

Citizens' Communication and the 2009 G8 Summit in L'Aquila, Italy

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In this article, I explore the emerging communication tactics that citizen committees and movements in L'Aquila, Italy, implemented during the Group of Eight (G8) summit in July 2009 – three months after a devastating earthquake left 80,000 residents homeless. I describe these tactics as 360-Degree Communication, an illuminating case study in citizen media and post-disaster political machinations. The focus is on how three main forms of communication (interpersonal, movements' relationships with mainstream media, and citizens' use of information and communication technologies) weaved together to support citizens' needs to organize and claim a more active role in the rebuilding process. This article also questions dominant views according to which political and civic life in Italy's south is based on a subservient relationship between power elites and residents, and that only rooted traditions of involvement with organized political parties and civil society can be a strong predictor of an active citizenry.

Introduction

In this article, I explore the emerging communication tactics that citizens committees and movements in L'Aquila, Italy, implemented during the Group of Eight (G8) summit in July 2009. (L'Aquila was chosen as the site of the international gathering after a massive earthquake on April 6, 2009, had destroyed the town). I describe these tactics as 360-Degree Communication, an illuminating case study in "citizens" media and post-disaster political machinations.¹ The focus is on how three main forms of communication, that is interpersonal communication, movements' relationships with mainstream media, and citizens' use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), intersected and worked together to support citizens' needs to organize and claim a more active role in the rebuilding process. I propose that, by looking at how these three aspects weave in and out of each other, we might develop a more

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¹ Throughout this paper, I will use the term "citizens" stripped of its legal meaning. "Citizens" is the noun of choice of L'Aquila's movements, which indicates anybody who wants to be actively involved with the town's reconstruction. For this reason, I will also use the terms "citizens" and "activists" interchangeably.

organic representation of citizens' communication tactics while avoiding treating each form as a discrete entity.

By highlighting citizens' activism in a central southern town like L'Aquila, this study also questions dominant views that political and civic life in Italy's south is tinted with nepotism and corruption and is based on a subservient relationship between power elites and residents. Indeed, the emergence of citizens' committees and movements in post-earthquake L'Aquila defies commonly accepted theories that only rooted traditions of civic involvement with organized political parties and civil society (a tradition that is lacking in this town), can be a strong predictor for an active citizenry (Putnam, 1993).

The Birth of Citizens' Committees

In the post-quake aftermath, the Italian government gave the Civil Protection Agency charge of formulating emergency procedures and overseeing all reconstruction plans, giving it *carte blanche* so that the agency could operate in complete autonomy from anybody, including local officials. Many residents resented such a top-down approach, especially because no input from citizens or even local politicians was sought. Although the government praised its emergency response and the work of the Civil Protection Agency, its promises for a quick recovery were based on unrealistic expectations. Indeed, by the time the G8 summit began, three months after the quake, tens of thousands of people were still living in government-run tent cities or in hotels and rentals scattered across the region.

Exasperation among the local populace, traumatized and homeless, ran high. Soon after the quake, a few residents organized committees to claim a more active role in the reconstruction. By the end of June 2009, 14 committees and movements had joined the *rete dei movimenti* (the network of movements), a network that, in the tradition of new social movements, was meant to emphasize "flexible organizational formats and interconnections among movements" (della Torre & Tarrow, 2005, p. 178). The committees' common goals were to address the problems of the populace at the local level and for citizens to be part of every phase of the post-emergency and reconstruction efforts.² Their purpose was to promote processes of "democratization from below" and to provide opportunities for citizens to voice their perspective.

Two of the groups that most engaged in communication and media activism, especially during the G8 summit, were the *3 e 32* committee (3:32 a.m. was when the quake struck on April 6, 2009), and the *Epicentro Solidale* (Solidarity Epicenter) movement (based in a self-administered tent camp in Fossa, a small village near L'Aquila). Only a few days after the quake, these two groups occupied a city park (the UNICEF Park), transforming it into a small autonomous tent camp. In June, *Epicentro Solidale* and *3 e 32* built a Media Lab on the park premises, which became the network of movements' main communication headquarters during the week of the summit.

² The network of movements' campaign was called the 100% campaign: to ensure 100% democratic participation in rebuilding; 100% transparency during the process of funds allocation to construction companies; and 100% government funds for the reconstruction.

The G8 in L'Aquila

Allegedly, L'Aquila was chosen as the site of the G8 gathering as a show of solidarity with the town. This decision was welcomed by those who thought that more visibility might mean more attention, and possibly funds, for the region. However, critics considered this choice a masterful political move to achieve two main objectives: 1) promote globally the media spectacle of a miraculous recovery that the government had put in place; and 2) hold the meeting in a place where the Global Justice Movement and NO-G8 protesters could be kept under even closer surveillance than elsewhere. Because of the quake damage, some roads to L'Aquila were closed for safety reasons, while a red zone, closing off the entire downtown perimeter, had made it impossible for local residents even to reach their homes without a firefighter escort.

With wrecked buildings everywhere, this once picturesque town looked as if it had been under intense aerial bombardment. With the continuous threat of more quakes, and numerous army checkpoints, very few demonstrators would have had the courage to infiltrate the maze of medieval streets and squares to carry out their protest. Although the local network of movements had obtained a permit for a "NO-G8" march to be held on July 10, it was agreed that the route would begin amid the wheat fields outside town and approach the red zone downtown only at the very end. Perhaps, in the government's thinking, the L'Aquila G8 summit was going to be a media spectacle and blot out the horrible memories of the previous Italy-run meeting in Genoa in 2001.³

A Golden Opportunity

For the local activists, however, the conditions represented an unrepeatable historical opportunity. They knew that their voices, rather than those of profit-seeking politicians and builders, could be decisive in developing ecologically sustainable reconstruction plans that would maintain and create public spaces respectful of the geographic, cultural, artistic and historical patrimony of the region. To this end, communication was essential, and the media exposure offered by the G8 represented, in the words of a representative of Solidarity Epicenter, "a golden opportunity" (Stefano F., personal communication, June 24, 2009) to make their voices heard, not only nationally but also internationally.

The movements' strategy was to seize the moment, to modify the structures of power "before the dust settle[d] in" (Stefano F., personal communication, June 24, 2009) by taking advantage of what the earthquake had exposed. Centuries-old government buildings and churches, as well as more recent structures, including the only hospital and the University of L'Aquila student dormitory, reduced to miserable rubble, served as a potent illustration of the vulnerability of power structures of those institutions that should have protected the population with better preventive measures but did not; of those who should have ensured that anti-seismic building codes were observed, but did not always do so.

After everything had been ripped and torn apart, it was very important to re-create physical spaces where people could meet and reconnect. The occupation of the city park and the establishment of

³ For more information about the G8 summit in Genoa and the role of media activists in denouncing the atrocities committed by the Italian police against demonstrators, see Juris, 2005a & 2005b. See also <http://www.urban75.org/genoa/>

various self-administered camps were tangible expressions of local citizens' need to take back control over their lives, while putting in practice alternative ways to take care of the emergency and the reconstruction.

Indeed, at the most fundamental level, citizens in L'Aquila and surrounding villages were in search for what Castells, although in a different context, defines as the need of the Self for "new connectedness around shared, reconstructed identity" (Castells, 1996, p. 23). In fact, reconstructing people's identities was not even a choice, it was a necessity. In a post-disaster situation, reconstruction was not only a matter of rebuilding dwellings, it was also about creating new public spaces (physical as well as virtual ones) now that the town's many squares and the entire downtown area, which for centuries were the primary places of socialization, had been destroyed. In order to re-create social connections and elaborate new identities, not only was it necessary to counter the Civil Protection Agency's plan for ruthless, top-down reconstruction, it was also vital to oppose the media spectacle portraying the situation in L'Aquila as being under control where residents were well provided for.

Reality is Another Thing

In the words of an elderly woman living in a government-run tent city: "Reality is the complete opposite of what they show [on TV]" (Puliafito, 2009). The golden opportunity provided by the media exposure during the international gathering consisted in letting the world know about the plight of the local populace. Although there was disagreement within the various citizens committees on how to relate to out of town demonstrators, whether to even participate in some of the events that were being planned (like the NO-G8 march), and how to interact with national and international reporters that were expected to descend over the town, the *rete dei movimenti* decided to use the global forum to highlight the discrepancy between what passed for reality on official media channels and people's lived experience. The movements resolved to do so without recourse to violence while still attracting as much attention as possible. The challenge, of course, was how to achieve this given that very few of the local activists had any prior experience moderating an assembly or a meeting, let alone dealing with reporters, promoting a campaign or engaging in any form of media activism.

Social Movements and Communication

Before exploring the activists' communication tactics, it is necessary to contextualize this case study within the broader literature on social movements and communication. Communication has always been a crucial element for promoting and improving social movements' organizational and mobilization strategies. However, as I will propose in this section, there is a tendency among scholars to "produce absolute definitions of social realities" (Dagron, cited in Downing, 2008, p. 2), and by doing so, to undermine the "anthropologically polymorphous" (Downing, 2008, p. 2) nature of media and communication. Here, I will review the three main strains of scholarship in the field of social movements and communication, and then propose a more comprehensive approach to citizens' communication tactics.

Interpersonal, face-to-face communication has been recognized as a vital element to promote social action. Scholars have investigated the relationship between social networks and participation in

social movements in an attempt to understand whether and how networks might predict individuals' involvement in movements, and the role that information plays in this process as the "capacity of networks to create opportunities for participation" (Kitts quoted in Diani, 2004, p. 345). Even in an era of computer-mediated social networks, a shared identity, personal relationships, spatial proximity, and mutual trust still represent "important facilitators of collective action" (Diani, 2004, p. 352). The power of each of those connectors to spur social and communication actions was palpable in L'Aquila, where the residents-turned-activists were moved by a thirst for re-establishing personal ties and recreating lost public spaces.

In the words of a young activist, it was vital for them to find ways to break the "semantic glass" (Alessandro T., personal communication, July 6, 2009) that had been thrown over the city after the quake. In order to disrupt it, interaction with mainstream media was necessary. Such interaction can be vital to the communication strategies of any social movement, and indeed some attention has been devoted to exploring the fruitful relationships between social movements and "official" media. Building from her own experience as a media and social activist, Charlotte Ryan has provided valuable insights for movements to develop a "grounded strategy" of communication, where securing mainstream media coverage is considered one crucial part of a comprehensive plan to mobilize consent and reach out to a variety of groups (Ryan, 1991, p. 231).

In order to inform and mobilize, activists in L'Aquila implemented every tool at their disposal, including, of course, communication technologies. Due to the rapid development of information and communication technologies, this field of scholarship has grown considerably by exploring how social movements are shaping emerging media, making use of the Internet to create informal networks, facilitating communication within the movements, reinforcing face-to-face communication, and providing a space for information and perspectives that might otherwise receive scarce attention in the mainstream media (van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004). Various scholars have explored the expanding possibilities for grassroots democratic participation represented by the Independent Media Center (IMC), an Internet-based network (Juris, 2005a; Downing, 2003 & 2005) and analyzed the contribution of the IMC in fostering a more inclusive public sphere in specific national contexts (Miloni, 2009). Others have studied the ever-growing opportunities offered by the Internet to provide spaces for the articulation of radical democratic cultures and practices (Pickard, 2006a & 2006b, Dahlberg & Siapera, 2007).

However, as McCurdy underlines (2009), scholarship has typically addressed the communication strategies of movements separately, focusing on the use of single technologies or on the binary opposition between alternative (or radical) and mainstream media. The danger of such an approach, McCurdy points out, is that we might "overlook . . . areas where one technology overlaps with another in the course of activity" (McCurdy, 2009, p. 88). I argue that by doing so, we might also overlook the intersections among various forms of communication. Indeed, "grassroots art activists such as puppeteers, banner designers, T-shirt designers, street theater actors and musicians" (Downing 2005, p. 217) have greatly contributed to protest against the status quo. Therefore, as Downing emphasizes, it would be difficult to "understand the roles of radical media . . . unless we link all these forms of communication and expression" (Downing, 2005, p. 218). Even at the apex of the use of digital technology for counter-information, he warned not to "blind us to the extraordinary combination of the most banal forms of

communications technologies with 'whiz-bang' hi-tech" (2005, p. 218). Contemporary movements continue to "root themselves in their local lives, and in face-to-face interaction" (Castells, 2007, p. 250) while the connection between social actors and society at large remains crucial: social movements' interactions with mainstream media is a vital element of such connection. .

All this was evident observing how L'Aquila's activists developed their communication tactics. The UNICEF Park and its Media Lab represented the physical public space where citizens could reconnect, reconstruct, and elaborate their new social identities and re-create lost "patial proximities" in a place whose very physical and geographical identity had been altered forever. That was the heart of activists' 360-Degree Communication tactics, which, firmly rooted in their experiences and problems, branched out into a variety of communication forms. Plain printouts without elaborate graphics or color; homemade banners; handwritten flyers; posters; T-shirts; pins; body tattoos, etc., combined with more technologically advanced forms of communication, including the Internet and mobile communication.

The "Uncivic" South?

Before going into more details about L'Aquila's movements and their communication, it is important to provide one more element of context, which will address the political and historical dimensions of democratic participation in this town. How did L'Aquila's movements come about? What is the history, if there is one, which made them possible? What is the substratum that allowed them to spring to life?

L'Aquila is the capital of the central south Abruzzo region, where, according to Putnam, an American scholar of civic republicanism, Italian citizens' engagement in local governing bodies and organized political associations and civil society has been weaker than in Northern regions (Putnam, 1993, pp. 83–120). For Putnam, the reason for stronger civic engagement in the north compared to what he defines as the "uncivic" south (1993, p. 115) is to be found in the history of citizens' participation that characterized the northerner *città-stato* [city states] during the Renaissance. Thanks to that history, those living in the north can tap into a richer tradition of civil society organizations, which, according to Putnam, translated into more active engagement in more recent local governments (Putnam, 1993, pp. 148–153). In the south, instead, because of the absolutist monarchies that had ruled the area for centuries, political involvement was characterized by clientelism, a practice based on a relationship among un-equals. In his study of regional administrations in Italy, Putnam concluded that the reason for the poor performance of central and southern local governments was the long tradition of corruption and lack of civic participation.

Putnam's analysis, however, mischaracterizes the south by making grand generalizations and not taking into account the differences among its various regions and cultures. The American scholar's approach embraces a rather deterministic historiography, based, on the one hand, on an idyllic notion of citizens' civic virtues during the Renaissance, and, on the other, on an equally superficial negative interpretation of the Bourbon and Hapsburg dynasties that ruled the south (including Abruzzo). His analysis, which assumes civic republicanism as the preferred measure of democratic participation, cannot explain the plurality of forms that political participation might take. Furthermore, it fails to examine the unavoidable formation of power in society, and the potent, propulsive force that conflict and a collective

awareness of inequalities can be for generating political action. It also assumes that civic republicanism and the kind of consensus-based democracy that it requires is a rational process where contradictions and inequalities are non-existent. Therefore, his theory is unable to grasp the unavoidable "pluralistic nature of the social world, with the conflict that pluralism entails," (Mouffe, 2005, p. 10) or account for the role of passions and emotions in fueling the "ineradicable character of antagonism" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 10), which represents the heart of the kind of radical democracy that progressive social movements often advocate.

Most fundamentally, Putnam's analysis cannot explain the development of political social movements in the south (like those in Palermo, Naples, and Salerno, to cite only a few among the most vibrant centers in the south) or the birth of citizen committees in L'Aquila. In the case of the Abruzzo capital, the enormous catastrophe of the April 2009 earthquake seems to have unleashed new forces, to have quickly generated inter-connective tissue, stirred passions, and unveiled what had been covered up for decades (including corruption of local governments and allegations of malpractice and mafia infiltration in the construction business). Although L'Aquila was never an independent city-state and did not enjoy a consistent history of worker and union struggles, its citizens did show, from time to time, a rebellious spirit. The town's small but vibrant community of artists and intellectuals, its thriving large research university, and some experience of counter cultural movements from the 1970s and 1980s, might all have contributed to the humus from which the post-quake movements emerged.

Methodology

This study of citizens' communication tactics is based on qualitative methodologies of data gathering, including participant observations and in-depth interviews with leaders of local movements conducted during the summer of 2009. Qualitative and ethnographic methodologies have been effectively used in studying social movements' communication tactics in a variety of contexts, including during counter-summits, as in the case of the use of digital media by anti-corporate global movements (Juris, 2005b), militants' actions during the G8 summit in Genoa (Juris, 2005a), and the study of Internet-based activism and social movement organizations (Pickard, 2006b).

Various factors allowed me to have a strategic position from which to observe activists' tactics. Given that L'Aquila is my home town, I knew directly or indirectly many of the people whose lives had been affected by the quake. My role, therefore, was that of an observer, but also of a participant. At a time when the attention of the world had descended on this otherwise provincial town, activists seemed happy to be interviewed by somebody they knew, someone who could empathize with them. They often expressed appreciation for the fact that our interviews were long, allowing ample time for reflections.⁴

⁴ Although I empathized with the activists' experiences, I was not "one of them." That was clear when, for instance, I offered to drive a group to a street happening (activists were looking for somebody who had a car) and they did not even consider my offer ("it has to be one of us," one person told me nonchalantly); or when I asked if I could purchase one of their signature T-shirts and was told that only activists were supposed to wear those T-shirts.

The fact that Italian is my mother tongue was obviously very important; the fact that I also speak the local dialect, which is not well known even in nearby towns, probably gave me another advantage, as I could tune in to some of the most subtle aspects of the activists' communication. I noticed, for instance, that they often used local slang and its particular spelling in their communications. The use of expressions that only local speakers can understand, like *quatrà* [guys and/or gals], *frà* [bro], *jamo* [come on], at a time when reporters and activists from all over Italy and the world were in town contributed to a sense of camaraderie, and to strengthen activists' attachment to their identity, defined by their common local origins and experiences. During the NO-G8 demonstration on July 10, for example, posters reading "*Jetevene Sciacalli*" ("*jetevene*" means "go away"; "*sciacalli*" means "vultures") distinguished local activists from everybody else.



Photo 1. Local activists use local dialect to address the negative consequences of globalization (photo by author).

I visited UNICEF Park for the first time a few days before the summit. Besides my professional interests, I went there because it was the only place where one could sit down at a bench and chat, reconnect with old friends, and have a taste of the kind of social, person-to-person interactions that this small town, with its many squares and various parks offered. During the week of the G8, I was at the park every day, observing, as well as participating in meetings, assemblies, marches, and other activities. I used my audio voice recorder, hand-held video camera, and field notes for recording purposes.

On the eve of the G8 gathering, there were about 80 local activists in the park. Most of them were with the *3 e 32* committee; for some of them, the park was also home. Members of *Epicentro Solidale* were also often in the park that week, although they maintained their headquarters in a nearby village. Ten or 15 activists were most involved with the Media Lab, although this number grew during the week. Theirs was a very tight-knit group of people, most of whom knew each other from before the quake. However, especially within the *3 e 32* committee, activists' political affiliation was quite diverse: some of the older ones came from sharply opposing militant experiences in the 1970s and 1980s social

movements of the extreme right and the extreme left. Most had university degrees (there were lawyers, university professors, and medical doctors); many of the younger ones were university students from Naples, Rome, and L'Aquila. Most of them came from the middle or upper-middle class. The movements' virtual community had hundreds of sympathizers in L'Aquila and beyond (according to subscriptions to their email list).

My first interviewee was a representative of *Epicentro Solidale*, who provided me with contact information for other activists, including those of the *3 e 32* committee. Spending time in the park also gave me the opportunity to meet activists and determine which ones to interview. During the interviews, I asked open-ended questions aimed at addressing the following concerns: How were activists preparing their communication campaigns for the week of the summit? How did they plan to reach out to L'Aquila's residents who had fled the area or were living in surrounding villages? How did they negotiate the need to reach out to national and international audiences while still addressing the town's very specific problems? The result of my observations and interviews is a story, which I will tell in chronological order following the events that unfolded from July 6, until the NO-G8 march of July 10. In telling this story, I will look at the intersections among the various forms of communication that characterized the citizens' 360-Degree Communication, including activists' interpersonal communication, interaction with mainstream media, and use of ITCs.

360-Degree Communication

The UNICEF Park

The UNICEF Park was the core of citizens' communication tactics. After the quake the park had become a small, but safe oasis right outside the city's medieval walls (where the red zone began) on the west side of town. In the absence of other public spaces, it was the "meeting place for the citizens groups . . . representing the only alternative form of socialization outside the logics of the market, a meeting point always available for those . . . who needed answers or just needed to talk" (Sara V., September 7, 2009).

By the end of June, activists had built a Media Lab, a 20-square-meter wooden shelter, with funds from private donors. Just days before the summit, Telecom Italia provided free wireless Internet access.



Photo 2. The Media Lab under construction (photo by 3 e 32).



Photo 3. The Media Lab during the G8 summit (photo by author).

About the same time, a legal center and a women's center (called "*Magnitudo Lady*," referring a quake's magnitude) had also been established. These initiatives contributed to animate the park, "*rendendolo piazza per tutti, di tutti*" [making it the assembly point for everybody, belonging to everybody] (Sara V., September 7, 2009). Internal meetings and public assemblies were usually conducted in the mornings or early afternoons. At night, the recreational tent and the small amphitheater nearby pullulated with cultural and artistic initiatives, including techno music dance parties, concerts by local and national bands and musicians, theatrical plays, and projections of movies. If democracy is indeed more than a simple exercise in rationality, then all these initiatives made the park a "permanent democratic presidium for [everybody]" (Vegni, September 7, 2009).

In the many meetings and assemblies that preceded G8 week, it was agreed that the main goal was to use any possible tool to perforate the government's media spectacle and reach out to a variety of audiences, from local residents to observers in Italy and internationally. Some of the campaigns took a couple of weeks to prepare, and some were created just a few hours before they were staged. The result was a comprehensive use of communication forms, from interpersonal communication, to interactions with mainstream media, to the use of communication technologies. It is in the intersection of those activities that the park, and with it, the Media Lab, came to life.

Interpersonal Communication

The Silent March

The first big public event sponsored by the network of movements for the G8 summit was the march of July 5–6, 2009 to commemorate those who had died during the quake. Long preparation and discussions preceded this event. Activists were concerned that somebody might find a pretext for violence during the march but no violent action would be acceptable in a city as devastated as L'Aquila. Another concern was how to make sure they could reach out to the L'Aquila *diaspora*, those tens of thousands of citizens who had fled the area.

Although the network of movements shared common goals, tensions existed among its various souls, especially between more militant members (mostly within the Solidarity Epicenter movement) and the more moderate groups like the *3 e 32* committee. For example, it was unclear who would lead the march, or what the marchers would do in case violence erupted. A decision was reached that the committee founded by the parents of the university students who had died under the collapsed dormitory (the so-called *Giustizia e Verità* [Justice and Truth] committee) would lead the march and coordinate security.

The march was advertised in every possible way: Via word of mouth; with flyers and hand-written posters distributed in tent cities (when and if authorization to do so was granted by the camp manager); via mass text messaging; via the network's emailing list; via the many Facebook groups of "L'Aquila's Friends" that had mushroomed since the quake; and via the various local news Web sites.

Regional newspapers (like *Il Centro*), widely distributed along the Adriatic coast where much of L'Aquila's *diaspora* had fled, dedicated ample coverage. When the march began, at 11:30 p.m., about 5,000 people had gathered. Most of them drove to town just for the occasion.

Although riot police, dispatched to L'Aquila in thousands for the G8 summit, made an impressive show of force, the march was peaceful and solemn. People walked for hours in complete silence, holding torches. Indeed, on that night, silence was the citizens' preferred form of communication, a much-needed *contrapunto* to the noise and media frenzy of those days.



Video 1. The silent march (video clip by author).

Freelance reporters; documentary film makers; and reporters for local and national radio and TV stations were there. Only a spokesperson for the university students' parents committee addressed the crowd using a megaphone, expressing her determination to denounce those who were responsible for not observing anti-seismic building codes in the construction of the dormitory, contributing to its collapse. Escorted by firefighters, the march reached the Duomo (the city's main church) inside the red zone in time for the formal commemoration of the victims, scheduled for 3:32 a.m., exactly three months after the quake.

L'Aquila Social Forums

L'Aquila Social Forums were held under the large recreation tent in the park on July 7. Representatives of L'Aquila's network of movements chaired the panels, where exponents of other social

movements (including Indymedia Abruzzo; the *No Dal Molin* committee [Molin is a small region in Northeast Italy whose residents have long been fighting against enlargement of a NATO base nearby]; the *Brigate Attive della Solidarietà* [the Active Solidarity Brigades, a communist national network of volunteers]; the Greek Social Forum; the Argentinean La Vaca cooperative; and others) participated. As is the tradition of social forums elsewhere, participants discussed topics related to ensuring processes of "democracy from below," which included discussions about supporting citizen participation in all phases of post-earthquake emergency and rebuilding.

Alex Zanottelli, a missionary priest very close to the Global Justice Movement in Italy, was a panelist. He encouraged activists to fight mafia infiltrations and engage in face-to-face communication with fellow residents. This was the most radical intervention of all, he said, as it went to the roots of our history and tradition of oral, person-to-person interactions. This, according to Zanottelli, was the way to honor the history of L'Aquila and its deeply rooted relationship with its surroundings; the only way to spark social change and empower people. "Go out there," he said, "in the tent-cities, in the small villages. Sit down with people; listen to what they have to say!" (A. Zanottelli, July 7, 2009).

His encouragement addressed one of the movements' core problems: how to reach out to L'Aquila's residents, a topic that had often emerged during assemblies and meetings and during my interviews. There were objective difficulties: It was difficult for activists to publicize their activities in the large tent cities, as no activist could easily enter those camps, while assemblies were often forbidden. In fact, the camps' managers had the last word in determining who could enter, and often they would cite security reasons for not allowing access and/or meetings. During the G8 summit, only reporters from official media were allowed to visit the tent cities (although some freelance reporters and media activists sneaked in anyway). The denial of freedom of assembly and expression, which are officially protected by the Italian constitution, was a major obstacle. After the G8 summit, the citizen committees ran national campaigns to sensitize public opinion about what was happening inside the government-run camps and how freedom of information was in danger in L'Aquila.

There were other reasons for the lack of participation by L'Aquila's residents. First of all, there was a certain distrust and suspicion toward the committees' political affiliation, some of which had ties with a few political parties of the left (including the Democratic Party — a leader of the *3 e 32* committee is the son of a prominent PD senator, for instance; and the Communist Reconstruction party, whose members were associated with the Solidarity Epicenter movement). Other reasons were cultural: Residents in surrounding villages had often resented L'Aquila's centrality and power in the region and wanted to keep some distance. Some organized themselves in their own self-administered communities; some put together their own independent reporting and printing operations.

One very noticeable example is the one-page paper titled "*Rialzati Abruzzo*" [Stand Up, Abruzzo], published by Antonio Venti in a tent in Paganica (a village near L'Aquila). Venti, a freelance investigative reporter and president of the local chapter of *Libera* [Free], a national citizens' organization against the mafia, runs a small operation, with the help of only one person. As billions of euros had been flooding the area for reconstruction, Venti has been writing about mafia infiltration in the reconstruction business. During the G8 summit, his *articolo di fondo* [editorial] also appeared in his paper translated into

English in an effort to reach out to international audiences; some of his articles have since been republished in the national influential daily *Il Manifesto* and on numerous news Web sites.

Yes We Camp!

Activists were determined to “perforate Berlusconi’s media spectacle” (Alessandro T., personal communication, July 6, 2009) thrown over the city, and to connect with international audiences. Early on the morning of July 8, when Barack Obama and other heads of state were scheduled to land at a nearby airport, about 50 activists drove to a mountain side bordering the town to the east, to place large letters on the ground that read *Yes We Camp!*. The slogan, in English, was designed to capture the interest of international media and call attention to the plight of the local populace, playing on Obama’s presidential campaign slogan, *Yes We Can*.



Photo 4. *Yes We Camp!* on mountainside (photo from <http://www.spiegel.de>).



Photo 5. Flyer in shop window (photo by author).



Photo 6. Activists holding one of their banners in the UNICEF Park (photo by author).

The words on the mountainside could not be missed by anybody getting in or out the compound where the G8 leaders were residing, including the thousands of reporters stationed in the official media headquarters. Freelance media activists, including photographers, documentary filmmakers, reporters for

independent TV stations, as well as some reporters for mainstream newspapers (most noticeably *L'Unità*, the Democratic Party's paper), accompanied the group to the mountain site. On that same day, *Yes We Camp!* T-shirts, pins, street banners, and flyers appeared all over town.

In the afternoon, after an informant had told activists that Obama was supposed to drive through a certain cross road sometime soon, they rushed to the site holding one of their *Yes We Camp!* banners. Although riot police promptly formed a cordon in front of them trying to hide the banner, the campaign was, overall, a success: by the early evening, pictures of the writings on the mountainside were all over the Internet. Even *The New York Times*, on its online edition, reported the initiative and a short interview with the spokesperson of the Solidarity Epicenter movement, Stefano Frezza (Donadio & Povoledo, 2009). TG1, the leading news bulletin on the public broadcast channel RAI1, also took note of the event. National newspapers like *L'Unità* and *Il Manifesto*, as well as international news Web sites, mentioned the initiative. One reporter for *L'Unità* noticed that the *Yes We Camp!* campaign did more than anything else to disrupt the government's attempt to portray a perfect G8 meeting (E. Fierro, personal communication, July 9, 2009).

The Last Ladies

Although many activists were women, communication among activists as well as gender representation at public events were at times problematic. Assemblies were chaotic and the ways to re-establish order was often to "raise the voice . . . [which implied] a gender communication gap, as [raising one's voice] is a typical masculine form of communication" (Isa T., personal communication, July 9, 2009). Indeed, I noticed that assemblies were always moderated by male activists. Furthermore, during the L'Aquila's Social Forums, there were no female activists on any of the panels.

Things seemed to slightly improve as a young woman was elected as L'Aquila's movements' representative to chair the afternoon Social Forums panel. By the day after, women seemed to have taken a slightly more central stage: for instance, two women were the spokespersons who briefed the media; one of them was also interviewed by TG3, the news bulletin on the third national public broadcast TV channel, as she and others occupied an empty apartment in town to protest local governments' decision not to make private dwellings available to earthquake victims. Women also, during the afternoon assembly on July 8, created and organized the campaign for the day after, the so-called *Last Ladies* campaign.

Given that the politicians' First Ladies would be touring L'Aquila's downtown on July 9, activists proposed to launch the *Last Ladies* campaign to underscore the distance separating the visiting First Ladies (living in luxurious anti-seismic suites) from the resident Last Ladies (living in precarious conditions in tents). During the afternoon assembly the day before, it was agreed that the Last Ladies would march holding food trays (the hallmark of life in the tent cities) and banners, and chanting slogans in Italian and in the local dialect, to call attention to the plight of earthquake victims. It was also decided that, whoever felt like doing it, would march solely in their underwear to symbolize that L'Aquila's residents had been stripped of everything. Reporters from mainstream media were present at the assembly and promised to

be at the event. The march was covered by local as well as national newspapers, news Web sites, and by a large contingency of media activists.



Photo 7. The Last Ladies' march. (photo by author).

Some encouraging observations should be made with regard to the use of the written language in activists' communication, where efforts have been made at resisting what Downing (2003) defines as the "linguistic reinforcement of gender hegemony" (p. 256). For instance, instead of spelling out the appellative "*car!*" (dear), which is the masculine plural form, all inclusive in the Italian language, activists spell it "*car**," thereby substituting the vowel "i" with an asterisk and signaling the inclusion of the feminine plural form, which would be an "e." As Downing noticed in his account of women's role and the use of language on the Latin American IMCs Web page (where they use similar gender-inclusive marks), this is an "encouraging small sign" (Downing, 2003, p. 256).

The NO-G8 March

The NO-G8 march divided the citizens' committees. The *3 e 32*, as well as other citizens' committees, decided not to participate for fear that violence might erupt and that media attention would concentrate on it rather than on the issues most important to the local population. On the other side, *Epicentro Solidale* supported the right of the global justice movement and other anti-G8 movements to demonstrate and indeed had been involved for months with national movements to organize the protest, which was preceded by many demonstrations in various Italian cities. Learning from the experience of the Genoa summit, where "performative violence provide[d] an important tool for resource-poor actors [but

that was] only at the substantial cost of reinforcing [negative] media frames and repressive strategies" (Juris, 2005b, p. 428), organizers knew that careful coordination was necessary. They had to make sure that: 1) out of town demonstrators were aware of the particular circumstances of the hosting town and that no form of violent action would be tolerated; 2) given the peculiar conditions of L'Aquila, the number of demonstrators from other countries should be limited; 3) L'Aquila's committees and the firefighters would lead the march, and local organizers would be in charge of security. About 10,000 people convened in L'Aquila, among them national workers unions, extra-parliamentary left wing parties, social movements from other regions, and a few internationals, most noticeably from the Basque and the Kurdish Communist parties. A few local residents who had not been active in the citizen committees also participated.

Hundreds of reporters from mainstream media (including *Corriere della Sera*, the satellite news channels Ski News Italia, and RAI News24) as well as alternative media and independent reporters, were present at the march. The police also had their own reporters and cameramen.

Good planning and communication among the coordinators paid off as organizers succeeded in de-escalating tension, mostly created by the enormous display of force by the police. When, as demonstrators approached the red zone checkpoint, a small group of masked youths began to throw rocks and chant slogans, local organizers formed a cordon separating the demonstrators from the police. In a very tense climate, where many youths had already been arrested in various Italian cities in anti-G8 demonstrations prior to the final one on July 10, the fact that there was no accident was a success for the local activists who were able to draw some attention to local issues, while articulating them within broader contexts of anti-capitalist protest, including the denunciation of precarious housing conditions, lack of jobs, exploitation of the environment, the conditions of migrants, etc. Indeed, such problems afflicted post-earthquake L'Aquila more than ever. On the other side, more radical areas of the NO-G8 movements criticized the local organizers' moderation, their catchy slogans, and their "sweet" opposition to the G8 (Proletari Comunisti, 2009).

Banners reading "Voi G8 Siete il Terremoto. Noi Tutt@ Aquilan@" [*You G8 are the Earthquake. We are all from L'Aquila.* The "@" sign is gender all inclusive] and banners in English, reading "G8 Quake," expressed solidarity while making a meaningful comparison between the devastating effects of a natural disaster and the wake of destruction that global capitalism brings at its passage. In this regard, it is interesting to notice that even a leading national newspaper like *Corriere della Sera* had made similar associations (G8=Quake) in its editorial cartoon a few days earlier. The cartoon, with a balloon reading "*Lo Sciame Sismico*" (The Seismic Swarm), portrayed a column of automobiles transporting the various heads of state as they approached, or "swarmed" L'Aquila, just as the seismic waves continued to swarm the earth.



Video 2. NO-G8 demonstration (video clip by author).



Editorial Cartoon in *Corriere della Sera*, July 7, 2009

Mainstream Media

Throughout the week of the summit, interactions with mainstream media were very frequent. Indeed, one could say that the activist campaigns were mostly designed to catch the media's attention. Reporters from leftist national TV stations (RAI3, for instance) and newspapers (like the one from *L'Unità*) were stable presences at the UNICEF Park. Whereas most official news bulletins would cover the summit primarily from their media headquarters in the G8 compound, some media outlets sent their own reporters to the UNICEF Park. For instance, TG3 often followed the committee activities, providing daily coverage from the park. TG3 distinguished itself for its coverage of the *Yes We Camp!* campaign and for reporting citizens' occupation of empty private apartments.

Journalists from *Il Manifesto* and other national newspapers could often be seen at the park. Enrico Fierro, a reporter for *L'Unità* who had written extensively about previous post-earthquake reconstruction, including in Irpinia (a region close to Naples, tragically famous for the 1980 quake), followed most activists' initiatives and filed daily reports on various topics, including the silent march, the *Last Ladies* and the NO-G8 march.

Information and Communication Technologies

The Internet and its emerging applications were amply used by the committees. *Epicentro Solidale's* activists and the Independent Media Center Abruzzo (the regional chapter of IMC Italia), posted videos, comments, and news updates on the Independent Media Center network. However, although the IMC Abruzzo had played a crucial role in sparking interest among the various committees about the importance of creating autonomous spaces of information, and the IMC itself was considered by the more radical activists as the "mother of all independent communication" (Stefano F., personal communication, June 24, 2009), it did not seem to be the preferred platform among the self-defined "independent" media activists (Alberto P., personal communication, September 25, 2009) and most of those in the *3 e 32* committee, who considered the IMC too ideologically tinted. In fact, the IMC provided a very important forum for the most radical activists to express their analysis and contributed to breaking down the *3 e 32's* almost hegemonic role within the network of movements.

The availability of a multitude of applications for open source publishing made it possible for techno-savvy activists to operate across a variety of platforms. The committees had their own emailing lists, while the network of movements had a centralized listserv and its own Facebook page, which was used for organization, information, and publicity purposes. *Epicentro Solidale* and *3 e 32* both used Web 2.0 applications to facilitate interactivity and sharing of information across platforms and among users. Freelance media activists posted their videos on YouTube, on their own Facebook pages (Facebook was their preferred social networking site) and Web sites. Some pitched their work to local as well as national mainstream news Web sites (for instance, one activist, who came from out of town but worked closely with the Media Lab and the local citizens' committees, was also a reporter for *Repubblica.it*, the Web site associated with the leading national newspaper *La Repubblica*, one of the most visited news Web sites in Italy).

Mobile communication was also very important, especially for text messaging possibilities. Walkie-talkies were irreplaceable as organizers used them to keep in contact among themselves and with designated police representatives to coordinate large public events and avoid direct confrontation between demonstrators and police.

Conclusions

L'Aquila does not have the same history of participation in organized political parties and civil society that other, more famous cities in the north of Italy have. However, the traumatic event that destroyed this town seems to have been a catalyst for citizens to mobilize and claim an active role in rebuilding their town, promoting participation and democratization from below. The process of reclaiming public spaces to reconstruct old and new social identities, has been vital. Communication tactics aimed at presenting citizens' perspectives and positions, continue to be an integral part of the committees' project of rewriting the history of this region.

The emergence of citizen activists and their communication and media tactics are powerful indicators of the vitality of L'Aquila and its surrounding villages. This case study questions generally accepted notions that the south of Italy is uncivic, marred with corruption, where political life is characterized by a subservient relationship between power elites and local residents. In fact, this experience gives new meaning to the term "citizen," as a citizen is anybody who will engage in collective efforts to produce social change.

Activists exploited the golden opportunity offered by the media exposure during the G8 summit, when the Media Lab became the heart of their communication tactics. In the words of a young activist, "the media lab [was his] life journey" (Mattia L., personal correspondence, July 6, 2009). Indeed, the lab had almost an existentialist dimension as it became, together with the UNICEF Park, the core of the movements' project to create a space where people could rebuild their social identities and experiences. The Media Lab was the center of the 360-Degree Communication, a form of porous, comprehensive communication that, during the G8 week, remained well anchored to local issues, while saturating the social and physical environments in all possible direction, including interpersonal communication (meetings, assemblies, marches, and other events); interactions with mainstream media; and the use of ICTs. Activists' linguistic choices added depth to the far-reaching flavor of these communication tactics, as citizens used English to reach out to international audiences and the local dialect to reinforce their own geographic identity.

Since the international gathering ended, tension among the various pieces of the network of movements, in particular between the *3 e 32* and *Epicentro Solidale*, has grown, with the former more moderate and willing to engage local politicians and interact with institutions for addressing issues, and the latter increasingly more determined to take drastic, antagonistic forms of protest. At times, the *3 e 32* committee has been accused of taking too much of a central stage, misrepresenting itself to the general public as the full network of movements, rather than as just one committee within the network.

Communication and media activities have been refined. Media workshops have been organized with the participation of media professionals and media activists; *3 e 32* has created a newsletter, while the network of movements has published a few issues of its own paper, *Il Cratere* [The Crater], distributed on line and in print. *Epicentro Solidale* continues to provide a very much needed counterbalance, with its forceful and uncompromising denunciations of local and central government's operations. It continues to use the IMC Abruzzo as one of its platforms, while further developing its own newsletter using Web 2.0 applications. Activists have also dedicated more time to reaching out to residents in L'Aquila and surrounding villages, holding assemblies and town hall meetings. On the joint network of movements emailing list, female activists are among the most prolific writers of daily accounts of assemblies, press releases, and theoretical elaborations about communication, democracy, and reconstruction "from below."

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