

Digital Urbanism in Southern Italy

Arturo Di Bella, Department of Political and Social Science, University of Catania, Catania, Sicily, Italy

ABSTRACT

This article presents an analysis of the presence in, and use of, the web by some forms of digital citizenry in a city of southern Italy: Catania. Its primary aim is to analyze how, also in a weak civil society, information and communication technologies (ICTs) create new opportunities for extending public sphere and for learning new modes of participatory local action for sustainable urban development. The local experiences presented in this research indicate that ICTs can facilitate a redistribution of local social powers, offering infrastructures and tools useful for implementing a continuous process of social interaction, exchange of knowledge and the development of practices, influencing policy processes and planning models.

Keywords: Digital Activism, E-Participation, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), Social Innovation, Urban Creativity

DIGITAL CITIZENRY AND SOCIAL INNOVATION

The debate regarding the progressive integration of digital technologies and urban spaces involves a number of questions relating to the complex processes of transformation – economic, social, political, and environmental – which impact cities. Among these, particular attention is given to urban governance and to the extension of the public sphere in the city (Castells, 1996; Lévy, 1999; Mitchell, 1995). The pervasive diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is having a profound effect upon the mode through which social movements and the diverse forms of active citizenship operate from below as agents of innovation, inclusion and social development.

This article describes the presence and use on the Web of best practices of active citizenship in a city of Southern Italy, Catania; practices which involve the social re-appropriation of urban and digital spaces and contribute to social inclusion and territorial regeneration.

To structure my analysis I utilize a theoretical framework that draws upon studies of network society, active citizenship, and geography of urban governance and planning. I used two survey instruments: semi-structured interviews conducted with more than 60 activists, focusing on the collection of data, including organizational history and programs, as well as on the extent of community participation and leadership practices; and a focus group of 15 activists organized thematically around issues of urban policies and conflicts, the right to the

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city and the limits and opportunities of ICTs for local practices of citizenry.

In the “augmented” city, where virtual and physical spaces do not represent two separate dimensions, but parts of a single hybrid system (Aurigi & De Cindio, 2008), attention is focused on the practices of digital citizenry.

The democratisation of access to the interactive potentialities offered by ICTs makes it possible to define a new space-participation model, guided, on the local scale, by single citizens, by local communities and by urban social movements. The advent of ICTs has produced a different way of conducting and exercising the individual and cultural attributes of citizens, as maintained by the self-actualizing citizenship paradigm (Bennett, 2008), emphasising the diffusion of the practices of citizen journalism, micro-activism and individual activism, uncoupled from collective action (Marichal, 2010). On the other hand, online participation also facilitates the birth of new collective mobilisations (Della Porta & Mosca, 2009; Postmes & Brunsting, 2002) and supports new community networks (Gaved & Mulholland, 2008; Wellman, 2001), creating spaces of convergence (Routledge, 2003) where to define a particular political agenda and to articulate certain collective visions.

In the urban context, these initiatives normally arise as a reaction to public decisions considered damaging to the local community or the groups belonging to it, or as decisional and organisational practices of the autonomous civil society with respect to formal systems of governance. The participatory impulse is manifested in forms of self-organisation which can operate in manifold directions: through protests, which on the Web acquire ever more often the form of single-issue movements; through channels of counter-information, serving to unmask practices of manipulation by the traditional media, or to arouse public awareness regarding topics of particular interest; or through the re-conversion and social re-valuation of spaces, real and virtual, and of resources, material and immaterial, in order to respond to unsatisfied needs.

For these associative networks, cyberspace becomes a new field of expression of resistance and transformation, a space of democratic participation and political innovation where antagonism is transformed into creative, constructive and pivotal role. From this perspective, cyberspace operates as the site, instrument and object of conflict and participation. In fact, the Web is ever more frequently the site where urban conflicts become visible, a new social space that can be used to challenge powers and to experiment with new reformist politics. In some cases the Web represents an additional option offered to groups and movements which already exist off line and for which ICTs provide new repertoires of action and communication (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010). Other mobilisations, often born directly online, do not limit themselves to using cyberspace, but they recognise it as a new vital environment which is itself the subject of social innovation and the object at stake in the dynamics of conflict.

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In the perspective of a convergence between the “network society” (Castells, 1996) and the “movement society” (Mayer, Tarrow, 1998), in which the “powerscape” of actors is more influenced by new social movement, the aim of this article is to show how, even in a weak civil society, ICTs can create opportunities and strategies for extending the public sphere and for learning modalities of participatory action.

In Catania, local governance has rarely used the direct involvement of civil society, still less through e-government processes, as an instru-

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