Can revolution be crowd sourced?
Voicing discontent and building political participation through Indie Go Go campaigns

Relying on the snowball effect inherent to the web as a network provided with "power of cumulative connections"[1] and unrivalled outreach potential to connect online and offline communities, many grassroots movements of our recent times have been self-producing documentary material on the ground. On the one hand, the process of documenting events that were witnessed in real time has contributed to increasing political the visibility of the movements. On the other hand, the act of spreading of the message through the web during dramatic political changes and upheavals has opened new communication avenues between activists and other less immediately engaged Internet users, merging communication techniques in unexpected ways. As testified by 2009 Green revolution Iranian protesters, through 2011 Arab Spring activists as well people in Spain and in Greece, to those involved in world-wide Occupy movement and recent Turkish protests, people have been using Internet tools, open source softwares and social media to spread their own messages across the world in order to create a space for connecting people in a new, horizontal, global, leaderless way[2] On the one side, voicing discontent techniques have been developing themselves in relation to the global context where political struggles were resonating. On the other side, they have been shaping up their own functioning modes in relation to the ever evolving web connection nodes as a way to increase their outreach scope on people and networks.

Departing from this set of preliminary considerations, I would like to analyse the characters and functioning modes of a new communication landscape where the practice of voicing discontent is immediately connected to the participation building moment as well as the fundraising phase. The continuity among the oppositional/propositional moment, the spreading of the message and the financing of the cause traces the borders of a new territory where media distribution models, political practices and advertising techniques are potentially overlapping and sharing common grounds. This process is testified by the very recent emergence of various crowdfunding initiatives[3] which are starting to be used as platforms to gather people around political issues as well as to collect funds for political events and groups. The continuity between the moment of participation building and the funds collection is particularly evident in the case I would like to analyse: the crowd funding campaign set up in Spring 2013 by some Turkish protesters, only three days after the protest had started fuelling the streets of Istanbul. The purpose of the campaign was at the beginning to help fund a full page advert on the New York Times in order to get the story known outside of the country. The actual results of the campaign (http://www.indiegogo.com/projects/full-page-ad-for-turkish-democracy-in-action) have massively outweighed the initial project, raising interesting questions related to contemporary interplays between traditional and new media[4].

In the light of the Couldry's concept of "media practices" as "open-ended range of practices focussed directly or indirectly on media"[5,] I would like to analyse this crowdfunding campaign's case study as a specific kind of media process which needs to be understood within the ecology it develops in. The media process, a combination between the role of media and their relationship to the web of cultural phenomena with the form taken in the articulation made by specific individuals or in the context of local experiences, is a social experience and it needs an ethnographic approach in order to be understood. I therefore would like to describe it first and then argue, following Gerbaudo's theory, that the whole question related to new forms of visibility circulation within the networks needs to be framed in terms of specific visibility regimes which are responsible for creating networks that are embracing both online and offline spaces, like the crowdfunding campaign we are analysing. In this process of re-territorialisation of the media processes, as displayed by crowd funding campaign like this one, new forms of power relationships are getting formed and new message geometries are getting designed, reshaping the traditional relationship between crowd and platforms in crowd funding campaigns.

A revolutionary crowdfunding campaign

To get in the heart of the question, let's take a step into 2013 Turkey. While thousands of people were marching across Turkey, building a spontaneous and progressively radical protest against Erdogan's authoritarian regime and getting an extremely violent and repressive response from the government, three New York-based members of "Occupy Gezi" set up a fundings collection on the well-known Indie Go Go crowd funding platform. In just a few days the campaign was able to mobilise thousands of people across the world, well beyond its own creators' initial expectations. The group posted on Twitter, asking followers for advice about the best online crowd-funding platform. Within the next 20 minutes after receiving an answer, they had already started the campaign on Indie Go Go and promoted it on social media. Donations started coming in almost immediately[6]. During the following 18 hours, people donated over 60.000 dollars to the their Indie Go Go campaign, possibly participating to the most successful – and second-fastest[7]- political crowd funding campaigns of all times. According to Indie Go Go website itself, the amount collected at the end of the campaign on June 9, 2013 was 103,371 dollars- more than double the amount required to reach the goal of 53, 800 dollars which the creators set in order to put a full page ad on the American newspaper[8]. This element is particularly interesting if we think of the role social media had already played during the Turkish protests and how the campaign intercepted the free-floating information flux conveyed by social media. If it's true that more than 2 million tweets were sent out in just eight hours on the first protest's Friday in Istanbul[9], it is probably correct to think that the snowball effect created by social media was at its peak when the crowd funding campaign was put in motion. The big majority of the Indie Go Go campaign supporters had already been massively mobilised through social media. This element reveals partial independence of the audience's participation from the crowd funding platform itself, with people who participated to the campaign without necessarily knowing Indie Go Go as a platform. The element which made the campaign tap into the social media flux so successfully was instead the perfect timing as well as the emotional impact the images circulating on the web from within the process– as well as its lack of coverage on the national media – were generating around the world. Since the very beginning of the Turkish protests, social media played a huge role in the protests, especially because much of the Turkish media had clearly downplayed the protests themselves[10]. The idea of putting up a full page ad on New York Times was thus mainly directed at creating a link between information circulating on digital platforms and the traditional platforms – like newspapers or TV stations - where the impact of the protest had been visibly reduced. In the words of the Indie Go Go page creators Murat Aktihanoglu, Oltac Unsal and Duygu Atacan themselves, the media in Turkey had worked in reinforcing the official version by remaining silent on the events of Gezi Park during the first days of the protest and this has generated a strong emotional response from those who wanted the story to get quickly out of the country.

> Arrests of numerous journalists, artists, and elected officials and restrictions on freedom of speech, minorities' and women's rights all demonstrate that the ruling party is not serious about democracy. Time and again, the Prime Minister has mocked and trivialised his nation's concerns while Turkey's own media have remained shamefully silent[11].

The process of official negation of the Taksim Square facts was one of the factors putting in motion a unique social media coverage from the ground. This media coverage from the ground was actually very different from other recent similar episodes, like the ones related to 2011 Arab Springs uprisings. According to the statistics collected by Social Media Participation Lab at NYU, in fact, 90 percent of geo-localised tweets were coming from within Turkey and around 50 percent from Istanbul itself, while during the Egyptian uprising only 30 percent of the tweets were coming from inside the country and the majority

was coming from outside. Moreover, 88 percent of the tweets which have been circulating were written in Turkish language, an element which implies that the main audience of those tweets was Turkish[12]. The initial plan behind the crowd funding campaign was to bring together thousands of people in order to create impact through the help of international newspapers, in a way that could never be ignored by Turkish newspapers and TV stations. On the one hand, the funds would be collected on the web through a crowd which was already informed and engaged in spreading the message across social media networks. On the other hand, through the advert published on the front page, the story would make its way into mainstream news, reaching out to a different audience. But, way beyond page creators' expectations, the success of the campaign played itself out before the full page advert on The New York Times was even published. By the time the advert was published, the story of the campaign itself had already made its way into the news, revealing the 'contagion' was following a different route – especially after the media shutdown played by Turkish government had opened the way for a reflection on media censorship[13].

Choreography of crowdfunded assemblies

The interesting question regards here the dynamic which was created within the media world created by political crowd funding campaign like this one. As I said above, I would like to refer to these campaigns as "media practices", an "open-ended range of practices focussed directly or indirectly on media"[14]. This concept, which is rooted at the crossroad between cultural studies, social science and media anthropology, proves extremely useful in analysing specific media processes which need to be framed specifically within the ecology they develop in. Media activists of our recent times have been using new media to both communicate their own message as well as constantly enlarge support, with the main goal of challenging mainstream political narratives with an action which would self-produce testimonies and memories of collective events in real time. Practices which had seen the light on the ground, have been transformed and translated into new evolving free-floating communication modes and opening new grounds of interaction between visibility, territoriality and communication. As Brighenti noticed, the main action of shaping the field of visibility has been pursued through the same type of regime in which media operate and thrive, rendering visibility a crucial notion to be taken account in the analysis of current media practices in order to understand contemporary public domain's construction and transformation[15]. Some media scholar have been incredibly enthusiastic of the possibilities opened by new media as a way of challenging traditional forms of authorship and the authority of point of view as displayed by linear storytelling as well as being a way to convey forms of direct democracy through non-representative means. The constant flux of information provided by social media in real time seemed to suggest the possibility of a space created by a multitude of voices which constantly loose and find their individual timbre within the stream, creating new interactions between individuals and collective. The debate has been polarised by positions that place themselves on either a very positive or very negative side of the spectrum, investing technology itself of some attributes that are, in fact, to do entirely with the use we make of them[16].
Optimism or pessimism excesses, though, can lead into the dangerous territory of essentialism, where the role of social media and new media platform in the realm of contemporary media practices becomes important in itself rather than being articulated in the context of specific experiences. I would argue, following Gerbaudo's comments, that the question related to new forms of visibility circulation within the networks needs to be supported by the analysis of individual phenomena which display different forms of visibility and participation building. This is also the case of the ways in which visibility regimes are responsible for creating specific networks which are embracing both online and offline spaces, like the crowdfunding campaign we are analysing.

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The relationship between virtual and real world produced by digital communication is definitely changing the landscape of realism in many ways. If virtuality extends itself everywhere[17], way beyond the digital world, creating an open system where online and offline spaces are overflowing into each other's original scope. In this sense, we could say that new media geographies are overlaying themselves onto physical spaces[18], producing forms of re-territorialisation and extending themselves to the realm of symbolic reconfiguration. As it has been noticed by Gerbaudo' social media have been chiefly responsible for the construction of a choreography of assembly as a process of symbolic construction of public space which facilitates and guides the physical assembling of a highly dispersed and individualised constituency[19]. And way beyond the spontaneity and unrestrained participation assigned to social media and to digital activism in general, "influential Facebook admins and activist tweeps become 'soft leaders' or choreographers are involved in setting the scene, and constructing an emotional space within which collective action can unfold"[20].

This is certainly true of the Turkish protest's crowd funding campaign, where the "soft" leadership played by the New York-based "Occupi Gezi" members who set up the campaign was fully accepted by the thousands of followers and funders across the world as a form of vehicle for a message that was already moving fast and intensely through the network. The violent images of the events happening in Istanbul had created a "choreography of assembly" based on strong emotional factors which made people all around the world frantically share images and videos, friends' Facebook updates, Tweets, pictures and everything they can to express solidarity with the protest.

A small group of people – regular citizens in their own definition but with a strong interest in technology[21] – who were based in the States, thousands of miles away from the centre of the protest, took initiative and spoke on behalf of thousands of people, giving voice to a feeling which proved to be widespread and fast growing. "Watching the events unfold in Turkey really really made us think we have to do something," Murat Aktihanoglu, one of the crowdfunding organisers. "We are regular citizens. We are not activists. We are not politicians. So we thought the best thing we could do is try to increase global visibility and attention on the situation in Turkey". "We want the government to start listening to people. We want the government to start respecting democracy in Turkey," said Aktihanoglu[22].

Animated by an anti-hierarchical feeling which made them refused to be recognised as leaders, the three members interpreted the collective feeling they sensed on the web and wrote a collective statement as the tagline of the campaign[23]: "Activists - We hear you. Protesters - We are you. You have power. You can speak your mind at the New York Times!"[24]. They wrote the statement *as if* they were the whole collective, as though, according to a sort of synecdochical process, the part had become the whole. Their role proved to be essential to bring together onto an online space an existing physical crowd which was composed by completely different people, with a completely different degree of involvement into the event. The crowd who participated to the campaign was made out of Turkish activists which were out on the streets, Turkish indignated citizens, Turkish expats all across the world and general international public who was made aware of the events through web channels. Their call was effectively opened to anyone who believed in the idea of freedom of speech, facilitating the rise of "liquid"[25] forms of interaction between different platforms like social media, traditional media and crowd funding sites.

After a week of intensive crowd funding campaign, the advert was put on the New York Times. "Just picked up my NYTimes outside my door. ****Front page under the title with photo of Turkish protestors in the park***. LEAD STORY of the NYTimes today! I assure you that it was triggered by the Ad. Congrats all! (the hard copy is far more impressive than online)"[26] recites ceo91, one of the supporters commenting on the crowd funding website. But what does it mean to use an advert to convey opinions or editorials? A traditional editorial space has been used for advertising for quite a long time already. So, what is the difference when it is used for opinions or editorials?[27]. The act of sponsoring a revolution on the full page advert on The New York Times opens a number of new questions on the relationships between medium and message .

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If we follow Gerbaudo's approach, we could say that contemporary popular movements are characterised by majoritarianism and an attention on creating unity[28] by adopting practices of "appropriation of public space" which are re-organising spatial and temporal scenes of social life and therefore projecting messages onto the virtual world as part of this process of re-shaping and re-organising. Advertising techniques seem to respond to this majoritarian attitude of creating unity and re-appropriation of the public space. This space is also the space of contemporary advertisement, where social messages are conveyed through marketing techniques, as it is for social advertising. In this case, it is not a non-profit organisation or an institution advertising its message, but a whole collective of people.

The whole question really revolves around the interplay among the crowd, the message conveyed/ shaped and the platform hosting it. The interplay among all these elements shapes the campaign itself, its dynamic and its impact, but also the vectorial relationships among these elements, namely where does the message come from and where does it go. In my opinion, the interesting question is whether the dynamic created by these elements is really giving voice to a message which is sourced from the crowd or whether the message is set *a priori* through advertising techniques and then supported by the crowd. Is it the use of advertising techniques conveyed by a campaign like this a form of communication which gives voice to the supporters' message or does it shape a language which then gets transferred back to the crowd and appointed to them through a form of "soft" leadership?

After crowdfunding

It is undoubtable that the impact exercised by this Indie Go Go campaign was huge. Not only the story of what was going on in Gezi Park was successfully brought to American media, but the campaign also set a new record as fastest crowd funding campaign of all times,. After reaching its set goal, the creators created a Reddit page [http://www.reddit.com/r/activism/comments/1fnbj6/fullpage_nytimes_ad_project_what_should_we_do/] in order to develop the discussion on how to spend the excess money which had been continuing to pour in even after the New York Times ad had been fully funded. Many proposals were formulated - the creation of documentary material, films or web platforms to multiply the impact of crowd sourced news. In the end, the final decision reached through referendum – as stated on the Indie Go Go site- was to fund "a global coordination team of 10 experts, and provide a yearlong stipend/honorarium for their expenses". "Using advertorials on a variety of Internet platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, etc. reach at least 1 million undecided voters and inform them". Reserve a sum "for the technical cross platform needs of the internet platforms such as security, hosting, etc"[29].

As the decision made seem only to push back a more structured plan on the use of money, it is interesting to see how the campaign was used by participants and donors as a chance to launch proposals for new forms of online direct democracy and interactions between new media and traditional media. It is especially interesting to see how the discussion was based around ways to get the message out which could reach out to the maximum number of people – even in deep Anatolia where the use of internet is very limited – maybe by even creating new platforms which could be shaped on the need of open "collectives" like this one to develop their discussion online.

Activists' interest for shaping new platforms for political campaigns seem to be increasing and the practice of voicing discontent and building participation seem to be developing a progressively stronger relationship to the media which are used for each action, shaping the message of the campaign through the functioning modes of each platform. The question remains whether, in the re-territorialisation of the traditional crowdfunding dynamic into the territory of political communication, which invests the 'object of desire' in its shift from being a product into being a political event, the geometry of the 'crowd' is changing and so are the power relationships involved in this configuration.

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End Notes

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