

Political anomalies and web-based civil antibodies in Silvio Berlusconi's *Bel Paese*

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Abstract

Italy's complex history has produced some remarkable path-breaking experiences and quite a few dangerous anomalies (such as Silvio Berlusconi's media driven political regime), but it has also made the country the perfect ground for testing experimental antibodies that can contrast such anomalies. One of these antibodies is the web-based civil society orbiting around the blog Beppegrillo.it. This article argues that the story of such community shows the path to follow for the Italian civil society. Grillo and his fellow bloggers in fact have so far demonstrated that new communication media have the potential to free citizens' from control and at the same time increase their capacity to keep a close watch on power.

Key words: Beppegrillo.it, Internet, Silvio Berlusconi, Italy, Civil Society.

Resumen

La compleja historia de Italia presenta algunas experiencias innovadoras así como bastantes anomalías peligrosas (por ejemplo el régimen mediáticamente controlado de Silvio Berlusconi), pero ha convertido también el país en el territorio perfecto para el surgimiento de anticuerpos que pueden contrastar dichas anomalías. Uno de estos anticuerpos es la sociedad civil basada en la web que gira en torno al blog Beppegrillo.it. Este artículo argumenta que la historia de dicha comunidad muestra el camino a seguir para la sociedad civil italiana. Grillo y el conjunto de sus seguidores *blogeros* han demostrado de hecho que nuevos medios de comunicación tienen el potencial de liberar a los ciudadanos del control y a su vez aumentar su capacidad para mantener estrechamente vigilado al poder.

Palabras clave: Beppegrillo.it, Internet, Silvio Berlusconi, Italia, sociedad civil.

Il Bel Paese (the Beautiful Country, the nickname by which Italy is often known by) is a land of many contradictions: throughout its boot-shape length the beauty of its many thousands of thousands of artworks coexists with the

ugliness of the many architectural and environmental eyesores that scar its landscape, these are often the ill-conceived product of corrupted politicians; if on the one hand Italy is the birthplace of the Renaissance and of many historical prominent figures such as Saint Francis of Assisi, Leonardo da Vinci, and Guglielmo Marconi, on the other hand it is also the motherland of Benito Mussolini, Fascism, Red Brigades, and organized crime such as Mafia. It is a country capable, in the heat of the moment, of wiping away (almost entirely) its corrupted political class, as it happened in 1992 after the scandal of *Tangentopoli* (Bribeswille) broke out, only to elect a couple of years later the media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, for many the epitome of corruption.¹

However, if Italy's complex history has produced some remarkable path-breaking experiences and quite a few dangerous anomalies, it has also made the country the perfect ground for testing experimental antibodies that can contrast such anomalies. From the Resistance that challenged the Fascists during the Second World War (see Battaglia, 1957), to the anti-mafia movement that in the city of Palermo during the 80s and 90s dared to say no to the racket of Organized Crime (see Schneider, 2003: 160-92), to the web-based civil society that in more recent times has stood up against Berlusconi's media driven political regime. In the latter case, arguably, the best and most successful example of such civil society is represented by the community orbiting around Beppegrillo.it, a blog created and run by Beppe Grillo, a famous Italian comedian. The experience of Beppegrillo.it is at the core of this article because it is more than simply a blog, in fact since its birth in 2005 it has functioned as an electronic beacon whose signals manage to attract on its virtual shores the many thousands members of an otherwise fragmented and geographically dispersed civil society. In this article I argue that this virtual space is home to a flourishing community of individuals committed to fight against the Italian political establishment and keep their tabs on power. Moreover, that the success of Beppegrillo.it is rooted into the political background in which the blog was born and bred. In fact, the growing shadow of the *media regime* established by Silvio Berlusconi, while serving as Italy's President of the Council of Ministries from 2001 to 2006,² if on the one hand successfully

1 For a broader analysis of Silvio Berlusconi's corruption cases and his links with Mafia, see Travaglio and Veltri, 2001 and Gomez and Travaglio, 2003.

2 For reasons of coherence and availability of data, the political time-line taken here in consideration is that of 2001-06. However, it is worth noting briefly that in April 2008, Berlusconi and his coalition managed to win again the general election. Although at the time of writing (August 2008) Berlusconi has been governing for only 100 days, according to some commentators his new government is very similar to the old one: devoted to pass laws to protect Berlusconi's interests and save him from judicial prosecution (cfc. Grossi and Zanca, 2008; Dinmore, 2008)

-muted criticism coming from mainstream media. On the other hand, it produced two unintended consequences: (1) in recent years, the Internet has virtually remained untouched by censorship, (2) Berlusconi's tight grip on mainstream communication media has pushed nonaligned audiences and dissident voices towards new alternative sources of information such as *beppegrillo.it* and non-overregulated spaces like the world wide web. The result is a lively, active, and healthy Italian web-based civil society. Within this political context, it is not surprising that the comedian's blog, in a short period of time, has become one of the main reference points through which many Italians, scattered around the country and across the globe, can make sense of the state of things in the country.

To clarify my argument, in the following pages I will first give an outline of Berlusconi's media regime, hence I introduce and contextualize the figure of Beppe Grillo; in the last section of the article I analyze the characteristics of the blog and of Clean up the Parliament, one of the main campaigns promoted by its community. In conclusion, I argue that the story of *Beppegrillo.it*'s community shows the path to follow for the Italian civil society. Grillo and his fellow bloggers in fact have so far demonstrated that new communication media have the potential to free citizens from control and at the same time increase their capacity to keep a close watch on power.

Berlusconi's media regime

Silvio Berlusconi is the richest man in Italy (Forbes Magazine, 2007) and the owner of the largest commercial television group, *Mediaset*, through which he personally controls three country-wide television networks (*Canale 5, Italia 1, Rete 4*). Berlusconi is without doubt a controversial figure in the Italian and international political scene, loved by his supporters, hated by his enemies: even before his political victories, he was indicated by many – on the opposite side of his political spectrum – has an open menace to democracy (*Economist*, 2001); by his supporters, however, he has always hailed as the only leader who can pull the country out of its political and economic stalemate. Whatever the angle on the matter, it is an undeniable fact that the last two decades of Italian history have been intertwined with Berlusconi's figure. In fact, notwithstanding his many trials, mishaps, flawed politics, his coalition's *ad hoc* use of the Parliament to pass laws to protect Berlusconi's personal interests and his own persona from legal prosecutions, despite his never resolved conflicts

of interests (one for all, being at the same time the recipient of three national televisions state concessions and president of council of ministries), and much more, since 1994, for three times (out of five) Berlusconi and his coalition have won Italy's general election, last one of which was won by a wide margin in April 2008. Moreover, as argued by Gomez and Travaglio (2004: xiv), it is since 1984³ that – regardless of the fact whether Berlusconi were inside or outside the Parliament – there has not been a single law in matter of Justice or Media that has been approved without safeguarding or helping the expansion of Berlusconi's empire.

The strength of such empire is firmly rooted in Berlusconi's exploitation of nation-wide television networks to pursue his own personal agenda. Berlusconi's grip on media is so strong and politically driven that some authors have openly spoken of an effective media regime. The late Indro Montanelli was a strong critic of Berlusconi's power and one of the most respected Italian journalists of the twentieth century. For Montanelli there was no doubt that Berlusconi with his predominant position in the Italian media landscape represented a great danger for democracy. In today's world, Montanelli argued as Gomez and Travaglio (2004: back cover) quoted:

To introduce a regime, one no longer needs to march towards Rome, nor does one need to set fire to the Reichstag, neither one needs a coup at the Winter palace. All that is needed are the so-called mass communication media: and among them, sovereign and irresistible is television.

To clarify the argument, from 2001 to 2006, Berlusconi did not only owned and controlled Mediaset, but, effectively, serving as President of Council of Ministries, he was also in control of the Italian public service broadcaster, *Radiotelevisione Italiana* (RAI).⁴

³ Between 1983 and 1984 Berlusconi added to his television network (*Canale 5*), his two main rivals (*Italia 1*, and *Retequattro*) and by doing so he acquired a *de facto* monopoly in the private broadcasting sector. Using a stream of local stations and a system of synchronised broadcasting, Berlusconi's network was able to broadcast nationwide. However that was a direct infringement of the Italian law that granted the right to broadcast nationwide only to RAI. When in 1984 some judges accusing Berlusconi of illegal national broadcast, ordered him to close some of his local stations, Prime Minister Craxi and his government rushed in his help and passed a law by decree to protect Berlusconi's interests. In effect the decree lifted the restrictions on national broadcasting and concentration of ownership, consolidating the foundations of Berlusconi's media empire (Ginsborg, 2005: 38).

⁴ Created in 1954, RAI has developed in a complex state-owned media company comprised of three terrestrial nation-wide networks, radios, satellite and Internet television. Its main revenue is based on a national TV license fee and is administered by a nine-member board. By law, these board members are chosen by political parties – seven elected by a parliamentary committee and two by the Ministry of Finance (*Repubblica*, 2005).

The two networks' groups combined account (on average) for 87 percent of the daily share of Italian television audience (*Repubblica*, 2006 a).

Berlusconi's media monopoly and the silencing of the center-left press (Blatmann, 2003; Gomez and Travaglio, 2004: 217-246) effectively allowed him to establish a firm media regime during his five years in power, run by people *willing* to support Berlusconi's own version of truth. Furthermore, as the historian Paul Ginsborg puts it, Berlusconi «has always had his own team of "organic" intellectuals of variable quality [...] whose programmes have barked out the line incessantly, at all times of the day and night» (Ginsborg, 2003: 38).

Berlusconi's regime was one that needs no gloomy atmospheres, iron clubs, or terror, in fact contrary to Mussolini's fascist regime, Berlusconi does not exercise his by sending opponents in exile on prison's islands, or by having them beaten up night time by his *squadristi*. Berlusconi's is a regime which is shiny and smiley. «His media regime is thus one based not on the silencing of all dissenting voices, as under Fascism» writes Ginsborg «but on the rule enunciated with acumen by the talk-show compère, Maurizio Costanzo: "Power does not belong to those who talk on television. It belongs to those who permit you to talk on television"» (Ginsborg, 2003: 38).

Gomez and Travaglio in their analysis of Berlusconi's power, indicate four characteristics of such unique regime (2004: XIV-XVII):

1) Berlusconi's media monopoly is a perfect tool to distribute wealth, grant favours, and help securing the career of many working in the media sector (such as journalists, directors, editors, and publishers), and it does so by rewarding those who behave well (that is those who are condescending towards Berlusconi) with a steady presence within his media realm. On the contrary, the regime is merciless with those who dare to contrast it openly. Berlusconi's regime in fact follows the golden rule of any authoritarian regime, *strike one to educate one hundred*. The best example of such *modus operandi* is the now notorious *Editto Bulgaro* (the Bulgarian Diktat or *Ukaze*, as the press often refers to the incident). The 18th of April 2002, less than a year since he had won the general political election and taken up office as President of the Council of Ministries, Berlusconi, at a press conference in Sofia during an official visit in Bulgaria, openly sanctioned the work and «abuse» of public television by prominent RAI journalists like Enzo Biagi, Michele Santoro, and successful comedians like Daniele Luttazzi. From Sofia, Berlusconi clearly suggested that those people, and those journalists who follow in the footsteps of those three *criminals* and make an immoral use of mass media should no

longer be allowed to work for the public broadcasting service which is owned and paid by the people. «Santoro, Biagi and Luttazzi» said the Prime Minister in Sofia «have used in a criminal way Public television, which is funded by all taxpayers; I think it is the precise duty of RAI's new management to prevent that from happening again» (*Repubblica*, 2002). The sins committed by those three were very simple: Biagi had committed the *infamous crime* of inviting Roberto Benigni (actor, Academy Award winning director, and well-known left-wing thought-provocateur) as principal guest of his popular evening daily TV show, *Il Fatto* (The fact) during which Benigni amused the many millions viewers of the show by commenting and mocking Berlusconi decision to do politics. Michele Santoro, a highly successful and opinionated (left-wing) investigative journalist, throughout the early month of 2001, before the election, had repeatedly criticized Berlusconi's policy during his evening show *Sciuscià*. Daniele Luttazzi, a popular stand-up comedian and television host, in 2001 had the *criminal idea* of inviting in his evening show *Satyricon* Marco Travaglio, a well known and respected investigative journalist of *La Repubblica* and an expert on Berlusconi's trials (*Satyricon*, 2001). During that night's show, quoting sources such as the official Court's papers of the District Attorney of the county of Palermo (Sicily), Travaglio explained that he had reasons to believe that Berlusconi's money and his much advertised entrepreneurial success are most likely rooted in Mafia's illegal businesses (see Travaglio and Veltri, 2001, and also Emmott, 2003). Shortly after the events of Sofia, Biagi, Santoro, and Luttazzi were unceremoniously sacked by RAI's management.

2) In their second point, Gomez and Travaglio argue that Berlusconi's grip on media allows him to manipulate information and broadcast only the news that he and his partners approve. In fact, as the two authors remark, in 2004 Berlusconi's Italy was still plausible on prime time news to attribute Italy's economy crisis to the post 9/11 terrorist attacks worldwide repercussions, or, worst to accuse the former centre-left government of a 60 billion euros hole in the national budget, as did the Finance Minister Giulio Tremonti on RAI 1 evening news programme in 2004 (Travaglio and Gomez, 2004: xv), all of that without any shred of evidence. According to the authors of *Regime* (2004) Italy is a country where black becomes white and vice versa. Information is twisted by those in power with a smile in front of an audience of millions of people, and all of that is allowed to happen without journalistic mediation or assessment of the information given;

3) Third characteristic of this media regime is its usefulness in dictating the agenda to the electors/audience that watch national television. What is

important, what is bad, what is good, what goes first in the main News programmes, it is dictated from above. Gomez and Travaglio give the example of illegal immigration from Africa towards Italian coasts and of rising criminality in metropolitan areas: in the months before the 2001 election, *Tg5*, the prime time evening news of *Canale 5*, directed by allegedly independent progressive journalist Enrico Mentana, each night compiled what Travaglio and Gomez call a «bollettino di guerra» (a war bulletin, 2004: xvi) filled with an increasing worrying stream of illegal immigrants landings and a rising number of breaking and entering with homicides in private middle-class owned properties. The two authors note that the «crime emergency» was a steady feature of the evening news before the election, but it suddenly almost totally disappeared as soon as Berlusconi took power.⁵

4) The fourth and last characteristic of the regime regard its ability of demonizing those who speak of inconvenient truths. The argument put forward by Gomez and Travaglio is that if you have a media regime that can condition the agenda of the news, the true facts become those that are broadcasted on television. If all nation-wide television networks remain silent (or give little coverage) to penal trials that involve the prime minister, if they don't deal with the economy as it were in crisis, if news journalists appear confident that the government can give new boost to the welfare of the country, then the audience is lead to believe that that must be the truth. So, if a political opponent dares to speak of a different truth, through the same media he is demonised: this 4th characteristic interests all those people and institutions that in a democracy exist to guarantee justice and fairness. So in such a context judges are no longer judges but are portrayed as the «metastases of a democratic society» (Berlusconi, 2008). They become individuals motivated not by the constitution and the Law but by their ideological creed who try to overturn the will of the people who have elected Berlusconi by dragging him endlessly and pointlessly in courts of justice (Berlusconi, 2008). The same happens to journalists who attempt to clarify the facts. In a normal democracy with a free press and non-monopolised media the likes of

⁵ A similar trend was evident in the building up of the 2008 general election. Even though Berlusconi was officially the leader of the opposition, therefore allegedly with less control over RAI's management, yet as reported by the Financial Times, «Berlusconi's mastery of the media» allowed him to undermine the work of the ministers of the Prodi's Government. They were in fact constantly damaged «by negative reporting that played up savage crimes allegedly committed by foreigners.» The FT's correspondent Guy Dinmore however notes that, contrary to what the Italian media reported daily, «Italy's crime rates are below the European average». Nevertheless, any attempt by Prodi and his ministers to reassure Italians that crime rates were declining went unheard (Dinmore, 2008).

Berlusconi will have the freedom to speak out loud their own truth, but that truth will be critically mediated to the audience by the journalist who interviews him. This never really happens in most of Italian television networks. The historian Paul Ginsborg (2003: 37-38) gives a good portrait of the way in which some News programmes work in Italy:

Take the example of the news on Rai Uno, where an almost ritualistic pluralism prevails: there is a regular parade of politicians, among whom figure members of the opposition. They all say something briefly. Berlusconi himself often appears, to say something at greater length. There then follows the *cronaca*, mainly a series of depressing incidents and fatalities of varying nature. The Pope is given a ritual few minutes and at the end it is time for sport. The general impression conveyed is of desperation at the state of the world, the vacuity of the politicians, the need for religion and the good sense of the Prime Minister.

Between 2001 and 2006, Berlusconi's unique media regime was capable of casting a heavy curtain of silence over information that might have damaged the Prime Minister's image and business interests. Amid a series of trials and investigations into the sources of Berlusconi's wealth that in any normal democratic environment could have ruined him politically and economically, his control of media muzzled any attempt of thorough analysis of those trials and their revelations. Not surprisingly, in this political milieu, Freedom House listed Italy as the least democratic country in Europe: Italy was ranked eightieth in the world, immediately after Tonga and Botswana and just before Antigua and Burkina Faso (*Freedom House*, 2006).

One famous example of the influence of the regime on Italian media is the Italy-Germany diplomatic row that took place in the summer of 2003. When in July of that year Berlusconi caused a wave of indignation throughout Europe by comparing a German Member of the European Parliament Martin Schultz to a Nazi concentration camp commander (*Guardian*, 2003 a) – RAI's main evening news program did not show the incident and only briefly reported on; coverage on other stations was «deliberately softened and cut» (Arie, 2003). The Italian press downplayed the affair, «with many papers relegating the story to the back pages» as reported by the BBC (2003).

The problem with Berlusconi's Italy is very simple: in such a political and social context where television plays such an important role in shaping up public opinion (Ginsborg, 2004: 105-6), «[d]issenting voices from society are never heard» (Ginsborg, 2003: 38). Even in *the ritualistic pluralism* of RAI 1 – as Ginsborg puts it – «the multiple associations of Italian civil society simply do not exist – unless they reach such mass proportions, as with the

European Social Forum's peace march in Florence in November 2002, that they cannot be ignored» (Ginsborg, 2003: 38). And even in this latter case that is not always true as exemplified by the partial reporting of the 2003 campaign against the Iraq War. Back then 3 million people gathered in Rome, yet the protests were not reported by RAI in order to spare politicians pressure from the people (*Guardian*, 2003 b). Roberto Natale, head of RAI Journalists Union, said he and his colleagues at the network were instructed to downplay the size of the protest, not to show the pacifist flag, and to refer to the protesters not as *pacifisti* (pacifists) but with the negative adjective of *disobbedienti* (disobedient people) (Gomez and Travaglio, 2004: 289; *The Prime Minister and the Press*, 2003).

Discussing the state of democracy in Italy in the 90s, Ginsborg (2002) points out that the scandals of Tangentopoli, the rise to power of Berlusconi, it is not only the result of the faults and lack of integrity of a rotten ruling political class, but also it depends upon the willingness and strength of the Italian people «upon the culture of its families and the energy of its citizens» (2002: 263). What Ginsborg is hinting at is the importance of an active civil society that can serve as antibody to contrast the malaise that has produced Berlusconi and can resist his regime. Nevertheless, in such a complex political context, as it is clear from the examples quoted earlier, traditional means of resistance used by civil society, such as public gatherings, picketing, or strikes lose their effectiveness when television networks refuse to report them (Gomez and Travaglio, 2004: 284-291). Thus, civil society organizations must find new ways to operate and manifest their dissent.

Before going any further it is important to clarify that with the term civil society in this article I understand broadly speaking all those associations or political actors that work outside the sphere of the State, the family, or the market, whose most important function is to monitor the exercise of power and its excesses (Keane, 1998: 11). The term civil society properly «describes and envisages a complex and dynamic ensemble of legally protected non-governmental institutions that tend to be non-violent, self-organising, self-reflexive, and permanently in tension with each other and with the state institutions that “frame”, constrict and enable their activities» (Keane, 1998: 6). Organisations such as trade unions, community based groups, charities, or non-governmental organisations and advocacy group are among the many examples of civil society organisations. However, as Keane rightly points out, the term civil society is an ideal-typical category, and hence it cannot be found in its pure form in the real world, in fact its boundaries are often blurred and confused with those of the State, or the market (Keane, 1998: 6).

In the remaining part of this article I will demonstrate that in response to Berlusconi's media regime, the Italian civil society has sought out new ways to resist. For example, in the recent past, harnessing the power of the web, a new reinvigorated web-based civil society has been successful in infiltrating the regime with the information that it is trying to censor. The example I use here is that of Beppe Grillo and the community of active citizens orbiting around his blog, they all in fact use the Web to «perforate» the system, to make the public aware of different truths than those broadcasted by mainstream media (Grillo, 2004: 405).

Beppe, who?

Beppe Grillo is one of the most popular and controversial stand-up comedians that has ever appeared on Italian television. Grillo began his career at the end of the 1970s (*Internazionale*, n.d.) and by the early 1980s, high audience ratings and critical acclaim made him a national celebrity. Toward the end of the decade, he began criticizing prominent Italian politicians and big corporations for corrupt practices (Grasso, 1992: 467-468; Israely, 2005). Because of mounting pressure of politicians and advertisers against Grillo's satire, TV producers stopped inviting him on their shows. Sent into unofficial exile, Grillo was forced to perform in theatres, sports arenas, and public squares.

Since the early 1990s Grillo has appeared only twice on public television. Yet Grillo's ban from the small screen has made him even more popular with the Italian public (*Internazionale*, n.d.). In 2005 *Time* magazine named Grillo among the 37 European heroes of the year «who illuminate and inspire, persevere and provoke» (Israely, 2005). In recent times, Grillo has been able to increase his popularity by transforming himself from a popular television comedian into a blogger. It is important here to note that his long-standing popularity with the public as the outspoken talking cricket, a vociferous critic of political and economic corruption, has played no little role in the success of his blog. Through his site beppegrillo.it, Grillo and his staff offer nonaligned and critical political information that rarely finds space in today's mainstream media. At the same time, thanks to the comments and countless feedbacks that are either posted daily on the blog or sent via email, Grillo himself has access to information and stories that otherwise would remain untold.

Grillo is a fervent critic of the lack of democratic openness in contemporary Italian politics. He fights to unveil the truth about issues that mainstream media and politicians do not dare to address (Grillo, 2004:

405). His main arguments can be summarised in three lines of critique: (1) politicians (and also high rank Civil Servants) should be held accountable for their actions (Grillo, 2006 a); (2) to be truly representative they should be chosen by the people and not by political parties, as is often the case in Italy (Grillo, 2007 a; Povoledo, 2007); (3) politicians and their actions should be fully transparent (Grillo, 2007 a). Nonetheless, it must be noted here, Grillo's increasingly politically oriented actions are not without shadows: as I showed elsewhere, a thorough analysis of his initiatives suggests that his *modus operandi* can rightly foster accusations of shallow demagoguery and lack accountability, representativeness, and transparency (Navarra, *forthcoming*).

From a *simple blog* to a web-based Civil Society

In 2005, Grillo turned his then not very active website (beppegrillo.it) into a blog. The term *blog* (abbreviation of weblog), refers to an online diary or journal whose entries (*posts*) are public, often organised chronologically and archived through categories. Its structure makes it a simple and direct means of production and distribution of information. A blog is in fact always easily accessible and editable on the internet. The content of a blog is as various as one can imagine. In it one can find any kind of user-generated content, from text to image, from sound to video, and that content can be downloaded, read, used, commented on, and exchanged easily and rapidly, and more importantly it can be as daring and politically incorrect as one can wish or imagine. For Grillo, a «blog is an amazing thing that connects people» virtually and practically. Beppegrillo.it in fact aims at providing a free platform for all citizens who are willing to communicate and share information, regardless of their political views (Grillo, n.d.-a). Judging from the success of the blog, Grillo seems to have achieved his goal.

In January 2005, Grillo begun blogging about his tour of performances and slowly moved on discussing some political and social issues, those in line with his shows. Within just few months the blog took off. In fact, less than a year after its first post, in mid-December 2005, beppegrillo.it was voted *best Internet site* in the category «News and Information» for the well known *www 2005 Prize*. The yearly prize, organized by *il Sole 24 Ore*, the most popular Italian daily financial newspaper, was awarded to Grillo's blog «for the interactivity with the public, the ample documentation on the Internet and the commitment to tackle topics of use to citizens» (Grillo, 2005 b).

One of the most common ways to measure the «authority» or importance of a blog is to count the number of other bloggers that link to it. This is the methodology used by Technorati.com, the leading blog search engine to determine the search rank of blogs. According to Technorati, *beppegrillo.it* authority rank⁶ is n. 20 in a list currently tracking and ranking over 112 million blogs.⁷ There are 7,407 other blogs that link to it.

In a previous study that I conducted on *beppegrillo.it*, I also found out that data show a constant growth in number of comments, especially those with a focus on politics (Navarria, 2007). The most active site of comments was in fact «Politics»⁸ which received more than 111,000 comments in a 12-month period (May 2005 - May 2006), almost a quarter of the total number of comments posted on the blog (463,000). On average, the subject of politics scored over 1,300 comments per post. In the same period, the overall number of comments grew by 368.87 percent. It jumped from 17,021 comments (May 2005), to 62,786 (April 2006).⁹

The offline work and organizing framework of the community orbiting around the blog is strongly facilitated by a direct link with Meetup.com, an online portal that facilitates social networking by helping people with similar interests finding each other and organising regular face-to-face meetings. To date, the Meetup.com group category «Friends of Beppe Grillo» has around 73,000 members, themselves organized in more than 500 groups located in 358 cities in 21 different countries.¹⁰ The friendship groups meet regularly, they have organized more than 14,000 meetings, and sometimes, when possible, Grillo himself attends their meetings, either in person or in video-chat.¹¹ Moreover, notwithstanding the importance of Grillo's charismatic figure, this multitude of Meetup groups is slowly

6 Technorati's authority rank is calculated by counting the number of unique blogs that have linked to a blog in the previous 180 days (data retrieved August 16, 2008).

7 Source: <http://www.technorati.com/about/>, data retrieved August 16, 2008).

8 The blog's post are archived according to ten topic categories: Citizen Primaries, Ecology, Economics, Energy, Health/Medicine, Information, Politics, Technology/Internet, Transport/Getting About, Wailing Wall.

9 As I argued elsewhere (Navarria, *forthcoming*), data drawn on comments give a clearer picture of the cultural and political spectrum of the community orbiting around a blog. In fact comments are the prime means by which the readers can actively enter the conversation, engage, and influence the discussions about the issues raised on the blog.

10 Source: <http://beppegrillo.meetup.com/about/?gmap=1> (retrieved August 18, 2008).

11 See for instance the International Meetup (January 19/20, 2008), organized by the Beppe Grillo's Friends Amsterdam Meetup Group; during that meeting Beppe Grillo himself connected to the audience via video through Skype. A recording of his message is available online: (retrieved February 2008).

shaping up into a self-aware international committed network of political activists capable of organizing itself beyond geographical boundaries, independently from the blog. The network uses Meetup to coordinate itself and harness the power of free software such as Skype, the free Internet-based phone software, to organize International online meetings between its members and discuss future course of actions.¹²

A web-based Civil Society at work: the *Clean up the Parliament* campaign in two acts

Facilitated by powerful and low-cost *tools* such as Meetup.com and Skype, in the past three years, the lively and growing civil society orbiting around Grillo's blog has been able to organize a number of grassroots campaigns, ranging from efforts to protect and sustain scientific research to economic and political issues. The community often took a firm stand on matters that have been underrepresented or misrepresented within the mainstream media. Of these campaigns, one stood out for its success in engaging the public participation and the interest that surrounded it: *Parlamento Pulito* (Clean up the Parliament). This campaign and its organizing process represent an important blue print of how a web-based civil society works: on the one hand it shows the strengths of the blog in functioning as a virtual agora where its community can actively debate and engage with social and political matters that are often neglected by mainstream media; on the other hand it raises some important questions about the organizational process of the campaign, the strength of the involvement of the citizens, the procedures of accountability inherent to this campaign, and the ultimate political impact of the campaign.

Clean-up the Parliament can be considered as a two-act campaign: the first act (at the end of 2005) aimed to inform the Italian public of a simple but rarely discussed fact: several Members of the Parliament (MPS) have been convicted by the courts yet they are still allowed to represent their constituents (see Gomez and Travaglio, 2006). The second act, two years later, was effectively a referendum that aimed to gather enough signatures to propose a law to the Parliament to deal with the issue of convicted politicians.

¹² Personal communication with Ethel Chiodelli, Assistant Organizer of the London Beppe Grillo Meetup Group

Act I

Originally, the Clean up the Parliament campaign stemmed from an initiative of the Beppegrillo Meetup group in Milan, the ultimate aim of the initiative was to protest against the lack of an adequate legislation for preventing convicted politicians to enter the parliament (Grillo, n.d.-b). Beppe Grillo and his fellow bloggers published 25 posts which received 29,382 comments (on average 1175.28 per post) debating the issue and how to organize the protest. Eventually it was decided that the best way to make the protest known to the wider public was to raise money and purchase a one-page advertisement in a national newspaper to denounce the situation. The campaign successfully managed to raise almost 60,000 euros, however, according to Grillo, not one of the national newspapers he contacted agreed to publish the one-page advertisement, hence the comedian turned his attention to the international press. At the end the choice fell on the *International Herald Tribune* (*IHT*). The one-page of text drew attention to the problem and asked the Members of Parliament whose names were among those convicted to resign (Grillo, 2005 a, 2005 c).

With hindsight, this first act of the campaign did not achieve much in terms of political result: the law was not even discussed in the parliament, and not a single MP resigned. However, it raised some interest and praises in Italy and overseas, most notably from Anupam Mishra secretary of the Gandhi Peace Foundation of New Delhi in India who, in a long letter addressed to Grillo (2006 b) and then posted on the blog, commented:

On behalf of our organization [...] we congratulate you on such a courageous advert and the important piece in the services of civil society. [...] We have circulated your inspiring advert to some news channels and Hindi newspapers [...thanks] for this small but greater step in the direction of upholding the democratic values.

Overall, albeit politically unsuccessful, this first act was useful in consolidating the blog – at such an early stage of life – as an excellent tool to help organizing the efforts of the community of citizens orbiting around it.

Act II

Almost two years after the appeal published on the *IHT*, on September 8, 2007, Grillo and his followers organized a protest called the *V-Day* or *Vaffanculo Day* (*Vaffanculo* means «fuck of» in Italian). On the day commemorating the Italian armistice in World War II (September 8,

1943), Grillo asked his fellow bloggers to gather in the squares of their cities throughout Italy and the world and to sign a petition to propose a new law to the Parliament. The proposed law is composed of three different elements: (1) candidates convicted by courts of law should be forbidden from running for public office; (2) political careers should be limited to only two terms; and (3) that the members of Parliament should be directly chosen by the people (Grillo, 2007 a).

The V-day was a success both in terms of numbers and media exposure: 350 thousand people gathered in more than 200 cities worldwide.¹³ The meetings were organized through the blog and through Meetup.com. In the aftermath of the event, the issue was debated in the pages of the Italian newspapers and on television,¹⁴ and it sparked harsh reactions from politicians from both sides of the Parliament. Commenting on this success, Grillo said: «I was really surprised. I didn't expect such a big turn out ... What happened out there was the release of a virus that's about to attack the political class. But in this case there's no vaccine» (Povoledo, 2007).

Moreover, the V-day was an other important step in the shaping up process of the civil society inspired by Grillo. For the very first time since the birth of the blog, on a national (and international) stage the many members that were part of the movement had finally the chance to stop being simply inoffensive lines of electronic text on a web page, and instead became real faces in a massive crowd of real committed citizens that have the ability to vote in an election and influence others.

Conclusions: a blueprint for the future?

The (partial) success of the blog and of initiatives like the V-Day shows that *beppegrillo.it* represents a new emerging trend in the Italian political sphere, one that dares to challenge what they perceive as an old sclerotic form of politics. However, whether or not Grillo is right in arguing that the trend set by his community of active citizens is *a blueprint for the future* (Povoledo, 2007) is all to be seen. At the moment some things seem certain, others are all to be proven.

It is clear that those who read and comment on Grillo's posts are members of an active public inspired by the comedian. In addition to

¹³ Source: Google Maps: <http://maps.google.it/maps/user?uid=117013866427879023294&hl=it&gl=it> (Retrieved August 18, 2008).

¹⁴ For articles and news about the V-Day, see: <http://www2.beppegrillo.it/vaffanculoday/>

posting thousands of comments on the blog, they post videos on external platforms, create and participate in social and political campaigns, publicize the blog and the work of its community, and organize regional and international gatherings via Meetup.com. In these ways they fight against the political establishment and actively attempt to give life, substance, and direction to a form of politics that aims to create a more democratic alternative to the existing status quo.

On the other hand, though it is also clear that if one looks at the political achievements of the blog's campaigns, little or nothing has changed in Italy since Grillo's started blogging. Grillo himself in a recent post on his blog admitted it: «The collection of signatures for a Clean Parliament has been ignored» (Grillo, 2008). The many millions of people that gathered in the streets in less than a year protesting against Prodi and Berlusconi's governments have been politely overlooked by those in power. Berlusconi keeps looking after his own interests. The left is uninterested. «The time of referendum and popular laws has finished» remarks Grillo, in fact, he dares to say «[politicians] use [our] signatures to clean their arses» (Grillo, 2008).

«What's to be done?» wonders Grillo. The answer he argues is hidden beneath something more daring and political. What is needed is a complete break with the existing political class. Politics must return in the hand of the citizens. And in fact the gauntlet has already been thrown. Riding the momentum of the first V-day, soon after the event ended, Grillo launched a new initiative, *Liste Civiche* (civic list), an open challenge to the political establishment. *Liste Civiche* are collaboratively created lists of local administrators who meet the standards approved by the Grillo community. For the lists to get the Beppe Grillo stamp of approval they must fulfill a set of requirements; for instance, they can not be linked to political parties, their members must have a clean record, each candidate should reside in the same location of his or her constituents, and candidates may not have served previously more than one term in office – either at local or national level (see Grillo, 2007 b). Grillo, however, is not attempting to create a new political coalition, but rather he stresses that each of these lists should be autonomous. He says, «I am not promoting any Civic List, neither local, nor national. The participants of the V-day do not lend their voices to anyone. They are megaphones of themselves. They are citizens that do their own politics» (*Repubblica*, 2007 a). Overall, during last local elections (April 2008) 19 lists¹⁵ were given the stamp of approval. On average these lists gathered in their constituency about 2.8 percent of

15 See <http://www2.beppegrillo.it/listeciviche/amministrative2008.html> (retrieved 21 June 2008).

the votes.¹⁶ The most significant results were in Rome and in Palermo where the two candidates supported by Grillo (Serenetta Monti as Mayor of Rome and Sonia Alfano as Governor of Sicily) received respectively almost 45 thousand and 70 thousand votes.¹⁷ Overall not at all a bad result for outsiders promoted mainly through the internet. And that is only the start. In fact as Grillo (2008) writes:

From September [2008], I will support the civic lists for the local elections in 2009. I will start an information campaign abroad about the dictatorship that is present in our country. I will ask those who follow the blog to participate in a series of immediate actions to change our reality. Information, health, food, employment mobility, work. An action each month to hit them in their wallets and to take back our country for ourselves. They will never give up, neither will we.

Time will tell if Grillo is right or wrong. Nonetheless one thing seems already clear, with or without Grillo, the civil society orbiting around his blog is one that understands the value of the democratic political process and the importance of new communication media to defend that process. The gauntlet is on the ground of the *Bel Paese*, will anyone pick it up?

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¹⁶ Data retrieved from the Italian Home Office website: (20 June 2008).

¹⁷ For Sicily data retrieved from the election Website:

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