

# NEW MEDIA AND THE CROWDSOURCING OF POLITICS: THE STRANGE CASE OF DR. BERLUSCONI AND MR. GRILLO

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**ABSTRACT** *The main Italian populist politicians, Silvio Berlusconi and Beppe Grillo, ensured their successes in parliamentary elections in 2013 combining a skilful use of electronic media with classical mass rallies, avoiding debates with competitors, and shunning journalists. The message of both Grillo and Berlusconi is characterized by populism, anti-party attitudes, demonization of opponents and an approach to the public and to politics focused on the leader. Although Grillo and Casaleggio emphasize their Movement's use of Internet as a direct democracy, claiming that the Movement's politics is created in equal measure by all the members, in a kind of a crowdsourcing, Grillo's messages remain mostly unidirectional directives, more appropriate to a dictatorial than to a democratic discourse.*

## KEY WORDS

NEW MEDIA, POLITICS, CROWDSOURCING, POPULISM, ITALY, GRILLO, BERLUSCONI

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*"... Who is to be blamed? Them! The parties! For 13 years they have shown what they are capable of. We have a nation economically devastated, farmers ruined, the middle class is on its knees, finances exhausted, and millions of unemployed ... They are responsible! ...*

*They constantly try to confuse me with them ... Today they say I am a socialist, tomorrow a communist, then a trade unionist; they confuse us because they think we are like them. We are not like them! They are dead and we want to see them all in the grave! ...*

*They suggested I should enter a coalition. That's how they think! They still do not understand that they are dealing with a movement that is quite different from the political parties. ... We will resist any pressure. This is a movement that is impossible to stop. They do not understand that this movement holds together a force that cannot be destroyed. We are not a party, we represent all the people. New people."<sup>1</sup>*

The practice of going into politics and of leading a political party, yet bypassing parliament and using either classical or new media instead, was started in Italy by successful politicians such as Silvio Berlusconi<sup>2</sup> and Beppe Grillo<sup>3</sup>. It is a characteristic of their relationship to the media that they use media resources as the principal vehicle for their communications not only during campaigns, but also for their contacts with supporters and with their *peones*<sup>4</sup>, even during parliamentary sessions, which Berlusconi<sup>5</sup> and Grillo<sup>6</sup> do not attend at all. For his unidirectional directives Berlusconi also uses social networks, mainly Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/SilvioBerlusconi>).

Two issues are worthy of analysis in this context, one specific and one general. Firstly, what type of policy has proved to be most compatible with the Internet, in Italy, one of the world's leading representative democracies – at least formally – and a member of the G7<sup>7</sup> since 1975? Secondly, can we consider the massive use of new media for political purposes part of eDemocracy?

<sup>1</sup> This quotation was shown to me alongside some other people in Italy. Almost all of us were convinced that the quotation was from an article or speech by Beppe Grillo. We were wrong: these words were spoken during the 1932 German electoral campaign by Adolf Hitler, the winner of that democratic contest.

<sup>2</sup> Silvio Berlusconi (born Milan, 29 September 1936) is an Italian politician, entrepreneur, media tycoon and convicted fraudster, who served three times as Prime Minister of Italy, from 1994 to 1995, 2001 to 2006 and 2008 to 2011. Berlusconi is also the controlling shareholder of *Mediaset* and owner of the Italian football club A.C. Milan. He is the unelected, undisputed leader of the *Popolo della libertà* (People of Freedom), a centre-right party he founded in 2009 as a successor to the *Forza Italia* party he had led since 1993. On 11 March 2013, *Forbes* magazine ranked him as the 194th richest man in the world with a net worth of US\$6.2 billion. Milan prosecutors stated that Mr. Berlusconi 'hosted a prostitution system' in his residences, as a centrepiece of his widely known '*bunga bunga*' parties.

<sup>3</sup> Giuseppe Piero 'Beppe' Grillo (born Genoa, 21 July 1948) is an Italian comedian, actor, blogger and political activist. On 8 September 2007 Grillo organized a 'V-Day Celebration' in Italy; the 'V' stood for *vaffanculo* (fuck off), directed at all other political parties and leaders. He founded the Five Star Movement in 2009 and remains its unelected, undisputed leader, but does not hold any public office. He was convicted of involuntary manslaughter in 1981.

<sup>4</sup> "Peones" are less influential members of Parliament who form the 'voting machines' in the chambers, and in the committees and commissions.

<sup>5</sup> Berlusconi was elected to the Italian Senate, but he attended only a single session before he was sentenced to four years in prison, which meant his automatic expulsion from Parliament.

<sup>6</sup> Grillo did not run for Parliament because his conviction for involuntary manslaughter (he caused the death of a person in a car accident) made him ineligible.

<sup>7</sup> Originally the seven most industrialised nations, and still the seven most industrialised fully democratic nations, with a combined GDP of over half nominal global GDP.

## POPULISM TAILORED FOR THE MEDIA

In considering the policies of Berlusconi and Grillo – extremely hostile towards each other – there is no doubt that their success in the 2013 parliamentary elections in Italy<sup>8</sup>, is owed predominantly to skilful use of electronic media.

Berlusconi, a seasoned TV tycoon<sup>9</sup>, highly skilled in televisual counter-attacks, used his appearances on television to maximum effect. He returned from the brink, to become once again the dominant figure on the Italian institutional political scene.

Grillo, a comedian fired from generalist television channels for his irreverent invectives against the institutional politicians, used his blog (<http://www.beppegrillo.it/>) to achieve his breakthrough in the world of politics, for the formation of his political movement, *MoVimento 5 Stelle* (Five Star MoVement, M5S)<sup>10</sup>, and eventually as his main vehicle for electoral propaganda.

The approach of both Grillo and Berlusconi is characterized by populism, anti-party attitudes, demonization of opponents and an approach to the public and to politics focused on the leader. A propensity for jokes and a thorough knowledge of the medium of television seem to be traits common to both gentlemen.

Berlusconi uses his own television channels for communication, even for the messages without any questioning, any discussion, in the manner of a head of State; Grillo uses YouTube as a television channel. Both rely on TV and Internet marketing: Berlusconi on *Publitalia* advertising company, and Grillo on *Casaleggio Associati*, an internet and publishing company specializing in consulting, which advises on network strategies and edits Grillo's blog. Both ask candidates for a CV as part of the recruitment process, as is the custom in enterprises.

During the recruitment of possible representatives (first in marketing, then in politics) Berlusconi and his PR guru Marcello Dell'Utri – the Senator convicted for his role as Berlusconi's link to the Sicilian mafia – introduced databases, updated after each contact, more detailed than in intelligence services. Grillo, on the other hand, uses the social networks even for conducting polls about possible candidates for the post of President of the Republic.

We might say that Berlusconi introduced the „politics of outsourcing“, and Grillo the „politics of crowdsourcing“. These methods would be impossible without the new media.

<sup>8</sup> Berlusconi's centre-right coalition earned 29.18% of the vote and now is the largest bloc (only 0.36% less than centre-left *Italia, il bene comune* (Italy: Common Good), since dissolved, and its principal *partito democratico* (Democratic Party) remains at 25.42%); Grillo's Five Star MoVement got 25.55%, becoming the largest party (but not the largest bloc) in Italy

<sup>9</sup> Berlusconi owns family holdings Italia I-XVII. They own the *Fininvest* Group, which owns, among other, the *Mediaset* TV group, which in turn owns several generalist television networks: *Canale5*, *Italia Uno*, *Retequattro* which are positioned respectively at 5, 6, and 4 on an Italian remote control - the entire second line of a remote control set for the Italian digital terrestrial network - and more than another dozen Berlusconi-controlled channels can be found on the two-digit and three-digit positions assigned in the network.

<sup>10</sup> The uppercase V denotes the vulgar but extremely common curse *vaffanculo* (fuckoff) used by Grillo at rallies as his rebuke to the political parties. He organized the *Vaffa* days throughout Italy, allowing supporters and citizens to participate in the collective rite of cursing politicians.

Both Berlusconi and Grillo are proponents of postmodern populism, where anonymous supporters are tied passively to the personality of the charismatic leader, following his appearances through television broadcasts or Internet streaming; their response limited mostly to commenting online.

Both Berlusconi and Grillo started their public careers as professional entertainers: a long time ago Berlusconi worked on cruisers, as a compere<sup>11</sup>, telling jokes and occasionally singing; Grillo worked as a comedian, satirist and impressionist. Both are rich. Berlusconi was the richest man in Italy for many years, until he distributed part of his capital to his children; he continues to control it. Grillo's wealth is not formally recorded as he holds no public office, but he has never denied the allegations that he owns assets worth more than a billion euros. Both own the name and logo of their movement personally, which is almost unheard of among the large parliamentary parties both in Italy and the rest of the European Union.

Berlusconi and Grillo entered political life with long-held personal positions and ideas, Berlusconi's political philosophy dates from the eighties and Grillo's from the nineties, and he formalized it no later than 2007. Neither Berlusconi nor Grillo showed any professional political vocation in their younger days, but they entered politics when it encroached on their core business. This does not mean that they were uninterested in politics. On the contrary: Grillo was earning his entertainer's salary mocking politicians and their politics, and this is still the main method and content of his political discourse, while Berlusconi on one hand gained favors from politicians by investing in their campaigns and in their friendship (the best man at his second marriage was none other than Prime Minister Bettino Craxi), and on the other joined the secret conspiracy Masonic lodge *Propaganda 2* led by former fascist spy and conspirator Licio Gelli. As Prime Minister he, legitimately, enacted part of *Propaganda 2*'s political agenda.

Berlusconi's "model" of acting in public is sometimes known as *cucu* (hide and seek), a term coined by Vladimir Putin. The autocratic Russian leader used the term after Berlusconi, when Italian Prime Minister and host of a G8 conference in Trieste in 2008, surprised and frightened Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor. Berlusconi was hidden behind a monument and jumped out screaming *cucu*. His *modus operandi* is to act the jester in public, buying some sympathy; but as a shark behind the scenes, swallowing everything moving and breathing, from enterprises to prostitutes.

Grillo's "model" of acting in public is somewhat complicated. Grillo does not appear in the media; does not permit any media appearance by members of his MoVement; does not respond to reporters' questions – arguing that "almost all journalists are servants of [political] parties" (Grillo, 2008); does not give interviews – except outside Italy – and does not participate in any discussions or debate: he only pontificates. He also holds rallies where he can howl his so called paradoxes, and writes on his blog.

<sup>11</sup> compere (plural comperes); (chiefly UK); A master of ceremonies, especially for a television, variety or quiz show.

Grillo is straight-talking, on the Internet as well at rallies. The political philosophy he sells sounds very simple: *uno vale uno* („all citizens are equally valuable“) – therefore anyone can represent the others; Italian politics is corrupt, elitist, and closed; the state is too expensive; money is wasted; money is drained out of Italians' pockets; political parties do not serve politics but enrich their leadership and their clients; parties must be eliminated because they are the source of all evils and because Italians are prone to needless and futile divisions („One Italian is a Latin lover, two are a mess, three make up four political parties.“ [Lavanga<sup>12</sup>, 2013], etc.).

Grillo argues that multiparty representative democracy must be replaced, especially after Berlusconi, who is called *psico nano* (psycho-dwarf) by Mr. Grillo: "Italians need to understand we need to move on from Berlusconi. Berlusconi is just a promise, a marketing exercise, an advertisement. We need to rebuild this country from its roots." (Chatterley and Ranasinghe, 2013)

The Five Star Movement ran 2013 on promises to cut the number of parliamentarians<sup>13</sup> in half; reduce their pay; pass an anti-corruption law; create a „citizen's stipend“ for unemployed Italians and create incentives – including tax cuts – to help small businesses grow.

Grillo's skill has been to channel a general frustration and convert apathy into anger, using this as the basis for a powerful but unstable political movement. The methodology used by Mr. Grillo was developed some ten years ago (Hooper, 2013), when he met Gianroberto Casaleggio<sup>14</sup>. It is, in a nutshell, direct democracy using the Internet and its interactivity. Casaleggio defines it as "a new, direct democracy that will see the elimination of all barriers between the citizen and the state." (Hooper, 2013) "Without the web, Beppe and I would not have achieved a thing ... It is the web that has altered all the balances." (Hooper, 2013)

## POLITICS BETWEEN ESOTERICISM AND FANTASY

Massimo Introvigne, a sociologist specializing in the study of new religions, claims that Casaleggio is a "techno-guru between esotericism and fantasy" (Del Vigo 2012), inspired by the writings of Alexandre Saint-Yves d'Alveydre<sup>15</sup>. Giovanni Favia, expelled from the Movement, described him (Serra 2012) as a combination of Marcello Dell'Utri<sup>16</sup> (Berlusconi's organizer) and L. Ron Hubbard (founder of Scientology). Some members of M5S call him "spectre" (after the mystical opponent of James Bond). Casaleggio claims Genghis Khan as the forerunner of the Internet because of his use of super-fast messengers who travelled from one end of the known world to the other. Casaleggio acts as a prophet: in 2008

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.aforismario.it/beppe-grillo.htm> (22.08.2013)

<sup>13</sup> In Italy, parliamentarians earn as much as €180.000 (US\$230,000) per year, much higher than the \$174,000 (€135.000) earned by members of the U.S. House of Representatives.

<sup>14</sup> Gianroberto Casaleggio (born Milan, 14 August 1954) is an Italian entrepreneur and a political opinion maker in Italy. He is co-founder, with Grillo, of the Five Star Movement and is sometimes called a 'guru' of the Movement.

<sup>15</sup> French esoteric lived in the 19th century.

<sup>16</sup> Marcello Dell'Utri (born Palermo, 11 September 1941) is an Italian propagandist, manager and advisor to Berlusconi, a former senator, he did not stand in the 2013 elections because he is a convicted criminal, found guilty of tax fraud, false accounting, and complicity in conspiracy with the Sicilian Mafia (the conviction for the last charge is pending appeal).

he recorded a video *Gaia*<sup>17</sup> (Casaleggio, 2008) in which foretold that newspapers would disappear in five years (i.e. this year), the third World War in 2040 leading to the victory of the West – supported by the Internet – over the East – leaning on brutal power, and in 2054 the appearance of Gaia, with the Earth unified by Internet (was not the concept of the unified life on Earth, under the same name *Gaia*, already found in Asimov, but as one of the obstacles to the development of mankind?). M5S is, for Casaleggio, the first step towards that goal.

Casaleggio's key move was to create *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, subtitled *Il primo magazine solo on line* („the first exclusively online magazine“) a claim that was untrue but effective, as are most of Grillo's claims, „justified“ by the poetics of the satirical discourse. Grillo's blog is the most widely read in Italy, and as early as in 2007 it became the seventh most popular in the world, in spite of being written in Italian.

Matter of fact, the large number of followers the blog attracted encouraged Casaleggio and Grillo to believe they had enough support to found a political movement, Q. E. D.

That basis became even greater through use of social networking: Grillo has, by an enormous margin, the largest social media following of any politician in the European Union. He has about 1.1million Facebook „likers“, and 1.2 million Twitter followers<sup>18</sup>. The next most prominent Italian politician on social media is Pier Luigi Bersani, with nearly a quarter of million „likers“ and followers; other European politicians with a prominent social media presence include David Cameron.

In Jamie Bartlett's estimation (2013) Grillo

*...has around a quarter of a million supporters who consider themselves members of the movement: an army of volunteers and door-knockers that would previously have taken years to recruit. The medium and the message fit hand in glove: the media is a racket, so circumvent it. Politics is closed – especially the party list system – so elect members online“.*

Grillo's M5S had support of close to 5% nationally as far back as May 2012. Nine months later, in the national parliamentary elections, M5S took 25.5% of the vote<sup>19</sup>. This share of the vote was achieved with a „fascinating and powerful mix of anti-establishment rhetoric, new technology and old-fashioned rallies and local action“ (Bartlett, 2013). "Head on the internet, and feet on the ground", as Grillo himself puts it (Bartlett, 2013)<sup>20</sup>.

The thirteen months preceding these elections was another *annus horribilis* on the Italian public scene: under the government of Mario Monti - hailed in the beginning as the country's savior - industrial production fell by 5.4%, unemployment rose from 8% to 11% and amongst people under 25 years from 30 to 37%. A generation of well-educated young

<sup>17</sup> Greek goddess Gaia (Latin: Gaea) means: Earth.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/beppegrillo.it> (21.08.2013); [https://twitter.com/beppe\\_grillo](https://twitter.com/beppe_grillo) (21.08.2013).

<sup>19</sup> If we consider it a protest vote, and if we add the 25 percent non-voters at the same general elections, it seems that half Italy's adult citizens expressed their disgust towards the political parties.

<sup>20</sup> It was an echo of the Microsoft's advertising slogan: "Head in the Cloud, Feet on the Ground", based on Virgil's description of Pheme (Fama, Fame), Gaia's daughter.

people was left in the „precariat“: working in internships, temporary jobs or on short-term contracts; earning no more than €1,000 per month, sometimes less than €500 per month and with no prospect of a stable, decently-paid job; without savings; living with parents rather than in their own flat. The number living in poverty rose from 9 to 10 million, i.e. to more than 16% of 61 million inhabitants. Monti's was a government supported by all the three major parties, and therefore without any relevant opposition in the Parliament. Grillo's movement was able to fill the political vacuum, exploiting the frustration, disgust and anger with conventional politics.

It seems obvious that Grillo's success is due to the increasing mistrust of political parties and to the widespread use of the new technologies.

The question is: what is the ratio of those two elements? What is the relative importance of populism – sometimes dangerously close to the national-socialist one – and what is due to cunning exploitation of new media?

### eDemocracy or eDirective?

Returning to the question of whether Berlusconi's and Grillo's recent successes can be seen as a triumph of a certain type of the eDemocracy (“direct democracy”, according to Casaleggio, 2008) over the slow and abstruse – perhaps even sclerotic – procedures in a classic democracy, the first step should be to reconsider what eDemocracy and eGovernment are today.

According to Meier's (2012: v) Editorial to *eDemocracy & eGovernment* “By means of eDemocracy, it is intended to support the exchange of information, as well as democratic processes of decision making, voting, and elections”, these are listed as eAssistance, eProcurement, eService, eContracting, eSettlement, eCollaboration, eDemocracy in the narrow sense (for instance eElection, eVoting). Similarly „eGovernment aims to put digital public services at disposal for citizens, companies, and organizations“; examples include „electronic services in taxation, employment services and online job markets, public offering via Web platforms, or mobile health services“ (*ibid.*).

So, there is no mention of any eGuidance by an eLeader.

But should we recognize Grillo's or Berlusconi's use of the media to further their political goals as another manifestation of the “great promise of citizen media - democratized digital media tools and increasingly ubiquitous digital networks” (Gillmor, 2010: xvi)?

Several years ago I became convinced that the main characteristic of Internet use for social purposes was its interactivity (Bešker, 1999). Moreover, I have asserted that media discourse is dialogical by itself, implicitly or explicitly, and that new media discourse is explicitly dialogical, because of their inherent interactivity (Bešker, 2010).

What name should we give to the use of the media support as a substitute for representative mechanisms, as a vehicle for the transmission of directives to the voting

machine in Parliament and to the mass of supporters outside the representative bodies? Would eDirective be an appropriate term?

The purpose of eDemocracy - understood in Meier's narrow sense - would be logistical support, information and informatics, to the processes of indirect representative democracy. The aim of Berlusconi's and Grillo's use of electronic media is just the opposite: to avoid any interactivity, any dialectic or any controversy; characteristics of parliamentary debate and discussion or interviews in the media. Their very objective seems to be to ensure unidirectional message, in fact a directive, as the basis of their political discourse. Although Berlusconi and Grillo do not operate in dictatorships their discourse is dictatorial.

The effects of interactivity in new media have already been called into question (Bešker, 2010, among others): should they be regarded *a priori* as participatory instruments (supporting eDemocracy) or does the receptor – a citizen – have to remain a passive object of the *in-formation*<sup>21</sup>? With the advent of a politics of outsourcing, or even of crowdsourcing, we face a new stage, a new step towards the putting the so called "masses" on the pedestal of a political subject instead of the citizen. The history teaches that sometimes there was a very short way from the "mass", as the sum of political individuals, to the crowd, characterized by anonymity, contagion and suggestibility, according to Le Bon<sup>22</sup>.

Let us remember that the misuse of media for inciting the crowd started neither with the new media<sup>23</sup>, nor in this century.

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<sup>21</sup> "In-formation" is seen as a shaping – even formatting of – a citizen, by careful selection of data offered in the media.

<sup>22</sup> Gustave Le Bon (1841 – 1931), French social psychologist whose *The Psychology of Crowds* was object of careful study by Italian PM Benito Mussolini (he apparently kept it by his bedside), cfr. Alex Steiner, *Marxism Without Its Head or Heart: A Reply to David North*, [www.permanent-revolution.org](http://www.permanent-revolution.org), 2007, p.272, [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch10.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch10.pdf) (21.08.2013).

<sup>23</sup> The study of the phenomenon can be started with boulangism in France in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Italy some major mass events during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, like the Fascist movement or the general boost to *Mani pulite* (Clean Hands, Milan investigations which destroyed the main political parties as Christian Democracy and Italian Socialist Party) could offer instructive case studies.



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## NOVI MEDIJI I CROWDSOURCING POLITIKE: ČUDAN SLUČAJ DR. BERLUSCONIJA I G. GRILLA

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Inoslav Bešker

**SAŽETAK** Glavni talijanski populist, Silvio Berlusconi i Beppe Grillo, osigurali su svoj uspjeh na parlamentarnim izborima 2013. uz pomoć vješte upotrebe elektroničkih medija i tradicionalnih masovnih mitinga. Pritom su izbjegavali debate s političkim protivnicima te su se klonili novinara. Poruka obojice, Grilla i Berlusconi, populistička je, izražava antistranačke stavove, demonizira protivnike, a u pristupu javnosti i politici fokus je na vođi. Iako Grillo i Casaleggio naglašavaju kako njihov PoKret (MoVimento) koristi internet za direktnu demokraciju, tvrdeći da politiku PoKreta u jednakoj mjeri kreiraju svi članovi, kroz svojevrstan crowdsourcing, Grillove poruke uglavnom su jednosmjerne direktive, prikladnije za diktatorski nego za demokratski diskurs.

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### KLJUČNE RIJEČI

NOVI MEDIJI, POLITIKA, CROWDSOURCING, POPULIZAM, ITALIJA, GRILLO, BERLUSCONI

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