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SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM AND THE FUNNELLING OF PARTICIPATION

To understand the way in which social media have influenced the transformation of protest and politics it is important to get to grips with the spatial and organisational transformation of forms of mobilisation that has been facilitated by the diffusion of new platforms and apps. To this end in this article I will reflect on and expand the concept of choreography of assembly introduced in my first book *Tweets and the Streets*, as a means to capture the way in which social media concur in the process of creation of events, and the construction of the space of mobilisation. I will argue that the new forms of action that are associated with social media and in particular the format of the flash mob, involve the idea of the protest event as a moment of assembly of individuals that are otherwise socially and spatially dispersed. In this context, the construction of the event is not just a manifestation of the protest movement that exists in other forms but something more radical: the precipitation of an online crowd into a physical gathering. This precipitation is filtered through a number of operations, such as the fixing of specific times and places where it is due to occur, the present of various instructions that are meant to guide the process of gathering and finally the narratives and symbols that accompany this process. Movement leaders in this context appear in the form of choreographers, namely as «namers», «placers» and «programmers» of a movement which while relying on the collaboration of manifold individuals is nevertheless stamped with the initial instructions, the «concept» that has been established by the initial group of creators. This view of protest as the result of a process of social media construction can help us better understand what happens in the genetic phase of a social movement and appreciate the importance of the moment of concept-development and design of the movement performance, thus overcoming the usual opposition between organisation and spontaneity and showing how rather the two act in concert.

KEYWORDS *Social Media, Activism, Mobilisation, Sales Funnel, Movements, Political Communication.*

Social media activism, namely the use of social media for the purpose of political and protest organisation and mobilisation has over the last decade become a familiar feature of contemporary politics. Social media have been used for political purposes in the most varied of political contexts; from protest movements to electoral campaigns and all sorts of civil society causes. But

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it is perhaps in the context of protest movements that the development of new tactics has been more intense and consequential. In 2011 the so-called «movement of the squares», of the Arab Spring, the Indignados and Occupy Wall Street, was instrumental in experimenting with the use of social media as a means for propaganda, reaping impressive results, as seen in the hundreds of thousands of people they managed to mobilise. That blueprint of «Organise online – Occupy offline» was widely adopted in the ensuing years by various protest movements campaigning against austerity and for democracy: from the 2013 June protests in Brazil, to the 2019 protests in Colombia, Chile, Bolivia and Ecuador, the anti-racist movement The Sardines in Italy, to end with the protests taking place during the pandemic, from Black Lives Matter to anti-mask and anti-vax mobilisations.

The 2010s have been not only a decade of protest, but also a decade marked by significant innovations in protest tactics and communication practices. Much literature has delved into various aspects of this transformation of protest movements and contemporary politics, exploring the change in the relationship between individuals and movements (Bennet and Segerberg 2012) and the opportunities and pitfalls of new «digital tactics» (Tufekci 2017). Yet, there are still important questions to be addressed concerning the overall logic of organisation and mobilisation that new protest tactics supported by social media have brought to the fore. To explore these issues, in the course of this article I will develop the notion of «funnelling», drawn from the theory of marketing as a metaphor to explore the socio-spatial logic of social media mobilisation. Drawing on the empirical evidence used in my previous work on social media activism (Gerbaudo 2012), I will show how the idea of funnelling can help us make sense of the process of mobilisation as a process of progressive social and spatial concentration. In the context of protest movements, the role played by social media such as Facebook, Twitter, part of the first generation of social media, and TikTok and other video-sharing platforms that exemplify the second wave of social media, is best understood as a social interface involved in grouping and gathering people, first online and then offline.

Partly this relationship between political communication and the process of gathering is inherent in all processes of mobilisation, which by their nature involve concentrating forces. However, this process acquires particular importance in the context of social media communication, given the way in which social media are designed to be a means to organise the texture of everyday social interactions. This intervention of social media in the «micro-coordination of everyday life» (Ling 2004) is key to understand the nexus between activism and social media. As I have argued in my previous work, the use of social media in contemporary protest culture can be described as involving

a «choreography of gathering», namely a process of symbolic construction of the ways in which participants come together in public space (2012). This term points to the way in which social media in protest movements, is involved in «scripting» the action of participants; for example, by scheduling events at a given point in space and time and publicising them, or setting rules for participants attending them. Social media communication, has been instrumental in facilitating new templates of collective action, such as «flash mobs», in which participants concerned about a given cause gather at short notice in a public space, thus creating an effect of surprise. This format of action, involves precisely a form of «script» that is often highly theatrical, for example telling everyone to gather around the office of a major oil corporation at an exact time and then start shouting together «shame» or smear one's faces in black to express outrage at environmental degradation. But it also fundamentally involves a moment of spatial concentration: people who normally are dispersed across the space of a given city or nation, temporarily become huddled together in the same place. In fact, concentration, both symbolic and physical stands to summarise much of what protest mobilisation is about, and the contribution social media makes to it.

In the continuation of the article, I explore this process of concentration through the notion of «funnelling» and the «sales funnel» used in marketing (Kotler and Armstrong 2010). The sales funnel is the idea that marketers have to progressively focus their attention on subsets of the general public, who are aware of the existence of certain products, interested in them, and finally willing to pay the necessary price to purchase them, what from the marketers' perspective is the «conversion» of a prospective consumer's interest (Smith 2016). In the context of social media activism, this concept can serve to capture various processes through which organisers attempt to gather prospective protestors, first online and then offline, by using the affordances of social media and in particular those that lend themselves to such process of aggregation.

The notion of funnelling in reference to the logic of social media activism implies, similar to the use of the term in marketing, an element of strategy and rationality. This does not mean that activists overtly design in detail the different stages of the campaign, though in certain circumstances they consciously do. Rather, online and offline funnelling emerges as an objective necessity, especially given the high level of fragmentation, complexity and dispersion of online publics. Another contribution of the idea of social media activism as funnelling is that it highlights that social media should not be understood as a substitute for physical protest. Rather social media in protest movements act more as social interfaces for protest gatherings. They are involved in organizing temporally, spatially and functionally such events and providing participants

with a common orientation in the space of protest. This understanding provides a way to capture the complementarity between online communication and protest gatherings and to move beyond views of social media as being a substitute for actual protest.

In the course of this article, I will develop this discussion, by following a number of steps. First, I shall delve into the customary definition of funnelling in marketing theory, and consider its relevance for political communication and social media activism in particular. Then, I will delve into the relationship between the notion of funnelling and the reality of high social and spatial dispersion that affects many contemporary societies and the protest movements operating within them, meaning that both social and spatial concentration come to be particularly challenging and urgent questions. I shall then explore examples and practices from different protest movements, from the *Gilets Jaunes* to the *Sardines* to explore how this process of funnelling plays out in practice. Finally, I discuss how funnelling can provide a useful lens through which to develop our future research agenda on social media activism.

1. The sales funnel model, from marketing to activism

Funnelling is a term used in marketing to discuss the different stages through which marketers have to lead their prospective customers, if they are to eventually secure sales. The original inspiration comes from the so-called Aida model (Awareness, Interest, Desire, Action), originally proposed by US advertiser and advertising advocate Elias St. Elmo Lewis (1908). While in recent years different typologies have been introduced, with slightly different labels, the sales funnel model continues to be a popular term of reference for people working in marketing (Kotler and Armstrong 2010).

Awareness is the first stage; because a customer will never purchase a product if he/she is not aware the product exists in the first place. It involves knowing about a product and the brand connected to it – brand recognition – which is fundamental for any commercial or political activity. Much effort needs to be expended in order just to signal that one is there, and has something to offer, either in the form of a product as in the case of marketing, or a cause as in the case of activism. Interest is instead the moment when the customer's attention is more actively mobilised with the purpose of creating a desire for a given product or service. In the case of a protest instead, it would be the moment a possible participant has a look at the actual demands, mani-

festo and platform of a given movement, and eyes specific events he/she could potentially join.

Action is finally the moment when interest and desire is converted into an actual sale: for example, by a customer ultimately purchasing that item of clothing he/she had long thought about buying. In the case of a protest movement, «action» would be the person who after thinking about going to a demonstration eventually makes the move and goes there. Hence, why in marketing circles people speak about «conversion rates» as the ratio of people performing a certain action out of all those who initially signalled their interest. Loyalty, finally, is the degree to which a certain base of customers/supporters is maintained through time, guaranteeing a steady stream of sales.

Using this marketing model to talk about activism may seem odd when it comes to analysing political phenomena. In fact, it is obvious that when it comes to the political realm there are quite different considerations and issues at play than is the case when one is merely selling certain goods. However, what the sales funnel model offers to political analysis is an understanding of the process of mobilisation as involving a number of stages, which while progressively involving a smaller number of people, engage them in actions that reflect a greater investment in energy and attention. As social psychology literature on protest mobilisation confirms, social movements first need people to know about their existence; and this is typically achieved through activist communication: circulating leaflets, putting up posters, but also these days, crucially, having a social media presence etc. Then, they need to create interest and motivation among potential publics, by highlighting the importance of the cause they are campaigning on, its urgency. Finally, they need to create concrete opportunities for people to participate.

The relevance of this sales funnel model to activism is demonstrated by the fact that some activists have explicitly drawn on it. One particularly telling example is that of Wael Ghonim, one of the most influential activists in the 2011 Egyptian revolution and the admin of the most famous activist Facebook page Kullena Khaled Said (We are Khaled Said). At the time of the Egyptian revolution the Google marketing executive of the Middle East, and hence a person very much aware of the different issues at play when trying to publicise something to the public (2012). This professional experience made him aware of the different requirements of effective strategic communication online. As Ghonim himself explains in his memoir *Revolution 2.0*, his first aim was creating a sense of unity among Egyptian youth, by making Khaled Said, a young Egyptian who had been brutally killed by the police, a generational symbol. The page explicitly invited users to identify with Said, with many people even

switching their own profile picture to the one of Khaled Said, and this logic was crucial in the Facebook page brand recognition strategy.

Secondly, as Ghonim recounts, his aim in the months ensuing the creation of the Facebook page, was boosting people's motivation, convincing them not only of the importance of the cause, but that, despite the enormous difficulties it faced youth stood a chance to change its beleaguered country. In other words, to use sales funnel terms, Ghonim was trying to generate «interest» and «consideration». To this end he utilised a highly emotional writing style, evidently geared at mobilising the emotions of young Egyptians. One example, is provided by one of the most popular posts published by the page, in which, few weeks before the beginning of the revolution, Ghonim countered the representation by the media and the establishment of young Egyptians as embittered but ultimately inconclusive complainers, by stating «we are not guys of comment and like as the say». These and similar posts took the semblance of motivational coaching, geared at giving Egyptian youth a sense of self-confidence without which any mobilisation would have been impossible.

The reason for this type of communication is fairly easy to understand. As we know from social psychology literature, people's availability to attend protest events is strongly shaped by psychological trends. For example, people are more likely to attend a protest if they think other people will also attend. At the outset of a protest movement much work goes towards persuading people that participating in a movement is worth their time and that they will ultimately be able to make a contribution to society (Klandermans 1984). In favourable circumstances this can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy and a «bandwagon effect», whereby people's expectations that other people will attend produces high attendance.

The final step in the sales funnel model is conversion, namely transforming interest and motivation into action. In the case of Wael Ghonim's work as Facebook admin conversion consisted in offering page fans opportunities to move from the rarefied context of online communication to the concreteness of protest gatherings. A terrorist attack against Coptic Christians in late 2010 provided the first occasion for the Facebook page to call for people to «take to the streets». But the most telling moment was obviously the 25 January 2011 protest event which gathered tens of thousands of people in central Cairo marking the beginning of the Egyptian revolution.

What is remarkable about this event, is that it was the Facebook page that scheduled and thus officially announced it, by creating a dedicated Facebook event to which people could RSVP. Activists in Egypt joked that 25 of January was the first «pre-programmed revolution». As it often happens with Facebook events, only a minority of the people who RSVPed actually partici-

pated in the protest (Gerbaudo 2012, 62). But on the other hand, public RSVPs to a Facebook event acted as an effective social psychology mechanism, providing an effective means to motivate prospective participants by showing them that many other people were going to attend.

2. Mobilisation as concentration in a space of dispersion

The relevance of the sales funnel model to understanding the strategies behind social media activism does not just have to do with the way it captures the social and psychological dynamics involved, but also the spatial ones. At a time marked by social and spatial dispersion, gathering people has become a key process in its own right. The metaphor of the funnel conjures an image of progressive concentration that can help us capture the logic of this process.

One of the key phenomena of post-industrial society has been the spatial dispersion of the workforce. For example, Boltanski and Chiapello (2018) have argued that the new spirit of capitalism, has been marked by the attempt to disperse the old bastions of labour, that were considered to be a point of resistance against the power of employers. In fact, the average number of employees per firm has significantly decreased over the last decades. To this tendency add the transformation of cities into sprawls, dominated by dispersed suburbs, and patterns of everyday life marked by extreme individualisation, meaning that cities have become a space of individualised flows rather than crowds. This leads to a situation which is very different from that of protest movements in the pre-modern and industrial eras, for which crowds and crowding were a precondition and a starting point for recruitment and mobilisation (Tilly 1993). For contemporary movements it is instead as if the crowd has to be actively created; by setting up dedicated events, or emphasising the need to «take the square», or «take to the streets» (as in the slogan «vem pra rua» used by protestors in Brasil in the July 2013 demonstrations).

Social media and various web 2.0 technologies are well suited to this task of creation of the crowd or «crowd-building». Many of their applications revolve around what Richard Ling calls the micro-coordination of everyday life (2002). Social media act as interfaces for many face-to-face activities. From Meetup groups, to Facebook events, Doodle polls, and many similar applications, much of what we do with social media has to do with the «construction of the event», with the organization of collective gatherings. These services are often used for «inviting» people who are dispersed in geographic space,

yet sometimes gathering in the same place and at the same time for events that correspond to their interests (Gordon and Silva 2011; Bell 2014).

The most evident manifestation of this trend of the mediation of the crowd is offered by the template of the flash-mob which, as previously mentioned, has become a popular model for protest events in recent years. The term was popularised by Howard Rheingold in his 2009 book *Smart mobs*, in which he discussed the way in which thanks to mobile media and the internet, people could coordinate their individual actions without the need for traditional forms of hierarchical coordination (Rheingold 2009). At the time of Rheingold's writing some events, such as the protests staged against the Popular Party in Spain after the 2004 Madrid train bombings against the government handling of the affair, that were mobilised by text messages. Over the 2010s, the flash mob has developed into a more structured template that has been variously adopted by protest movements of the most disparate kind, what could be described as social media-supported protest events.

Social media-supported protest events involve a two-step process of funnelling or aggregation. First it involves aggregating people around shared interests online, exploiting the way social media gather people at a distance around the same interests. Second, translating this online crowd into an offline crowd, by creating events in which people sharing the same interest, can transform this interest into collective action. As Jeffrey Juris already highlighted in 2012 when commenting on the Occupy Wall Street movement, aggregation was the main logic at play in the 2011 movements compared to their predecessors that instead operated through a logic of networking (2012). In this context the logic of aggregation involves «the assembling of masses of individuals from diverse backgrounds within physical spaces» (2012, 280).

The crowding of people in physical space is however only the endpoint of an aggregation that already took place online. Social media and the internet in fact revolve to a great extent not only around networking people but also aggregating them. Consider for example the myriad of Reddit pages for the most disparate kinds of interests, values and causes and the way in which they allow people, including those living in remote areas to share and cultivate common peculiar interests at a distance. They are the manifestation of the way in which the internet has facilitated the development of all sorts of social and political subcultures. It would have been far more difficult in the past for someone holding radical right or left views to be able to develop them and express them if one was geographically cut off from an area where a given subcultural community was physically concentrated.

This aggregative function of social media, which is key to understand how funnelling works in social media activism, can be approached by looking

both at the front-end and back-end of social media. On the one hand, on social media communities aggregating people sharing the same interests in music, cinema, consumption or politics, often leading to the famous «bubbles» that have become a feature of the social media landscape (Pariser 2011). On the other hand, at the time of targeted advertising, a key aspect of what goes on in the back-end of social media, and the crunching of Big data has to do with the categorising of individuals in different socio-demographic sets to make them the target of various products, contents, advertising messages. Whenever you are targeted by a certain ad intending to sell you a given good, it is because you are considered as pertaining to a specific category of internet users, who are likely to be attracted by the specific good that is on offer.

Online crowds would however not become protest crowds if they only remained confined to online spaces. Besides processes of online aggregation, even more important for the purposes of the funnelling processes involved in social media activism, are the manifold ways in which a pool of mobilisation is eventually transformed into a protest crowd. In this context, online aggregation involves first and foremost the creation of common identities that can act as a common point of reference for people supporting a given cause (Gerbaudo and Treré 2015). Perhaps the most notable example of this is offered by hashtag activism, and the way in which different hashtags such #BlackLivesMatter have come to be marker of identification for different social movements.

The last stage of social media mobilisation is creating events in which this potential can be realised. The use of social media as a means of mobilisation involves an element of physical precipitation that is an effort of directing the energy of collective action towards the same point in space and time in view of assembling a protest constituency. In this context, what is essential is not the creation of the hashtag, as discussed in the previous step, but rather the construction of the event, and social media can be deployed at different levels to facilitate this process of event-building. It is significant that many of the most important hashtags used in these movements derived from key protest dates such #25jan in Egypt, #15M in Spain and #15O in the occasion of the 15 October 2011 protests that took place in Spain, the US, Italy, and several other countries. It is significant how in all these different cases specific protest dates have become important identity references for protest movements, to the point that in the Spanish Indignados 15M has been used as an equally or even more popular term of collective identification.

One recent example was offered by the Italian movement of «le Sardine» (The Sardines). This movement was created to campaign against Matteo Salvini's right-wing Lega Party, few weeks before the elections in Emilia-Romagna in 2020, where the party was very close to victory. A Facebook page

using already the image of the sardines that need to unite as a shoal of fish in order to fight against predators. A flash-mob protest was called on 14 November 2019 in Piazza Maggiore, Bologna, the main city of Emilia-Romagna, gathering around 10,000 people in a flash mob event. Soon in the following days and weeks similar protests were called online in other cities of the region and throughout Italy. Tens of thousands of people were mobilised, and, the movement attracted abundant news coverage.

Similar is the case with the *Gilets Jaunes* protest movement, whose moment of inception was on a number of internet forums, in which people criticised the decision of president Emmanuel Macron to raise the price of gasoline – what constituted the initial spark for dissent – alongside many other issues, such as failing public services, and unemployment. The movement then went on to establish a number of Facebook groups, Facebook pages and Telegram channels from which protest events were repeatedly called. At its height the movement took the form of protest marches in Paris and other cities every Saturday, thus adopting a routine template similar to the one adopted by other social movements, such as the cyclists' protest of *Critical Mass*, meeting every last Friday of the month.

It is further significant that the very discourse and imagery social movements use thematises this need to come together in spite of dispersion. This is most clearly seen in the *Sardines*, an image used precisely to express how, despite their division, the strength of many people coming together is such that it can prove a major challenge also for much bigger and more dangerous animals. Similarly, in the case of the *Gilets Jaunes*, the colour yellow of high visibility vests, comes to act as a common marker to find a sense of unity, despite the marked difference in the individual conditions or physical location of the individuals involved. This is compounded by the rhetoric of «take to the streets» and «occupy public space», which highlights that online aggregation is not enough and what is required instead is also an actual moment of physical crowding, the end point of the moment of funnelling. This emphasis should again be read as a reflection of its opposite: activists emphasise the need to take to public space precisely because public space and crowding is not a given, but something that needs to be actively created. While traditional protest movements rose from existing situations of crowding, for contemporary social movements the crowd is something that has to be built from scratch.

In conclusion, the contribution of social media activism to contemporary protest events has come in the most diverse shape and forms. Social media these days are used as a space of discussion, of debate, of organisation and propaganda. But perhaps their most fundamental use is as a social funnel by means of which otherwise dispersed constituencies can be brought together,

first in the form of an internet public, and secondly in the form of an offline crowd. What is characteristic in the use of social media as a means of mobilisation is not just their role as a space of online aggregation of participants bringing people together in the same set of individuals in accordance with various socio-demographics, but also the way in which social media communications tend to focus collective action on specific events in time and space, that act as a rallying point for an otherwise physically dispersed mass. Protest places and events can be seen as the occasions in which the phantom crowd constituency to by these movements is incarnated into a physical crowd. This importance of the construction of collective identity and of collective events in which people can gather and feel part of a collective, is one of the aspects that recent theory of digital politics, such as the notion of «connective action» (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), has tended to overlook. Ultimately, too often the persistence of collectivity in contemporary protests tends to be overlooked. Yet, it is also the aspect that requires the greatest attention due to the way in which it constantly resurfaces in the most diverse of circumstances. Therefore, it is a question that deserves to be explored with great attention to capture the logic and content of contemporary protests.

Obviously, this process of funnelling does not always succeed. There are a number of circumstances in which «clicks» do not translate into bodies, into people participating physically in protests (Lim 2013). There are all sorts of factors, and circumstances, some of them completely outside of protestors' control that can intervene in shaping a protest event and the extent to which sympathy is translated into actual participation. But regardless of the specific success or failure of campaigns driven by social media, these practices reveal something important about the nature of our society, and the challenges it poses to protest movements. It highlights that one of the main obstacles to mobilisation these days lies in the extreme degree of social and spatial dispersion of capitalist democracies, as a result of the post-industrial transformation of the economy; and conversely it shows that in this context the most important challenge for activists in the social media age is aggregation; constructing a series of practices by means of which what is previously dispersed, can be assembled and gathered, first online and then offline.

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