 - neutrale

4 - d’accordo

5 - molto d’accordo

Internet era meglio qualche anno fa.

1 - molto in disaccordo

2 - in disaccordo

3 - neutrale

4 - d’accordo

5 - molto d’accordo

Internet funziona in maniera democratica.

1 - molto in disaccordo

2 - in disaccordo

3 - neutrale

4 - d’accordo

5 - molto d’accordo

Internet è uno spazio di libertà.

1 - molto in disaccordo

2 - in disaccordo

3 - neutrale

4 - d’accordo

5 - molto d’accordo

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