*Special issue article*

Journalism
14(7) 868–884

DOI: 10.1177/1464884913478362
jou.sagepub.com

# Tactical media practices in Italy: The case of Insu^tv

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**Abstract**
This article focuses on two main questions that frame the status of contemporary Italian media: What happens when the democratic potential of the media is smothered by the cemented ties between television and politics? And how do alternative media initiatives in Italy engage this rapprochement of media and citizenship in the 21st century? This article addresses these issues by examining the origins and ramifications of one such initiative known as Telestreet project. The first part of the analysis traces the history and objectives of Telestreet as a bottom-up approach to broadcasting; in the second section, I focus on a Neapolitan street TV project, Insu^Tv, as a successful case in point of this activist approach to local media making; the last section of the article focuses on in-depth interviews with the activists behind Insu^Tv and their efforts to create independent communication tools and reclaim an active and activist role in the Italian media flows.

**Keywords**
Activism, alternative media, Italy, street television, tactical media

The second half of the 20th century and the early 21st century have witnessed an unprecedented expansion of media concentration across the world. As corporations have grown bigger and more powerful and more lax media policies have become commonplace in various national contexts, the concentration of ownership in the hands of few companies has characterized the mediascape of many western and non-western societies: Springer and Bertelsmann in Germany, Televisa in Mexico, Vivendi in France, Murdoch in the UK and Australia, Bonnier in Sweden, O'Reilly in Ireland, CTV Globe Media, CanWest Global, and Rogers in Canada. While these and other examples are indicative of the

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profound implications media concentration and ownership have on business, culture and innovation, perhaps the most alarming case remains that of Italy's Silvio Berlusconi.

Since the mid-1980s, Berlusconi has dominated the Italian media environment in broadcast, print, and cinema, he has been a major player in cultural industries like soccer and shopping centers, and, since the 1990s, he has stifled the political arena as pluri-elected prime minister. In his book on Berlusconi, historian Alexander Stille uses a compelling analogy to summarize the stronghold of the Berlusconi family in contemporary Italian culture:

> Imagine if Bill Gates of Microsoft were also the owner of the three largest national TV networks and then became president and took over public television as well. Imagine that he also owned Time Warner, HBO, the *Los Angeles Times*, the New York Yankees, Aetna Insurance, Fidelity Investments and Loews Theaters, and you begin to get an idea of how large a shadow Silvio Berlusconi casts over Italian life. Imagine also that dozens of members of parliament and most of the key people in government are also current or former employees of the TV-tycoon prime minister, that he has been indicted and convicted in several criminal trials, which his personal lawyers, who also sit in parliament, have legislated or tried to legislate out of existence. (2006: 10)

As Stille clearly highlights, the unique situation of Italian media culture invites us to reflect upon the impact of concentration and ownership on the public sphere and the nature of the dialogues and debates allowed in such an environment. In Italy, for instance, broadcast television is characterized by a duopolistic system divided between the public broadcaster RAI (controlled by the government) and the commercial network Mediaset (owned by the Berlusconi family). The introduction of satellite television in 2003 through the Murdoch-owned platform Sky Italia has slightly shifted this equilibrium by providing a much greater number of channels. Yet, in 2012 the percentage of Italians who subscribe to the satellite service is still limited,[1] and RAI and Mediaset are still considered the only true mass-audience channels (D'Arma, 2010). In a country with one of the lowest readership figures in Europe and internet access growing slowly and mostly among younger generations,[2] the appeal of the small screen as a source of information and, ideally, public debate remains unquestioned and cannot be ignored by media scholars.

In Italy, however, the convergence of media ownership and the increasing similarity of public-service and commercial television have created an environment where new (or, simply oppositional) ideas are often relegated to marginal channels and unpopular times of the day or are altogether banned. In such a context, the potential of the mass media to provide a platform for the construction and (re)negotiation of identities is reduced to the commercial imperative imposed by Mediaset and RAI alike, which focus on advertising, reality programs, American series, and daytime talk shows as their staple programming. The neoliberal logic promoted by this type of television is not only in line with the right-wing political majority led by prime minister Berlusconi,[3] but it is also neglectful of the complex and developing nature of Italian society at the cultural, ideological, and economic levels. In this respect, issues of migration and new citizenship, dissentient political views, and the increasing socio-economic divide are rarely addressed on mainstream television and, when they are, it is often in late-night or early morning programs. The

reality of the average Italian is thus silenced on broadcast television and few efforts are being made to fill this lacuna. As Garcia Canclini argues apropos Latin America, a weak political establishment and the insolvency of institutions have decreased in Italy the space for truly democratic forms of expression and representation:

> Men and women increasingly feel that many of the questions proper to citizenship – where do I belong, what rights accrue to me, how can I get information, who represents my interests? – are being answered in the private realm of commodity consumption and the mass media more than in the abstract rules of democracy or collective participation in public spaces. (2001: 15)

While this is certainly representative of contemporary Italy, two important questions must be asked in this unique context: What happens when the democratic potential of the media is smothered by the cemented ties between television and politics? And how do alternative media initiatives in Italy engage this rapprochement of media and citizenship in the 21st century? This article addresses these issues by examining the origins and ramifications of one such initiative known as the Telestreet project. The first part of the analysis traces the history and objectives of Telestreet as a bottom-up approach to broadcasting; in the second section, I focus on a Neapolitan street TV project, Insu^Tv, as a successful case in point of this activist approach to local media making; the last section of the article focuses on in-depth interviews with the activists behind Insu^Tv and their efforts to create independent communication tools and reclaim an active and activist role in Italian media flows. While this article focuses on a specifically contextualized aspect of Italian media, it will nonetheless unveil larger trends of media activism in societies which, like Italy, are characterized by highly concentrated media markets and commercialized information streams. I use particularly Chantal Mouffe's concept of radical democracy and agonistic pluralism to reflect on the tactics and politics of the street television movement and its implications on Italian citizenship.

## WHAT IS TELESTREET?

*Citizens*,

*The televisual ocean in which we swim is beginning to reek of monoculture.*

*Only one species of fish dominates the infosphere.*

*The communicative biodiversity risks being erased.*

*The banana-fish is eating up all the other fish.*

*LISTEN CAREFULLY*,

*You, strong fish, who still love to swim freely, liberate your hearts from any forms*

*of anxiety and depression.*

*It's time to get out of the fish tank.*

*May fantasy and creativity find again their power*,

*May friendship and challenge guide us towards the open space*,

*Because in danger dwells salvation.*

This manifesto of civic (dis)obedience adorned some streets of Bologna in Northern Italy in June 2002. The poster with the metaphorical call to action reported above was created to launch the first neighborhood television channel in Italy. Orfeo TV, named after the street in which it originated and broadcast, had a footprint of 164 yards and was on the air for two hours a day. The first program was an interview with a local bartender. Despite its humble beginnings, Orfeo TV paved the way for the creation of more than 150 street television channels that developed across the country between 2002 and 2008. Intended as community media, these neighborhood channels aimed to expand local citizens' access to information by using simple technology for viewers to engage in the production and consumption of television programs. While Italian street TV channels differed in their goals and scopes, they all share a similar concern about the arbitrary consolidation of media in the hands of a few companies and the repercussions this system has on the kind of information accessible to viewers.

The phrase 'street television' refers to a micro television channel with a very small footprint and produced through the use of inexpensive, affordable technology. Street television indeed operated in the empty frequencies left between regularly licensed channels. In this sense, street television did not take over the frequency allotted for another broadcaster; at the same time, though, its operations were not legally licensed through the Ministry of Communication. As the creators of Orfeo TV are keen to clarify, street television was not legal, but was certainly legitimate and sanctioned by Article 21 of the Italian Constitution, which proclaims citizens' freedom of expression with any means of communication and prohibits censorship except for cases of public indecency. The technology used to set up a street television is quite simple, almost rudimentary, and consists of three elements: a modulator to find the empty frequency; an amplifier for the transmission of the signal; and an electrical feeder. The signal would then be transmitted through a regular television antenna placed on a roof or balcony. Clearly, the set-up of street television relied on traditional broadcasting means, but its operations were supplemented by the use of the internet as a locus of exchange of technical information, video clips, and news relevant to all street televisions. The non-profit organization New Global Vision (www.ngvision.org), for instance, collaborated with the street television project by collecting video clips downloadable on tape or DVD in VHS quality; as a digital video archive, the New Global Vision project frames its mission as follows:

> [W]e are under the pressure of a pervasive and powerful information system, that points exclusively to consensus manipulation and political support. We think information is something different: to fight mainstream dis-information we need to implement the effectiveness of the tools we're able to immediately develop or quickly build up. (www.ngvision.org/index.en.html)

The archive features hundreds of videos about environmental issues, gender and sexual identity, international conflicts, migration, religion, hacking, G8 meetings, and

globalization. By embracing Telestreet's concern about the status of media in our times, this project has become a useful site of reference for street TV producers who aim to relate the localism and communitarian scope of their projects to the broader spectrum of global life and international issues. In this sense, the street television phenomenon availed itself of the convergence of old and new media technologies for the creation of a project that was situated between the local and global of today's existence. Another aspect that made street television an accessible and attractive project was its cost effectiveness. The purchase of antennas, modulator, amplifier and feeder is calculated to amount to €1000 (about $1,500) to which one must add the price of a computer and broadband internet connection. The moderate expense and limited technical skills required to launch a street television allowed a wide variety of citizens to become active participants in the communication process and decision-makers in the flow of information related to their local communities.

Since the very beginning, the Telestreet experiment focused on the local as a site of identity, creativity, and territorial affiliation. While this scope can certainly be linked to the limited footprint each street television has – often reaching only a few streets or a small neighborhood – this localism must be also understood as an attempt to re-center previously marginalized local issues that are indeed vital to the existence of communities throughout the country. For instance, Insu^tv from Naples featured programs on the problem of trash-filled streets in the city and its surroundings, an obvious emergency for local communities. Telestreet Bari from the Southern region of Apulia gave voice to local writers and poets with interviews and live performances. Telecitofono from the North-West (Reggio Emilia), instead, straddled the global/local divide by engaging community-bound issues such as Saturday-night car accidents and Eastern European migrations westward. As mentioned in the opening paragraph, Orfeo TV was the first instance of street television in Italy and emerged from the ashes of the 1970s free radios, an earlier attempt at embracing the airwaves to promote the freedom of expression guaranteed by the Italian constitution.[4] Arguably, the most famous free radio in Italy was a left-wing political station, Radio Alice, based in Bologna and created by Franco Berardi (aka 'Bifo')[5] and other students or political activists. Launched in 1976, soon after the liberalization of the airwaves for commercial uses, Radio Alice was on the air for one year before it was shut down by the police and its members were arrested for suspected connections with the extreme Left (Downing, 2000). At a time when television was dominated by the state broadcaster RAI, radio transmission was the only medium through which alternative voices could be heard. In fact, in 1976 the city of Rome recorded a total of 74 free radios, the most prominent of which were Radio Radicale and Radio Città Futura.[6] Thirty years after their creation, many free radios are no longer on the air, but their spirit is preserved in the Telestreet project. This evident connection between the two eras and two media is emphasized by Radio Alice's website, which opens with a pop-up window alerting visitors: 'it's not by coincidence that Orfeo TV was created by the Radio Alice team'. As indicated in many street TV websites, in the 21st century communication and information are hardly dissociable from the visual power of television, and this medium is perceived as the ideal tool to reach different groups of citizens and consumers.

The geography of the Telestreet network has remained vague, and data on local street television stations are contradictory and quite subjective. At the end of 2008, Italy had

around 130 street televisions: some of these were on the air for a few years, while others had a short-lived existence of just a few months. Overall, the Telestreet initiative came to a halt in 2010 following the switch from analog to digital television in Italy. No longer able to use the empty analog frequencies, the activists behind Telestreet have had to opt for different tools and communication modalities. The new digital mediatic system has thus offered both opportunities for and obstacles to activist and alternative media: on the one hand, the new format allows for more channels and potentially more diversity; on the other hand, the first few years of digital television have revealed an unchanged pattern of oligopolistic control where the same players (RAI, Mediaset, and Sky Italia, in particular) now have a larger (and quickly growing) number of channels (D'Arma, 2010). As we will see with the case of Insu^tv, in many instances the liaison between activist and mainstream media proved to be inevitable in order to reach viewers nationwide and to overcome the barriers of the digital divide.

## Insu^tv from Naples

Insu^tv from Naples began in 2002 as an attempt to create means of mediated communication that could be shared and produced by the public. The founders of Insu^tv define the goals of this project as follows: '[our goal is] to create media that are produced by the same number of people that watch them. We like to call this "proxyvision", a space in osmosis with the reality of daily life.'[7] It is particularly the convergence between the public sphere of television and the local space of daily, urban life that is at the heart of Insu^tv programming. Like other street projects, this Neapolitan channel arose from dissatisfaction with the lack of representation of local issues in mainstream national media and the stereotypical portrayal of the Italian South as regressive and indolent. The reality of urban living in Naples' neighborhoods is often neglected by national media, which privilege a spectacle-like lens to filter commercially viable news of the area. Thus, the problems, but also the opportunities, presented by some areas of the city never reach the national stage and are consequently ignored by local populations as well. The creative idea behind Insu^tv aimed to fill this lacuna by catering to local communities that are often voiceless in the national mediascape. Unlike other street channels that focus on some selected topics, Insu^tv does not limit its programming to specific issues, but rather follows the trajectories and the narratives that shape Neapolitan life over time. In this respect, one of the main contributions of Insu^tv is the space dedicated to migrants' issues. The trend of globalization that has accelerated the flows of migrations from the South and East of the world towards the West has heavily impacted Naples' urban life. Compared with other Italian cities, Naples is a relatively newer destination of migration for foreigners, who began moving into the city in the early 1990s. In 2010, the urban population of Naples was about 1,000,000, 2.5 percent of whom are legal migrants.[8] To address the problems and obstacles faced by immigrants in Naples, Insu^tv created an alternative newscast, *Tg Migranti*, that featured stories shot and narrated from the migrants' perspective. Thus, instead of trying to capture the difficulties of migrant life through the eyes of a privileged native Italian – a viewpoint often adopted on national television – *Tg Migranti* handed the camera and the microphone over to immigrants, who chose to report in their native language (subtitled in Italian) to narrate the shackles of

their path to Europe or their views on the most recent law on immigration. A program like *Tg Migranti* is alternative and innovative in two essential ways. First, the underprivileged and the powerless are allowed to speak and they do so by using the linguistic and ideological codes with which they feel most comfortable; this approach collides with the more paternalistic and patronizing view of national newscasts, where immigrants are featured mostly in cases of criminality or lack of integration and their differences from traditional notions of Italianness are underscored by their limited knowledge of the language. Second, *Tg Migranti* focuses on the interdependence between the local and the global in today's world. In this program, the national level is muffled by a more pragmatic look at how the international reality of migration patterns to Naples has impacted on the city and, conversely, how the Neapolitan identity is increasingly re-centered by virtue of being exposed to a globalized world. As this program highlights, people of different ethnic, economic, and educational backgrounds participate in the creation of the channel and the promotion of its programs. While no official data exist on the viewership, the founders confirm that Insu^tv reached a footprint of about 500,000 people living in the area where the channel was accessible. This reach was expanded in their website, which involves audience participation through polls and blogs and allows visitors to view the programs originally broadcast on television.

From a technological point of view the Telestreet project became possible thanks to the existing gaps between analog frequencies. In 2009, though, most Italian regions completed the switch to digital terrestrial television. While this new platform has the potential to provide a more diverse mediascape in Italy (D'Arma, 2010), it certainly had a clear and concrete impact on Insu^tv, which was forced off air because of the lack of frequencies from which it could broadcast. This move undermined their ability to target audiences with alternative and critical content the mainstream media seldom carry. In the next section, I discuss the new direction taken by Insu^tv activists in the digital age and their involvement in tactical media practices.

## From alternative to tactical?

The street TV project of Insu^tv came to an end in December 2009, when DTT (digital terrestrial television) was activated in Naples. Since then the producers and activists behind Insu^tv have moved on to other video projects, utilizing different media platforms to promote their bottom-up coverage of local and national issues. As we will see, this shift to new video productions and distribution forms has resulted in the need to address different audiences and reach different demographic groups through the use of transmedia practices.[9]

Since 2009, the Insu^tv collective has created documentary-style productions as well as short news reportages for Italian television shows and international channels like Al Jazeera and Current TV. The first docu-film produced by Insu^tv was the 2009 *Wasting Naples* on the dramatic trash crisis that has afflicted Naples and its surroundings since the early 2000s. Framed like a traditional story, with opposing sides and the fictional trope of a radio host (played by Italian actor Ascanio Celestini) who tells the story of Naples' trash emergency, this film is based on more than 500 hours of footage collected over the span of six years (2003–9) to give voice to the communities and individuals

affected by the political and financial garbage emergency around Naples. While this emergency has received, through the years, frequent and superficial coverage in local and national newscasts, *Wasting Naples* is the first in-depth attempt to uncover and untangle the intricate ties between government, eco-mafia, and mighty corporations and the effect of these relations on citizens' health, jobs, and the environment. As one of the creators, who wishes to remain anonymous and uses the name of nicol*angrisano as a group pseudonym, explained:

> We felt there was a need to provide an informative, educational, communicative tool for those communities involved in the fight against the construction of landfills … Our objective was to create a docu-film targeting both the people involved in this issue and people in other parts of Italy who didn't know much about the details of this issue … We worked on this as a social assignment. (nicol*angrisano, 2011)

This connective approach to filmmaking was reinforced in the final phases of post-production, during which the creators returned to the communities and the individuals interviewed to ensure a correct representation of their views in the final editing of the film. Like other productions by Insu^tv, *Wasting Naples* was funded partially through the site 'Produzioni dal basso',[10] an independent, horizontal, and free platform where viewers can fund different kinds of video productions (from feature films to shorts, animations, and reportages) by purchasing quotas of the project of their choice. Once the video has been fully funded and produced, all the co-producers receive a copy of the DVD and their names are included in the closing titles. This form of financial participation, often referred to as 'crowdfunding',[11] was crucial in the production of *Wasting Naples* in two essential ways: on the one hand, it allowed Insu^tv to work on a subject that mainstream media and big corporations deemed uncomfortable and inconvenient and that would be hardly funded by major donors; on the other hand, crowdfunding enabled Insu^tv to retain all distribution rights of the film and thus control where and when the video would be screened. This level of agency is particularly important in a concentrated media market such as Italy, where Mediaset and News Corp. dominate most mainstream production and distribution outlets and clearly repress alternative media products that question political and social institutions.

The use of crowdfunding to finance this docu-film proved to be a useful tool to promote it and create important expectations well before its official release, making *Wasting Naples* a highly anticipated screening throughout Italy. The film was released through alternative distribution models enabled by digital media, whether online streaming (on YouTube and Vimeo), digital downloads (through blogs and archive.org), or through the use of social media tools (like Facebook and Twitter) to facilitate the organization of public or semi-public screenings in places such as high schools, local NGOs, or labor unions. The echoing effect of digital tools ensured that *Wasting Naples* received wide coverage in local and national news and participated in several film festivals on the environment or other social issues, while, at the same time, it attracted the attention of viewers living outside of Italy, who recognized the innovative approach of this kind of coverage. Yet, the online popularity of *Wasting Naples* was fundamentally limited to certain demographics of the population: mostly young and well educated, the online consumers of this docu-film are the digitally savvy niche who regularly uses the web to gather information and consume news.[12] Unlike other western countries, this section of

the population is still remarkably small in Italy, where mainstream television remains the preferred source of information and entertainment even well into the 21st century. The collective of Insu^tv is clearly aware of this digital divide and insists on developing working relationships with terrestrial and satellite television channels. As nicol*angrisano, a member of Insu^tv put it:

> … it would be short sighted for media activists to break any ties with mainstream media. Some people argue that through the Internet (web TV, social networks, peer-to-peer, etc.) media activists don't need any collaborations with mainstream media. Yet, the digital divide that still characterizes most sections of Italian society seems to cast doubt on this optimistic view … We don't run after mainstream media, but we still propose our productions to them without compromises or censorship. (2011)

In order to bridge this digital gap between different audience demographics, in 2010 *Wasting Naples* was aired on Current TV for several months, reaching an audience of approximately 500,000 people. The crossing over to terrestrial television was seen as a necessary step in a society that relies heavily on traditional mass media for information and entertainment. This approach proved to be a useful strategy to create a transmedia appeal for Insu^tv productions, which resulted in their coverage in print and broadcast media as well as an increase in online followers.

After the success of *Wasting Naples*, Insu^tv produced other video materials aimed at engaging a new kind of citizenship and agency arising from the quotidian existence of local communities in various parts of the country. Two of these productions, *Il tempo delle arance* (2010) and *Via Padova è meglio di Milano* (2011), recount the vicissitudes of migrants in different Italian regions and the violence and prejudices they experience. The first documentary, *Il tempo delle arance*, is based in Rosarno, a Calabrian town which reached national headlines in 2010 after the motiveless shooting of four African orange-pickers and the ensuing violence and ethnic cleansing attitude of the local population. Here, visibility is given to the illegal migrants at the heart of the pogrom conditions in Rosarno and their experience as occasional laborers in the underground market. As mentioned before, migrants are rarely featured in mainstream television, which privileges a spectacle lens to frame issues of marginalization and cultural diversity. A similar approach characterizes the more recent *Via Padova è meglio di Milano*, which was inspired by the death of a 19-year-old Egyptian migrant in one of Milan's most ethnically diverse streets (Via Padova). In this case, Insu^tv in collaboration with Teleimmagini (a street TV project from Bologna) narrated the history and daily life in this central area of Milan, which encapsulates half a century of migratory flows to the city, and the need to negotiate urban spaces and local identities in situations where the institutional infrastructures were neglectful or totally inexistent. Here, the microphone is handed to Italian natives, second-generation migrants and newly arrived laborers, who take turns in depicting their relationship with the urban socioscape of this complex and heterogeneous neighborhood. As one of the interviewees in the film put it, 'Via Padova is a process of globalization from below which comes to exist when social politics and policies are ineffective.' In this respect, Insu^tv productions provide an innovative and much-needed approach to a different idea of citizenship, one that sees the active engagement of local communities and individuals as the pre-eminent benchmark for a more comprehensive

and thorough understanding of the changes taking place in Italian society in the 21st century. Clearly, the notion of citizenship presented in these videos defies the flattening, pejorative images that populate mainstream programming and acknowledges the central role played by those social actors (migrants, local NGOs, social workers, public schools, etc.) who are often silenced or marginalized in the audience-seeking productions of RAI and Mediaset. These tend to give preference to politicians and institutional officials, who are often blamed by citizens for their lack of involvement in the problems affecting local communities and their deficient understanding of the issues at stake. Hence, the approach of Insu^tv should not be read as a weak attempt to oppose existing power structures, but it should rather be seen as a strategy to create new, parallel sources of power through the engagement of local communities and citizens and through the use of transmedia tactics. This approach shifts the focus away from the nation-state as the most viable socio-political context and re-centers the role of localism in the age of globalization. As Turner argues in his analysis of postmodern cultural citizenship:

> … [a]t the same time that the state is partly eroded in terms of its political sovereignty and cultural hegemony, localism as a response to such changes squeezes, so to speak, the state from below. The state is caught between these global pressures, which challenge its monopoly over the emotive commitments of its citizens, and local, regional and ethnic challenges to its authority. (1994: 157)

The complex status of the nation-state as a socio-political framework is consistently addressed in the Insu^tv productions I have discussed so far: by focusing on the global–local tensions at the heart of different communities, these documentaries aim to relocate the center of cultural citizenship and engage with the impact of alternative media practices on the reinvigorated agency of local actors.

All the videos have been produced thanks to the active and activist participation of numerous volunteers and collaborators, whose anonymous identity is collapsed under the directorial label 'nicol*angrisano'. This appellative encompasses the collective identity of those behind Insu^tv and:

> … stands for a multiplicity of visions and perspectives, it uses a lower case because s/he refuses the concept of authorship; s/he takes the asterisk to inflect for all genders. It is a collective – a connective – identity radically searching for different reading cues to transform simple narrations into tools of struggle and liberation. (nicol*angrisano, Personal interview, 17 July 2011)

As Renzi states in her review of *Wasting Naples*, 'nicol* is as much a symbol as a mode of collaboration' (2010: 22). Here, intervention through anonymity is not only deployed to assert a collective will, but also to bolster a grassroots campaign of bottom-up cultural and political production where the identity of individuals who worked on the films becomes only peripherally important. Anonymity is therefore a pungent critique of a political climate of power accumulation and a narrative of media monopoly as 'authored' by one omnipresent political and media mogul. In other words, the collective 'we' in the label 'nicol*angrisano' represents a counter-narrative against the singularity of political power and the cult of personality which dominated Berlusconi's governing style and changed the face of Italian politics for a long time to come.

## Tactical media practices

As strategies of resistance, the creative intervention of Insu^tv and the culture of bottom-up video production it has spawned subscribe to a complex mode of tacticality in a political context of asymmetrical power and centralization of capital, even in seemingly, and perhaps deceptively, grassroots technological platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. As explained above, the producers of Insu^tv tout their work against a paternalizing neoliberal system which is hurtling citizens into a culture of commercialization and apolitical conformity, but their actions are also carefully mounted to forge new spaces of organic participation that are free of the same market imperatives which constrain collective political deliberation and influence in Italy. Their tactics of intervention, however, are also inscribed in an effort to cope with a political and media ecology which does not lend itself easily to radical structural transformations. As Rita Raley (2009) argues, tactical media are not sweeping revolutionary events but crucial strategic openings for their practitioners to act, even if the impact of their action might seem ephemeral and less conclusive:

> With the recognition that there is no getting outside the global techno-military-economic world order, tactical media thus performs a sociopolitical intervention by gesturing only obliquely toward a better world in the future, its vision of tomorrow much like that offered at the end of Alfonso Cuaron's *Children of Men*: a boat fleeting visible on the horizon and detached from any concrete articulation of an ideal political community or certain historical destiny. (2009: 28)

The political legwork of the Telestreet project and the bottom-up production I discuss here join a significant debate about the effectiveness of tactical media in the neoliberal era and the nature of performative politics of intervention in contemporary Italy. A number of questions are in order: How disruptive are these new media interventions both politically and aesthetically? If tactical media have provided new actors with decentralized spaces for public participation, what kind of activism emerges out of these platforms, and what kind of innovative practices do tactical media contribute to performing activism in the 21st century? And if, as Raley concedes, tactical media are not concerned with permanent social change, what can we conclude about the nature and legacy of dissent today?

Cyber skeptics have dismissed the dissent of electronic networks as ineffectual because its rhetorical engagement is removed from the traditional politics and tactics of the street. To these critics, the hacktivism of WikiLeaks and Anonymous and the smart mobs of the Occupy Wall Street movement or even the inventive appropriations of new media technologies in the events of the Arab Spring are only fleeting bouts of discontent, or, as some have dubbed them, 'hashtag activism' or 'clicktivism'. The assumption that, because the web operates in a decentralized culture of networks and protocols, it will necessarily lead to social change and an alternative political culture, is to these critics a major fallacy which occludes the real dynamics of authoritarian and neoliberal rule in the web era. Commenting on what he calls the fetishization of the internet, Evgeny Morozov, author of *The Net Delusion*, says the web is a 'paradise for consumers' and a 'hell for citizens' (2011). Malcolm Gladwell, another strong critic of 'cyber-utopianism', argues that digital social protests cannot work because they are based on 'weak ties' which poorly

compare to the high-risk values of face-to-face activism (Gladwell and Shirky, 2011). Morozov's and Gladwell's deep skepticism about the affordances of the web and their potential for social change – while useful in tempering cyber enthusiasm for change and its longevity – is indicative of a lingering deterministic approach which often pits the digital against the physical and constantly validates their merit based strictly on their ability to produce concrete social action. This hierarchical and normative indexing of the digital and face-to-face activism hides an important question about how we can understand activism as it transitions into a network culture of informational capitalism and marketized politics.

The logic of the hacktivists of Anonymous, for example, may not be comprehended from a traditional analytical framework of how street activism functions. As Gabriela Coleman, an anthropologist who writes on hacking cultures, said, 'it is hard to put our finger on Anonymous sociologically' (2012: 3). Anonymous' use of the Guy Fawkes mask at rallies and demonstrations around the world reveals how neoliberal individualism has been traded for a more porous and encompassing collectivistic stance (Coleman, 2012: 6). The same rejection of individual subjectivity is at the heart of the Insu^tv label of nicol*angrisano, which directs the public's attention to the collective actions initiated by the group rather than the focusing on the singular participation of a group of individuals.

In trying to define the nature of Anonymous interventions and the space they occupy, Coleman argues that:

> Anonymous acts in a way that is irreverent, often destructive, occasionally vindictive, and generally disdainful of the law. These actions are unlike the work of traditional activists who might rather urge citizens to stay within the bounds of the law, to wield the law, to call their local representatives, or to charter an NGO. (2012: 5)

Like Anonymous, the Insu^tv collective seeks to disrupt the dominant media and political narrative in Italy by functioning as a public arbiter that monitors the inefficiency of existing infrastructures and violations of public trust. Insu^tv productions and call to action also serve to address the inability of mainstream discourse to reflect the crucial changes in the socio-cultural landscape of Italian society. But unlike Anonymous, their work is not necessarily a statement aimed at destroying existing power structures and, as such, doesn't operate outside the legal boundaries of political action. As mentioned, Insu^tv's early broadcasting projects made use of empty analog frequencies and, in doing so, operated under Article 21 of the Italian Constitution, which protects the freedom of individuals and groups to express their views in uncensored ways and through the use of available means of communication. Similarly, when the collective moved on to documentaries and docu-films, they found paramount allies in mainstream television channels, such as the public broadcaster RAI (which aired *Wasting Naples* on its third channel for several weeks) and channels on the Sky platform (Babel TV and Current TV). The kind of action chosen by the Insu^tv collective can be characterized as a form of 'in and out intervention' that straddles the boundaries between mainstream/traditional media and new/alternative forms of communication.

As Michael Warner claims in his discussion of *Publics and Counterpublics*, the public that emerges as a result of these actions cannot be understood within the traditional

framework of the bourgeois public sphere, most importantly because of its ability to organize 'itself independently of state institutions, law, formal frameworks of citizenship, or pre-existing institutions such as the church' (2005: 68). Through their use of social media and non-traditional media platforms, the activists behind Insu^tv projects have addressed precisely this notion of counterpublic and have created a form of counter-discourse that exists alongside the more popular perspectives promoted by corporate media. Although, as Warner argues, counterpublics maintain at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of their subordinate status, in the context of Insu^tv it is important to emphasize how its subordinate position in the prevailing power structure does not necessarily coincide with a marginal (and marginalized) presence in the Italian public sphere. Indeed, Insu^tv still sees its primary platform of action in mainstream media such as Sky channels and broadcasters like RAI and Al Jazeera. In opting for these visible platforms of action, this collective makes a clear statement on the space their actions should occupy: rather than being relegated to the margins of society, like other transient alternative media initiatives, Insu^tv productions must be viewed as important, critical agents of political and social change whose ideas and visions must be at the heart of public discourse. As a member of the group asserted in a personal interview, their engagement and collaboration with traditional broadcasters should not be easily dismissed as a betrayal of their activist ideals, but rather as a more pragmatic attempt to infiltrate the neoliberal Italian power structure, which leaves little room for dissident voices, and to operate a tactical transformation from within.

## Street television as radical democracy

Liberal democracy has come under fierce attack as the only remaining paradigm of organized politics despite the celebratory tones of its supporters after the fall of communism. Critics of traditional democratic theory argue that the political does not dwell within states and political parties only, but that a deliberative force of the political has become embedded in all other dimensions of society. As Chantal Mouffe (2005) contends, deliberation by free citizens has always been an important constituent of democracy but it had been replaced by an aggregation model, which saw value in the representation of political parties as a conduit between citizens and the state. Proponents of deliberative democracy, represented mainly by the Habermasian view of the public sphere, have sought to base their universalistic and rationalist theories of the democratic around concepts of consensus at the center and a marginalization of irreconcilable conflict and collective identities. The increasing pluralism of societies today, however, has complicated the prospects for consensus and rendered it a fleeting and conflictual ideal while supporters of the liberal democracy thesis continue to expect and glorify a sanitized future beyond dissent and hegemony and right and left politics. This idealized vision of the outcome of politics in a cosmopolitan world largely obfuscates our view of what happens on the margins of society because the attention is focused on a false sense of harmony and a neutralization of conflict and dissent. This is why, Mouffe argues, politicians become surprised when the tactics of international terrorism become spectacular or those of ethnic minorities and marginalized social groups become radical. Mouffe calls this moment 'post-political' because as a

consensual form of a universalist democracy it divests the political of one of its vital constituents, i.e. antagonism, leading to further conflict and dangerous tension. Mouffe's solution is to create agonistic public spaces where conflicts could be expressed not for the sake of neutralizing them but to use partisan passion to animate a multipolar world where difference feeds democratic politics. So, in other words, the only way to reinvigorate civil society and political participation is not by resisting conflict but by recognizing its centrality to the political process and its capacity to produce legitimate political identities.

In the case of the street television movement I write about here, which is not quite the example Mouffe had in mind when she wrote her seminal book *On the Political*, the same post-political climate in Italy has forced not only the marginalization of social dissent but also its relegation to underground channels of communication in order to be minimally visible. This adds another layer to Mouffe's preoccupation with the fate of antagonism, or conflict in the case of Insu^tv, when it is not tolerated or addressed. In a sense, the producers of Insu^tv use street television, despite its state of underground marginality, as a way to avoid exactly what Mouffe is concerned about: the degeneration of conflict into uncontrolled violence. A radical vision of democracy here is understood as activist citizens who, in the absence of a process of political legitimation in mainstream society, create agonistic spaces through the limited means they possess precisely to diffuse the impending violence the suppression of dissent might produce. Tactical media provide a breathing space for this kind of agonism from the bottom up before it devolves into destructive antagonism against hegemonic political structures. The proliferation of these spaces becomes not only a vital tactic to avoid the totalizing power of dominant frames of discourse and political action, but also a way to foster a necessary civil competency of creating legitimate and visible venues for the expression of conflict. It would be naïve to simply argue that tactical media such as street television in Italy resolves all conflict by virtue of its existence, but it at least sets in motion a vibrant process of reclaiming a space for the performance of citizenship in a highly contested climate of competing powers and social allegiances.

## Concluding remarks

Projects like the Insu^tv collective might initially appear of little political consequence primarily because of their size and the limitations of their public reach, but their intervention is significant precisely because it reflects important ruptures in the nature of dissent and activism in an era of informational capitalism and digital political engagement. It might be, as Rita Raley argues, that a new generation of social actors who are suspicious of the singular revolutionary event and the tactics of street-based protests is opting for 'a multiplicity of actions, practices, performances and interventions' (2009: 151) as their modus operandi. The political impact of their dissent resides not only in the content of their oppositional claims but also in the strategic tactic of their re-appropriation of existing spaces and media technologies against themselves. The technological prowess of these activists becomes indeed, along with the substance of their grievances, an important essence of their project of cultural and political critique. In the case of the Insu^tv collective, the use of crowdfunding, documentary production from below, and

DIY broadcasting has the express intent to overturn the dominant use of media technologies in a neoliberal system – which itself thrives on deregulation and open spaces – to entertain and flatten public opinion. The technological expertise behind the collective is then a critical asset in the long-standing fight against oppressive state and corporate power, not that it will overhaul existing power relations, but it does provide meaningful models for political participation and civic engagement which would not be available otherwise.

Thus an underlying feature of the collective's brand of activism is the emphasis it places on the performance of dissent as a tactic of intervention. The aesthetics of such interventions are foregrounded as a critical component of opposition in that the performativity in the media production of each participant, regardless of its impact, already contains within itself the act, or at least the potential, of dissent. Whether this reduces activism to pure form or describes an overly subjective type of political engagement in the digital age, it reflects a rapidly shifting ground of contemporary activism, which defies the hierarchical binaries of street activism versus screen activism.

## Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Notes

1. At the end of 2009, Sky Italia had a total of 4.7 million subscriptions, corresponding to 8 percent of the population (Anonymous, 2010).
2. In 2011, 54 percent of Italians read a newspaper once a week, while only 45 percent read books. The use of the internet grew slightly compared to previous years, but it remained popular mostly among the youngest generations: 90 percent of young people between the ages of 15 and 25 used the web on a regular basis, while only 14.9 percent of the 64–73 year-olds accessed the internet (http://www.tvdigitaldivide.it/tag/consumo-libri/).
3. In their study on partisan control and media bias, Durante and Knight found that, following the 2001 elections and Berlusconi's ascent to power, the news content on both RAI and Mediaset shifted to the right, with clear consequences in terms of viewership: right-wing viewers increased their trust in public television, while left-leaning audiences relied only on marginal, ideologically leftist channels of information (Durante and Knight, 2009).
4. For more historical background on Italian alternative media in the 1960s and 1970s and 'free radios' in particular, see Downing (2000).
5. 'Franco Berardi Bifo is a contemporary writer, media-theorist and media activist. He founded the magazine *A/traverso* (1975–1981) and was part of the staff of Radio Alice, the first free pirate radio station in Italy (1976–1978). Like others involved in the political movement of Autonomia in Italy during the 1970s, he fled to Paris, where he worked with Felix Guattari in the field of schizoanalysis. During the 1980s he contributed to the magazines *Semiotexte* (New York), *Chimerees* (Paris), *Metropoli* (Rome) and *Musica 80* (Milan). In the 1990s he published *Mutazione e Ciberpunk* (Genoa, 1993), *Cibernauti* (Rome, 1994), and *Felix* (Rome, 2001). He is currently collaborating on the magazine *Derive Approdi* as well as teaching social history of communication at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Milan' (http://www.generation-online.org/p/pbifo.htm).
6. http://www.musicaememoria.com/le_prime_radio_libere_in_italia.htm
7. Personal communication, September 2009.

8. The official demographics do not include the high number of illegal migrants, who settle down in Naples and work in the underground industry.
9. Here I use the term 'transmedia' coined by Henry Jenkins in his analysis of transmedia storytelling in contemporary entertainment industries (Jenkins, 2003).
10. Literally 'bottom-up productions'; http://www.produzionidalbasso.com
11. Crowdfunding is believed to have started in the United States where websites like kickstarter.com have allowed creators to promote their ideas and find money for their productions. A successful example of this is the 2009 environment film *The Age of Stupid* by Franny Armstrong, discussed thoroughly by Tyron (2011).
12. According to the 2011 study by Censis/Ucsi, in Italy the digital divide is marked by age and education level: 87.4 percent of young people (14–29) use the web as a source of information, while only 15.1 percent of the older population (65–80) do so on a regular basis. The difference in terms of education is equally striking: 72.2 percent of people with higher degrees and 37.7 percent of individuals with lower levels of formal instruction (Censis/Ucsi, 2011).

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