

# At the intersections of journalisms and politics. Semi-established media and social movements in Italy\*

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## Abstract

Literature on social movements and media is rich in studies focusing on interactions between 1) social movement actors and mainstream media and 2) social movement actors and alternative media. Mainstream and alternative media, however, are not the two only categories of media organizations and outlets with which social movement actors interact. They indeed frequently engage in intense and extended interactions with media organizations and outlets that are neither mainstream nor alternative but openly operate at the intersections of journalisms and politics. Literature on social movements and media lack in both empirical studies and conceptual definitions of “semi-established media” that occupy an intermediated position in an ideal continuum going from mainstream to alternative media. Based on in-depth interviews with activists and journalists involved in Italian mobilizations related to the labour realm, this article seeks to fill this gap in existing literature. In particular, the article 1) lists and explains the aspects that render semi-established media dissimilar to both mainstream and alternative media and then introduces two examples of progressive semi-established media in Italy, 2) explores how the relationship between semi-established media organizations and social movement actors develops on the ground level considering activists’ perception of and activists’ interaction with semi-established media respectively, 3) further discusses the results of the analysis considering the peculiar position of semi-established media organizations and outlets, which are at the intersection of journalism and politics, and 4) illustrates the relevance of semi-established media for scholars interested in developing further knowledge about mediation processes related to and managed by social movement actors.

**Keywords:** semi-established media; journalism; politics.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social movement actors interact with diverse media organizations and outlets. They seek the attention of mainstream and corporate mass media that in turn have an impact on social movements’ internal dynamics related to organizational patterns, forms of protest and collective action frames (Rucht 2010; Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993; Gitlin 1980; Molotch 1979). They also engage in the creation of alternative, independent, radical, and autonomous media that allow social movement actors to elaborate and circulate alternative system of meanings about contentious issues and, in doing so, to pose challenges to mainstream media power (Couldry and Curran 2003; Atton 2002; Downing 1984) and to empower citizens (Rodriguez 2001). While mainstream media are outside the social movement milieu, often times alternative, radical and autonomous media position themselves within it. Mainstream and alternative media, however, are not the two only categories of media organizations and outlets with which social movement actors interact. Especially in countries characterized by high political parallelism between the media and the political system, like Southern European countries (Hallin and Mancini 2004), social movement actors frequently engage in intense and extended interactions with media organizations and outlets that are neither mainstream nor alternative but

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openly operate at the intersections of journalism and politics. This category of media organizations and outlets is not a novelty. Focusing on the progressive spectrum of the political realm, for instance, there are “Leninist media” rooted in revolutionary parties of the past century (Downing 1984), the “working class press” embedded in organizations developed within workers movements, like trade unions (Grace 1985; Sparks 1985), and “second media” economically supported by “socialist, communist or/and leftist parties” as opposed to alternative “third media” and dominant “first media” (Dagron 2004: 45).

Literature on social movements and media suffers from two gaps with regard to these specific media organizations and outlets, here named semi-established media. First, with very few exceptions, it fails in recognizing the empirical existence and in elaborating a conceptual definition of media organizations and outlets that have an intermediary position in the ideal continuum going from mainstream to alternative media. Second, it devotes scarce attention to how social movement actors interact with this category of media organization and outlet, despite the relevant role that they can potentially play with regard to the symbolic dimensions of social movement processes, like the development of collective identities and the construction of critical discourses on specific contentious issues. Starting from an explorative investigation of five mobilizations related to the labour realm in Italy, this article seeks to fill these gaps in existing literature.

This article develops as follows. The first section deals with some methodological remarks and presents the five case studies on which the analysis is based. The second section lists and explains the aspects that render semi-established media dissimilar to both mainstream and alternative media and then introduces two examples of progressive semi-established media in Italy. The third and the fourth sections explore how the relationship between semi-established media organizations and social movement actors develops on the ground level considering activists’ perception of and activists’ interaction with semi-established media

respectively. The fifth section discusses the results of the analysis considering the peculiar position of semi-established media organizations and outlets, which are at the intersection of journalism and politics. Conclusions sum up the main findings and illustrate the relevance of semi-established media for scholars interested in developing further knowledge about mediation processes related to and managed by social movement actors.

## 2. METHODS AND CASE STUDIES

The category of semi-established media emerged as relevant in a research project about activist media practices of Italian grassroots social movement groups related to labour issues. The investigation was based on a comparative case study approach (George and Bennett 2005; Snow and Trom 2002) that included five mobilizations against the marginalization and insecurity of temporary workers, also named “precarious workers”, in Italy from 2001 to 2006: the transnational parade against precarity named the Euro Mayday Parade, which has taken place in Milan every 1<sup>st</sup> May since 2001; two direct actions named *Reddito Per Tutti\**, one in a mall and the other in a bookshop, which took place in Rome before and during a national demonstration organized by radical trade unions on 6<sup>th</sup> November 2004; the false fashion show of *Serpica Naro* organized by a group of activists and precarious workers who managed to infiltrate the Milan fashion week in February 2005; the mobilization against the reform of public higher education and, in particular, the national demonstration in Rome organized by university students and precarious researchers on 25<sup>th</sup> October 2005; and strikes, pickets and other forms of protest carried out by a small group of precarious workers within one of the biggest call centers in Europe, named the *Atesia*, in 2005.

To analyze activist media practices I adopted “constructionist grounded theory” as a research method, according to which the point of view and the voices of participants are crucial to construct new categories of data (Charmaz 2008; Charmaz 2000) and that assign to coding a central position in the analytical process (Charmaz 2007; Glaser and

Strauss 1967; Glaser and Strauss 1965) so as to value the knowledge of social actors with regard to specific “sensitizing concepts” (Blumer 1954) that are still under-explored in literature, like the category of semi-established media.

I interviewed thirty-four activists selected as a result of their participation in the organization of at least one of the mobilizations investigated.<sup>1</sup> I chose the interviewees according to a specific type of purposeful sampling (Patton 1990), snowball sampling (Weiss 1994; Blaikie 2000), in order to interview a diverse range of activists involved in the five mobilizations. The resulting sample of interviewees covers a broad range of activist groups and provides a tentative picture of those who actively organized protests against precarity.<sup>2</sup> I completed the interview sample of activists involved in the cycle of protest against precarity with four semi-structured interviews with journalists who covered the five mobilizations introduced above and that were employed in two semi-established media active at the time of the precarious workers protests: *il manifesto* and *Liberazione*. Each semi-structured interview lasted from forty-five minutes to 2 hours. I then used transcripts of semi-structured interviews to explore further the sensitizing concept of semi-established media with regard to social movement processes. The data analysis was developed through Atlas.ti a software for Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDA), a tool that proved powerful in analyzing this data set according to the grounded theory research strategy (Muhr and Friese 2004).

### 3. SEMI-ESTABLISHED MEDIA, A PRELIMINARY DEFINITION.

I treated the category of semi-established media as a sensitizing concept to be further explored during the fieldwork and the subsequent analysis. The

1\_ Activists I interviewed, therefore, reproduced the point of view of those activist groups that more actively participated to the organization of mobilizations. For this reason, the results presented in this dissertation mostly concern the specific point of view of specific minorities of activists within social movements and not the more general point of view of more loosely committed protest participants.

2\_ Twenty-two of the interviewees were men and nine women. Detailed information about socio-demographic characteristics of the sample are available under request.

meanings of semi-established media, indeed, vary considerably across space and time. The technological supports through which semi-established media are created and then distributed, moreover, are diverse and go from the print press to online websites. For these reasons, specific instances of semi-established media organizations and outlets do exist, but it is not possible to single out a general and universal definition of this category. Semi-established media, however, share some basic common traits. As with news media in general (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993), semi-established media organizations and journalists, have their own culture that render them different from mainstream media organizations and mainstream media journalists, but also from alternative media outlets and alternative media practitioners. Four dimensions, in particular, differentiate semi-established media organizations that occupy different positions in an ideal continuum going from mainstream to alternative media.

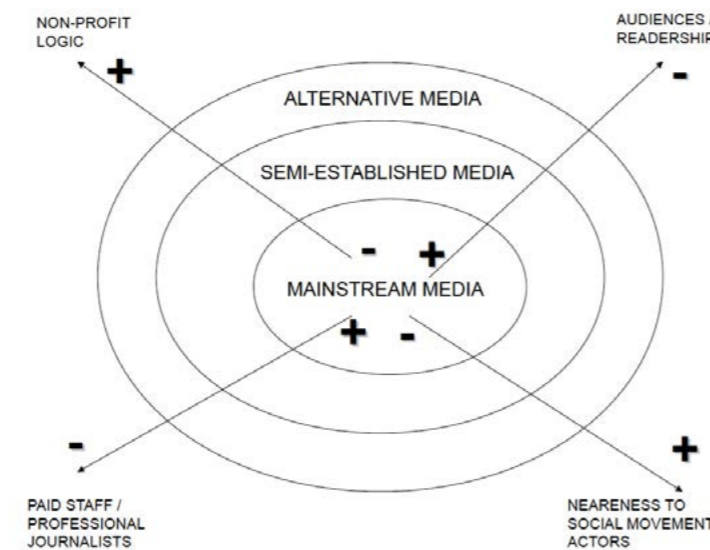


Figure 1 – mainstream, semi-established and alternative media

The first dimension is linked to the position that media organizations have in the media market. Being either entirely commercial or owned by the state, mainstream media are usually profit oriented, while alternative media tend to be non-profit and outside the market logic (Atton 2007). Semi-established media have an intermediate position, since they partially rely on the media market to sustain their business, but can be also economically supported

through public funding or party funding. Without being corporate media organizations in the strict sense, semi-established media are usually profit media outlets. The second dimension is linked to the individuals who work in media organization, either as paid-staff or on a voluntary basis. Mainstream media heavily rely on professional journalists and other media professionals, like photographers. On the contrary, alternative media practitioners frequently do not belong to the category of trained journalists and speak as part of specific communities of citizens (ibidem). Semi-established media may employ paid staff and professional journalists, but often rely on the voluntary work of non professional journalists. The third dimension is linked to the readership of media outlets. Though not always and depending on the territorial level in which they are embedded, mainstream media usually have significant audiences and they are the mass media par excellence. One of the characteristics of alternative media, instead, is the fact that they have smaller audiences than mainstream media (Dagron 2004). Semi-established media, again, occupy an intermediary position between mainstream and alternative media: they usually have a relatively broader circulation than alternative media, but they are not able to reach the mass audiences of mainstream media. The fourth dimension is related to the position of media organizations with regard to the political arena. While mainstream media often present themselves as politically independent and journalistically objective, alternative media are usually embedded in the political sphere since they represent the neglected voices of political, social and cultural actors that are excluded from mainstream media (Rodriguez 2001). In representing and sustaining marginal political subjectivities, alternative media are indeed inherently political and frequently internal to the social movement milieu (Dagron 2004). Semi-established media also assume an explicit political point of view, but they are usually situated at the margins, when not outside, of the social movement milieu: they can show a certain degree of sympathy towards social movement actors (Brinson 2006), but they are to some extent independent from social movement actors. Being openly politically oriented, semi-established media occupy a specific position

at the intersection of journalism and politics, and have a strategic role in the discursive opportunity structure (Ferree et al. 2002) in that they have the potential of supporting and diffusing alternative system of meanings elaborated within the social movement milieu to broader audiences that are already politically oriented.

In Italy, news media organizations and outlets belong to a media system that is characterized by a high degree of parallelism between the media system and the party system (Hallin and Mancini 2004). The influence of the political sphere on the journalistic sphere is therefore generally strong, but there is a difference, in terms of readership and ideological orientation, between generalist news media organizations, that are commercially oriented and aim at reaching broad audience, and news media organizations that openly declare their partisanship in favor of specific political orientations and therefore aim at reaching specific audiences. Amongst the latter, progressive semi-established media, in particular, apply a general (radical) left-wing frame to the news that they propose to audiences. During the fieldwork and the subsequent analysis, activists frequently referred to two progressive semi-established newspapers that were active at the time of the precarious workers mobilizations I was investigating: *il manifesto* and *Liberazione*.

The former was founded in 1969 by a group of intellectuals belonging to the most left-wing group within the PCI (Italian Communist Party) and expelled from the party. It was first published as a weekly journal and, in 1971, became a daily national newspaper. During the 1970s, *il manifesto* was embedded in the network of radical left wing groups that flourishing during that time, named the extra-parliamentary leftist groups (Gozzini 2000). From the very beginning it was, and indeed still is, an independent cooperative of journalists, with no direct political affiliations. Similarly to other media, it was then considered internal to social movements. Indeed, together with other journals, such as *Lotta Continua* and *Il Quotidiano dei Lavoratori*, it has been considered an emblematic example of alternative information for that period (Eco and



Violi 1976). With alternate fortunes, *il manifesto* is still published today and remains a point of reference for all institutional and non-institutional political actors that recognize themselves as radical left-wingers. The other newspaper that activists often mentioned during interviews was *Liberazione*. While the newspaper ceased to be published in 2014, at the time of the fieldwork it was a publication directly affiliated to the PRC (Partito della Rifondazione Comunista), one of the radical left-wing parties born after the last PCI national congress in 1991, when its name was changed to the PDS (Partito Democratico della Sinistra) and a group of about 90 members decided to found a different political party, more openly linked with the communist tradition. In the October of the same year, PRC published the first number of *Liberazione*, a weekly journal that became a national daily newspaper in 1995. Strictly speaking, *Liberazione* could be included in the category of party press (Downing 2001), since it expressed the positions and analyses of the PRC. But immediately after the famous battle of Seattle in 1999 and the beginning of transnational protests against corporate globalization, this political party strategically opened itself to radical, left-wing social movements in general and the global justice movement in particular. As a consequence, *Liberazione* followed the same pattern and supported protests against the G8 summit in Genoa in July 2001, as well as other protest events organized by global justice movements. In alternate phases, these national newspapers were therefore close to social movement struggles, and had direct and indirect linkages with precarious workers protests that occurred from 2001 to 2006 in Italy.

For different reasons, though, they cannot be considered alternative media in the strict sense. The former was born as a form of alternative media, but nowadays its position in the media environment has changed: this is mostly due to the rise of new types of alternative media, more embedded in contemporary social movements than *il manifesto* and directly managed by grassroots social movement groups. The latter was owned and financed by a political party, the PRC, which has connections with grassroots activist groups as well as with the realm of institutional and

representative politics. The remaining of the article elaborates further on progressive semi-established media by focusing on activists' perceptions of and activists' interactions with this category of media organizations and media outlets.

#### 4. CONTROVERSIAL ALLIES. ACTIVISTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SEMI-ESTABLISHED MEDIA.

Activists involved in mobilizations develop specific understandings of the media environment surrounding them. Through direct and indirect experiences with media organizations, media outlets and media professionals, activists elaborate "lay theories" about how mainstream media work (McCurdy 2011), but also about how other categories of media organization and outlets work. In Italy, for instance, activists perceived semi-established media as controversial allies.

Semi-established media were considered as allies because before mobilizations they granted a certain amount of positive and accurate media coverage that contributed to the launch of protest events, speaking about them before they took place. While mainstream media usually promote an inferential framework that foreshadows violence during mobilizations (Halloran, Elliott, and Murdock 1970), semi-established media help activists prepare the ground for mobilization. Matteo,<sup>3</sup> for instance, explained how *il manifesto* promoted the Euro Mayday Parade in 2004:

"For sure, with regard to the Mayday, 'il manifesto' devoted large amounts of space to the parade, in comparison to other newspapers. Even with regard to its launch, not only with regard to journalistic accounts. Obviously, I especially remember how they launched our truck, our mobilizations within the parade. We succeeded in obtaining a lot of space. Even the picture of our truck was published, the one of the pirates assaulting knowledge island."

In giving visibility to mobilizations, semi-

<sup>3</sup> All the names of the interviewees are fictional for reasons of privacy.

established media constituted an important channel for the "standing" of social movement actors in the media environment (Ferree et al. 2002) since they were represented as legitimate political actors participating to the construction of public discourses about specific contentious issue. During the protests against the *Ddl Moratti*, for instance, activist groups promoting the national demonstration were not alone opposing the education reform. The CRUI, the national committee of the Rectors of all Italian universities, had also spoken out against the *Ddl* proposed by the Minister for Education, Letizia Moratti. According to activists, this institutional actor, whose frame on the reform was dramatically different from that of university students, PhD students and precarious researchers, enjoyed extensive mainstream media coverage of its formal, conventional protests. Mirella remembers that this was not the case among semi-established media:

"[they] paid more attention to the reasons of precarious researchers and less space was dedicated to the CRUI. It was kind of an attempt to carry out a more in depth investigation of the precarious researchers' conditions, about the youngest generations, generally precarious, within universities. This was massively ignored until that moment, even by those media which are more attentive to these issues."

Semi-established media were allies in that they privileged the point of view of grassroots mobilizations and, also, because they enriched the context in which they were inserted and completed narratives about protest events, which were frequently incomplete, or else missing, in mainstream media texts. Activists also pointed out the possibility of establishing more direct contacts with semi-established media journalists than with mainstream media ones. Giuseppe explained what this meant:

"With newspapers like *il manifesto* or *Liberazione*, which is friendly press, there is a more intimate, direct relationship on the same wavelength. So, it could happen to me as to everyone else to say to them: we need more space on that now, this should be said because it helps. And we found a certain attention concerning the success of the mobilization and the message that we wanted to convey."

In this case, direct access implies that activist groups can even have face-to-face interactions with journalists working in semi-established media, here defined as the "friendly press", since activists and journalists have more "intimate" relationships than those that activists establish with mainstream media journalists. Overall, activists developed a generally positive perception of semi-established media: they actively supported mobilizations, reporting on them before they took place and reinforcing the discourses related to protest events. They were, in addition, more open than mainstream media, since activists were able to gain direct access to semi-established media through face-to-face interactions with journalists.

The construction of semi-established media as allies during mobilizations, however, was only one part of the story. Some activists, indeed, also found their relationships with semi-established media particularly difficult. The most emblematic examples are the activists involved in the *Precari Atesia* strikes who had very negative opinions of semi-established media and, in particular, of *il manifesto*. They stressed the political linkages of the semi-established media, which rendered it difficult for certain activist groups to receive media attention. The *Precari Atesia* collective blamed the traditional trade union CGIL, whose delegates were also politically active in the call-centre, for the bad working conditions of call-centre operators working in Atesia. According to Sergio and Lorenzo, this influenced semi-established media coverage, which depicted the collective in a rather negative manner:

"[Sergio] There are some journalists that... we did one thing and they said another. They agreed with the others, the unions [...] [Lorenzo] *il manifesto* is a little bit peculiar, it's in a rather strange situation. It is not a newspaper with a director who decides, there is no line, there is no owner who decides what should be published and what shouldn't. In theory, those who work there should be comrades, but [that specific journalist] not only is he not a comrade, he doesn't have any comradeship (they laugh)."

Activists had a clear perception of the political alliances of the semi-established media outlet in question, blamed for favoring traditional trade unions while ignoring the struggles of the *Precari*

Atesia collective. In a similar vein, speaking about the demonstration against the *Ddl Moratti*, some activists were of the opinion that semi-established media overemphasized the presence of certain political actors in the organization of the protest event while overshadowing some others, for instance Antonio:

“il manifesto didn’t speak about it [mobilization against the Ddl Moratti] and when it did, it used as a filter the presumed students’ unions organizations, which don’t exist in Italy, except some like the Udu. But in Rome the Udu is formed by 5 people and doesn’t have real followers. In fact, they never launched a demonstration. [...] Liberazione spoke about it [mobilization against the Ddl Moratti] saying that the youth of their political party were involved in it, as is normal for a political party organ”<sup>4</sup>

84 Activists explained the quality of media coverage pointing out the existence of connections of semi-established media outlets and journalists with other political actors, like trade unions and political parties. But also when activists had relatively good linkages with semi-established media journalists, they could encounter difficulties in receiving media coverage. This happened, for instance, in the case of the *Serpica Naro* fashion show. Some journalists employed in semi-established media had an important role in the network of relations that sustained the protest event. Before its occurrence, indeed, semi-established media outlets reported on protests against fashion designers during the Milan fashion week and announced forthcoming protests against *Serpica Naro* as well. Although the first protests, targeting the two fashion brands Laura Biagiotti and Prada, were genuine, they mainly served to attract journalists to the *Serpica Naro* fashion show, since activist groups announced that it would be their next protest target. Despite the support of semi-established media in spreading this news at the local level, Michele complains that:

“When we organized *Serpica Naro*, il manifesto didn’t publish anything. The day after there were articles published by the “Corriere”, “Il Giornale”, by everybody. il manifesto had the article in

4\_ UDU stands for *Unione Degli Universitari* and is a university student association.

advance, it knew everything in advance because we went to speak with them in the newsroom in advance. And it didn’t publish anything. We had to quarrel for a week to have one article published.”<sup>5</sup>

In the case of the *Serpica Naro* fashion show, the social movement group collaborated with the semi-established media journalists wrote an article before protest events occurred. But activists had to ‘quarrel’ in order to secure one article about the protest event at the national level. This was probably due to the different networks of relations established at different territorial levels: they seem to be tighter and unproblematic at the local level, but more dispersed and problematic at the national level. On the whole, however, Michele recounted this experience as an emblematic example of the difficulties activist groups meet with when trying to receive semi-established media coverage. In line with this, in some cases activists said that it was less time-consuming and more efficient to construct relationships with some mainstream media journalists than to attempt to secure coverage from semi-established media. In some cases, therefore, activists elaborated a rather negative perception of semi-established media. Although sympathetic in principle, they did not support and/or cover some mobilizations because of their political linkages with other political actors.

## 5. BLURRED BOUNDARIES BETWEEN JOURNALISM AND POLITICS: ACTIVISTS’ INTERACTIONS WITH SEMI-ESTABLISHED MEDIA

The previous section shows that activists considered semi-established media seen as controversial allies. When looking at interactions between activists involved in mobilizations against precarity and journalists employed in semi-established media, however, there seems to be a trend towards collaboration rather than antagonism between the two actors. Collaborative interactions

5\_ *Il Giornale* is a right-wing national newspaper founded in 1974 by the journalist Indro Montanelli. At the moment of fieldwork, the owner of the newspaper was Paolo Berlusconi, the brother of the Italian prime minister of the time, media tycoon and entrepreneur Silvio Berlusconi.

between journalists and activists occurred at the intersection of journalism and politics whose boundaries became extremely blurred. This was due to the temporary exchange of roles between activists and journalists and resulted in mutual self-reflections about the journalistic profession and activist identities.

First, journalists employed in semi-established media also participated to the activities of social movement groups and sometime were, according to activists, directly involved in mobilizations. Mirella explained this exchange of roles when speaking about the preparatory stages of many protest events against precarity in general, and of the Euro Mayday Parade in particular:

“These media were also close to us during the organizational passages, so sometimes they reported national assemblies which occurred. So, rather than external observers, sometimes some of them were subjects who took part in the construction of mobilizations, especially in the Mayday’s construction. [...] So I considered them, rather than subjects of information, as subjects that participated in the construction of mobilisations”

Some journalists employed in semi-established media were actually involved in the political reflections on precarity as well as in the active construction of protest events related to this contentious issue. Activists tended to think about them as persons directly engaged in the struggle against precarity, rather than simply journalists.

To take part in the preparatory meetings for a protest event was also important for journalists who considered their participation as part of their professional duties as well as in their political interests. An example was the occupation of *La Sapienza* University, which preceded the national demonstration against the *Ddl Moratti*. As activists involved explained, the three week period of the occupation was important in order to organize the demonstration and increase the mobilization potential of the activist groups organizing it, which were not openly supported by any institutional political actor with the exception of some university student collectives linked to the Young Communist

organization.<sup>6</sup> The occupation also helped journalists to get in touch with the mobilization and grasp its nature. Although they were not supposed to write articles about the occupation, they frequently went to *La Sapienza* University, especially during the night, in order to understand what was going on there, as journalist Nadia explained:

“We did it above all to have a clear perception of it. Actually because one tries to be an external observer, to be a journalist and possibly to have clear ideas about the dynamics of clashes among groups, about who thinks in a certain way and who thinks the opposite. [...] Clashes always happen, obviously, and so one tries to go there and observe even when he or she has nothing to write anything about it. So simply to have an idea about the ongoing dynamics and then usually the article is about the demonstration or with interviews”

85 Activists and journalists attached different meanings to participation in the preparatory stages of protest events, like in the case of the occupation of *La Sapienza* University. Besides any real interest in mobilizations, journalists employed in semi-established media considered themselves first and foremost as journalists and then, sometimes, as activists. They referred first to their occupational culture and then, sometimes, to the political cultures of activist groups mobilized against precarity. In line with this, the journalist Piero considered himself an “external observer” who wanted to understand as clearly as possible what was going on within the social movement milieu. This was because the ultimate aim of the journalist was to write articles that would take into account the protest event in its entirety rather than from the point of view of any specific social movement group. In this regard, a comprehensive perception of intra-movement dynamics, which frequently led to clashes between activist groups, was a necessary preliminary step in order to be able to single out people to interview as well as to describe the demonstration faithfully. While activists sometimes considered journalists as involved in the organization of protest events, the latter tended to continue to consider themselves as

6\_ *Giovani Comunisti* was the young people’s organization of the PRC (Partito della Rifondazione Comunista). The organization was founded in 1994, one year after the PRC was born.



journalists with radical left wing backgrounds trying to fulfill the requirements of their professional culture. This was evident in another interview with journalist Franco, who stressed the importance of maintaining two roles, that of journalist and that of activist, as separate as possible when speaking about mobilizations.

Second, activists involved in mobilizations against precarity sometime had an active role in the writing of semi-established media texts. In this case, activists temporarily assumed the role of journalists and this, in turn, activated moments of self-reflections about social movement activities, for activists, and the news-making process, for journalists. For instance, during the mobilizations against the *Ddl Moratti*, some of the activists involved played a twofold role, as Nadia explained:

“We have different researchers who are activists and also collaborators in our newspaper. So it was also a period in which they were frequently here [in the newsroom], so we could speak with them because [...] in the afternoon they came, proposed articles, we discussed them.”

The fact that activists involved in mobilizations against the *Ddl Moratti* were both collaborators on newspapers and university researchers facilitated a fruitful exchange and an overlap between two usually separate places: the place of information, that is the newsrooms of semi-established media, and the place of conflict, that is the occupied *La Sapienza* University, which was one of the most important centers of this struggle. In a similar vein, those semi-established media linked to far left wing political parties frequently asked for contributions from activists participating in mobilizations against precarity and members of their political party, as Mirella explained when speaking about the Euro Mayday parade:

“With regard to the Euro Mayday, the contacts I had with the media were with more political media. It could happen that *Liberazione*, the newspaper of *Rifondazione*, asked for an article or an interview about the Mayday. Because I lived here in Milan and so it was easier for me to follow all the organizational stages of the Mayday Parade.”

Sometimes, even activists who did not collaborate with semi-established media on a regular basis were involved in the construction of media texts related to mobilizations against precarity. For instance, various semi-established media asked Maya for media texts on the Euro Mayday Parade in 2004:

“They asked for pieces on the Mayday’s organization and not about theories, because for theories each of had its own journalist [...] It was a peculiar experience because I was not used to writing for newspapers and before the Mayday I was there asking myself ‘what is the Mayday? What do I usually do when I wake up in the morning before going into the streets, what do I have to do, what are the relationships which surround me. It was really funny as an analytical passage.”

As Maya tells it, writing media texts for semi-established media could also give the opportunity to reflect on the protest events activists organized as well as to understand the news-making process from a more internal point of view. Activists were therefore no longer mere active audiences of semi-established media, which they could criticize (or not) while remaining on the outside. Instead they temporarily assumed the role of semi-established media producers or at least collaborators. For a while, they became a part of them and reflected about their roles as activists from a different perspective. Exchanges and patterns of collaboration between activists and journalists could also produce moments of self-reflection for journalists. The two *Reddito per Tutt\** direct actions provide a good example of this. Mainstream media immediately depicted these protest events as extremely radical and violent and compared the protest events with the previous cycle of protest of the late 1970s, the so-called ’77 movement. This distorted media coverage of the two direct actions that was also proposed on various mainstream informational websites. The discursive context was, from the very beginning, hostile to the activists that organized and participated in the direct actions. In the days immediately after them, a semi-established journalist from Rome met some activists who were very disappointed about the way in which mainstream media depicted the protest events. Journalist Piero told me what happened during that

meeting in the newsroom:

“They came into my room and we began to speak. I said: listen, this evening I’m going to say this and that. And they said to me: well, then we will write it together. I have to say that [the article] was published with my signature since I wrote some things they didn’t agree with. But it was a great experience, because I was writing and they were behind me [...] and commented. They said: ‘in my opinion you are wrong in doing this’ and so on and so forth. And that was a text that, how to put it, I took a lot of time to write it. And then there was this wonderful element of respect from them. They said about what I wrote: ‘You think this way and we do not completely agree with you, but we think that this thing also belongs to us, this corresponds to the feelings many of us have.’”

The story told by journalist Piero speaks volumes about the level of openness that semi-established media sometimes had with respect to activists. It also illustrates a very interesting moment where the invisible though tangible wall that usually separates media producers and media consumers fell. The semi-established media journalist had the opportunity to write an article alongside a section of his audience, who were at the same time a part of his news source. Activists, in addition, had the opportunity to enter a newsroom and observe how the newspaper article was conceived. Furthermore, they contributed to writing the article, transforming themselves into media producers.

Third, some journalists also participated in the production of alternative media texts. In these cases, the interaction between activists and journalists was to some extent reversed, in the sense that activists employed journalists as experts about specific contentious issues and thus asked them to contribute to debates, widen social problems and analyze mobilizations. This kind of exchange seemed an usual and established type of interaction, as Manuela explained when speaking about the alternative radio in which she was involved:

“Here at the radio station we do this thing very often. There are some journalists who are more or less significant regarding what you’re saying. From the *il manifesto* correspondent, who lives in Jerusalem, and who has also been our correspondent for years to another journalist who may speak about a lot of things, but we

often invite him to speak about copyright, digital rights.”

The reasons for using journalists employed in semi-established media as experts within alternative media were twofold. Even though semi-established media as a whole were frequently perceived as controversial allies, interactions between a specific journalist and a specific social movement group could be planned and positive. In such cases, a common political viewpoint and similar interpretative frames about social problems, contentious issues and societies in general seemed to form the reason why activists asked journalists to provide authoritative analyses and comments in alternative media. Holding the same political viewpoints was not enough on its own: journalists acquired the status of experts because of the nature of their profession, which gave them a more comprehensive understanding of the social problems that activists addressed. A particularly complex issue was that linked to the public education reform, challenged during the mobilizations against the *Ddl Moratti*. University students experienced daily the outcomes of previous public education reforms, criticized them and were able to construct detailed reflections about their living conditions as university students. However, they could ask for technical analysis and specialized comments from journalists, as Andrea explained:

“There is a journalist who, each year, studies all the school and university reform proposals, due to her job and to the sector she follows for her newspaper. We often interview her, since she is a source of information for us. Many among us... nearly all of us often don’t have the time and maybe lack the abilities necessary to understand a law.”

In this case, journalists working in semi-established media were recognized as important news sources for their technical, specialized knowledge, which many activists had not developed. They were used in order to deepen and strengthen all those reasons behind mobilizations. Journalists, in addition, may also be used to produce independent media texts directly related to a particular protest event, as Nadia explained:

There is a very strict relationship between our

journalists and movement radio, so we intervene, they tell us things, and they ask us to tell things. We also do some correspondences. [...] Since demonstrations are often in Rome and maybe they don't have the possibility to have someone in Rome, they ask for a correspondent. So you do the correspondence, pass the mobile phone to someone, I let you speak with this one and that one, and you do a normal report."

Activists used the professional abilities of sympathetic journalists to report those protest events they could not cover. This section shows that semi-established media are sites where interactions between activists and journalists could result in the breaching of the boundaries between different categories of media organizations and outlets and of the usual separation between media producers and media consumers. It also illustrates that the distinction between the role of activist and the role of journalist rest is fragile and subjective.

## 6. THE POLITICAL NATURE OF SEMI-ESTABLISHED MEDIA

The findings proposed in the previous sections can be further discussed considering semi-established media as actors that live at the intersection between journalism and politics. This intersection was embodied in the specific position of individual journalists, that often shared the same political orientation with activists also due to biographical reasons, as Nadia stressed:

"We have a political experience, so clearly there are also personal relationships at stake and I think that this is true for all, not only for my newspaper. Those who have political experience are those you know and then as the years go by you strengthen [these relationships] and, beyond personal ties and friendships [...], you continue to refer to them and maybe they give you the contacts with other people".

A common past of political participation created social ties that formed the starting point for constructing a network of relations between activists and journalists. The latter, in particular, maintained contact with other activists because of their previous social ties rooted in their pasts as activists. They

also established new social ties with previously unknown activists considered as valuable news sources. The bonding dimension in these networks seems to be strong mutual trust, which both activists and sympathetic journalists considered extremely important. The political nature of this network, and the creation of an atmosphere of reliance, did not however guarantee the development of plans and non-contentious interactions between activists and journalists. Activists often considered semi-established media as political actors who actively intervened in shaping discourses about mobilizations. As journalist Nadia explained, this was a normal problem to be faced:

"With movements, the problem always regards who receives more space and why you give more space to someone and less to someone else. Because to some extent it seems you have assumed the political line of a person or a group. Controversies are always about that, while those less political ones, let's say, happen when you don't give space to certain initiatives. It is clear that when a mobilization is taking place they would like you to write about all the assemblies, all the pickets, all the things they do. While you have only the "shorts", only the little "reminder" and they say to you: 'you should have done bigger things', 'you should have been more interested in it', 'you were not attentive, you didn't follow us'. This frequently happens to me also because I always ask myself 'is the reader interested in this?'. Because, you know, when you write about these demonstrations, [...] you always risk writing for those who did them".

This quote illustrates in a rather exhaustive way the point of view of those sympathetic journalists frequently blamed for not having dedicated enough space to mobilizations. Here, what was at stake was a complex mix of news values – what the reader really wants to be informed about – and constraints related to the news-making process – that is the lack of space within a newspaper – which could be also interpreted as a reflection of what the media organization as a whole thinks about certain protest events.

As noticed above, however, the fact that semi-established media are positioned at the intersection of journalism and politics also led to a biased media coverage that was seen as a problem for grassroots activists groups. This was certainly true for

*Liberazione*, linked to the PRC, but apparently also applied to *il manifesto*, published by an independent cooperative society. Speaking about *Liberazione*, for instance, Sandra explained that:

"Liberazione gave space to it [the Euro Mayday Parade], because we were in a phase preceding this one. In the sense that Rifondazione was not in government, and Rifondazione, since Genoa [the anti G8 demonstration in July, 2001], has always tried to pin its colours on the movement. It always positions itself as the movement party, always remaining in this game of violence vs. non-violence. In fact, *Liberazione* published articles in which there was a narration, a report about who was in the streets and then, instead, articles which denounced and attacked those direct actions occurring within the Euromayday."

Semi-established media as the direct mouthpieces of political actors, political parties in the case of *Liberazione*. As a consequence, activists perceived semi-established media coverage as reinforcing the positions of predetermined political actors at the discursive level, and as selectively supporting mobilizations in which those same political actors were involved, reinforcing their specific collective action frames. Maya, for instance, observed that the Euro Mayday Parade was not covered at the very beginning, and that semi-established media "began to push the Mayday when it was taken up by political parties, not when it was simply recognized at the social level." It was not enough, therefore, for activists to single out a relevant social problem, precarity, and a relevant political actor, precarious workers, to gain coverage in semi-established media. It was necessary for one or more conventional political actors to enter the network of relations sustaining the mobilizations.

In some cases, activists considered semi-established media as political actors in the strict sense and thus perceived their strong political identities as the main obstacle to gaining recognition. Speaking about the demonstration against the *Ddl Moratti*, for instance, Mario pointed out that with these media outlets:

"There is anything but a frank political exchange. That is, you organize agitations against the Berlusconi government and we will follow you. And in fact, they followed us in the last period of the movement. You put into practice self-organization and so on and we will consider you

too into the movement (movimentisti). [...] In our relationships with certain kinds of press a more political relationship occurred."

In this quote, Mario underlines that the development of grassroots mobilizations, what he names the "practice of self-organization", did not fit with the political standpoint of the semi-established media outlet in question. Being at the margins of the political arena and criticizing more conventional political actors through the adoption of different organizational patterns, based on participation rather than on representation, led to a partial recognition of mobilizations against precarity. In this line, Mario said that the relationship with semi-established media was often "political", meaning that political cleavages related to the forms and content of protests played a role in the recognition of grassroots social movement groups that expresses strong critiques of representative democracies. They did not felt represented by conventional political actors, like traditional trade unions and left-wing political parties, and they aimed at representing their own claims and demands without any institutional political mediation. Mobilizations against precarity, therefore, put into question representative democratic processes and, therefore, also the role of semi-established media that often represented the point of view of conventional political actors. For this reason, grassroots social movement groups had difficulties in obtaining semi-established media coverage.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

Semi-established media occupy an intermediate position in an ideal continuum going from mainstream to alternative media. Literature on media in and on social movement actors did not study this category of media organizations, despite the relevance it has for social movement actors, especially in countries where political parallelism between the political sphere and the journalistic sphere is strong. This explorative article seeks to fill this gap in literature analyzing the relationship between semi-established media and grassroots social movement groups promoting mobilizations related to the labour realm in Italy.



90 Activists underlined the existence of strong and clear political standpoints in semi-established media that rendered them controversial allies. Being social actors positioned at the intersection of journalism and politics, progressive semi-established media were frequently a site of collaborative interaction between journalists and activists overall based on a high degree of trust. Many journalists were activists in past cycles of mobilizations, many activists sometimes acted as journalists during mobilizations against precarity. The support of journalists to the creation of alternative media texts contributed to construct a continuity between alternative media outlets embedded in the social movement milieu and semi-established media situated at the margins of the social movement milieu. There was, moreover, a continuous exchange of roles, sometimes accepted and sometimes refused by journalists in the name of the professional culture to which they belonged: journalists had an active role during preparatory stages of mobilizations and activists contributed to the production of contents to be published in semi-established media outlets. The existence of such overlapping roles also led to tense interactions, greater expectations and continuous negotiations between social movement actors and news media organizations. But it also sustained the activation of self-reflexive practices about social movement activities, for activists, and news-making processes, for journalists. Overall, the article illustrates some dynamics occurring at the intersections of journalism and politics in the specific case of the traditional press, supporting the argument that recent movement-media dynamics linked to the emergence of information and communication technologies, like the blurring boundaries between journalists and activists, media producers and media consumers are not completely new and can in fact also be detected when investigating the relationship between activists and analog news media, like newspapers.

This article also illustrates that semi-established media, as an analytical lens, cannot be applied to a static and immutable set of media outlets: due to the fact that the degree of 'sympathy' changes according to the protest in point and the way in which those involved in such mobilizations look at

the media environment towards which they act. The very category of media outlet, furthermore, has its own life course as the media environment in which it is inserted also evolved, as it is evident when considering the historical trajectory of *il manifesto*: born as an alternative and counter-information outlet during the 1970s, nowadays it is a semi-established radical left-wing newspaper. At a more abstract level, therefore, to explore and refine the sensitizing concept of semi-established media also tells something about the importance of actors' perceptions when analyzing movement-media dynamics: while it is difficult, if not impossible, to assert that a fixed and static number of semi-established media do exist in a given media environment, this article showed that activists have in mind a specific media geography in which semi-established media have an important, though frequently contested, position.

While casting light on movement-media dynamics at the intersection of journalism and politics, this article also leads to new research demands. First, this article focused on two print semi-established media outlets leaving aside other technological formats, like the radio and the internet. The internet, in particular, seems a relevant technological environment for semi-established media organizations that could push even further the collaboration between activists and journalists and the breaching of the usual division between media producers and media consumers. Further research in this direction is needed to develop a cross-technological comparison to develop a typology that takes into consideration the means of production and distribution of this category of semi-established media. Second, the concept of semi-established media as developed here is embedded in the Italian media system and political context. Due to the strong connections between political power and media power, Italian semi-established media have a clear and distinct political identity. For this reason they seem to be particularly relevant for social movement actors to reach specific audience segments already politically receptive, amongst which political party leaders, traditional trade unionists, journalists working in mainstream media and, of course, potential protestors. Further cross-

country comparative research is therefore needed to analyze the relationship between social movement groups and semi-established media in countries characterized by different discursive and political opportunity structures, like *Liberation* in France or *Taz* in Germany. Such a comparative research would refine the category of semi-established media at the conceptual level, but could also be an interesting lens through which to observe different instances of political parallelism at work across the world. Third, the few existing studies on this topic and this article especially focus on progressive social movement actors and progressive semi-established media. However, similarly to what happens with alternative media (Atton 2007) conservative semi-established media exist that interact with conservative social movements. Further research in this direction is needed to understand if some of the qualities of progressive semi-established media outlined in this article are also present in conservative semi-established media and hence due to their position in the media environment or, on the contrary, are absent and replaced by other qualities hence due to differences at the level of political cultures.

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