

CHAPTER NINE

Beppegrillo.it

One Year in the Life of an Italian Blog

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Beppe Grillo: The Talking Cricket

In Carlo Collodi's classic children tale, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, a talking cricket (*grillo* in Italian) is killed by Pinocchio for trying to impart wisdom to the wooden-headed marionette. In the contemporary Italian media landscape there is another controversial cricket, Beppe Grillo, one of the most popular and controversial stand-up comedians who has ever appeared on Italian television. Grillo began his career at the end of the 1970s (Internazionale, n.d.) and by the early 1980s, high audience ratings and critical acclaim made him a national celebrity. Toward the end of the decade, he began criticizing prominent Italian politicians and big corporations for corrupt practices (Grasso, 1992: 467–468; Israely, 2005). Because of mounting pressure of politicians and advertisers against Grillo's satire, TV producers stopped inviting him on their shows. Sent into unofficial exile, Grillo was forced to perform in theatres, sports arenas, and public squares.

Since the early 1990s Grillo has appeared only twice on public television. Yet Grillo's ban from the small screen has made him even more popular with the Italian public (Internazionale, n.d.), which regards him as the outspoken talking cricket, a vociferous critic of political and economic corruption. In 2005 *Time* magazine named Grillo among the 37 European heroes of the year (Israely, 2005).¹ In recent times, Grillo has been able to increase his popularity by transforming him-

self from a popular television comedian into a blogger. Through his site *beppegrillo.it* Grillo and his staff offer nonaligned and critical political information that rarely finds space in today's mainstream media. At the same time, thanks to the comments and countless feedbacks that are either posted daily on the blog or sent via email, Grillo himself has access to information and stories that otherwise would remain untold.

In this chapter, I argue that *beppegrillo.it* represents both the dark and the bright sides of grassroots politics on the Web. Digital tools and networks offer potential new ways to facilitate political engagement; they can also serve to undermine the democratic process they champion by adopting a double standards approach on three important pillars of any democratic endeavor: transparency, accountability, and representativeness.

On the one hand, democratic institutions, elected representatives, watchdog and civil society organizations are all important elements of the complex mechanism of a democracy, and they are all—in various degrees—expected to uphold these three fundamental pillars (Held, 1996). On the other hand, political formations facilitated through digital tools, such as blogs, do not require these three elements. Blogs like *beppegrillo.it*, attract thousands of readers every day and can act as a point of reference in important political debates. The more political they become the more they should consider whom if anyone they represent and to what extent they should be accountable and transparent. Often, however, bloggers avoid these questions because of the ambiguous role they play in public sphere: Are they journalists? Are they political subjects? Or are they merely the solo voice of a chorus of angry citizens?

Grillo is a vociferous critic of the lack of democratic openness in contemporary Italian politics. He fights to unveil the truth about issues that mainstream media and politicians do not dare to address (Grillo, 2004: 405). His main arguments can be summarised in three lines of critique: (1) politicians (and also high ranking civil servants) should be held accountable for their actions (Grillo, 2006d); (2) to be truly representative they should be chosen by the people and not by political parties, as is often the case in Italy (Grillo, 2007a; Povoledo, 2007); (3) politicians and their actions should be fully transparent (Grillo, 2007a). As Grillo's actions are becoming increasingly political and action oriented, however, Grillo needs to confront the questions of accountability, representativeness, and transparency in order to strengthen its political potential and protect against accusations of shallow demagoguery.

The case of *beppegrillo.it* also represents an important example of how civic-minded people with limited access to mainstream media, but who are equipped with a strong sense of civic engagement and a history of integrity and who are willing to support others, can indeed harness the power of the Web to promote innovative modes of political participation. Overall, *beppegrillo.it* is more than simply a blog,

it functions as an electronic beacon whose signals manage to attract on its virtual shores an otherwise fragmented and geographically dispersed public. The texts of the many thousand comments, published on the blog and from the quick and continuing blossoming of many hundreds of Friends of Beppe Grillo Meetup groups, demonstrate that this virtual space is home to a flourishing community of individuals looking to fight against the establishment.

The political background in which the blog was born and bred has clearly been a key factor in its expansion. The growing shadow of the media regime established by Silvio Berlusconi, while serving as Italy's prime minister (2001–2006), has on one hand muted criticism coming from mainstream media. On the other hand, it has produced two unintended consequences: (1) the Internet has virtually remained untouched by censorship, (2) the silencing of mainstream media has pushed non-aligned audiences toward new alternative sources of information such as *beppegrillo.it*. Thus, it is not surprising that the comedian's blog, in a short period of time, has become one of the main reference points through which many Italians, scattered around the country and across the globe, can make sense of the state of things in the country.

Berlusconi's Media Regime

Silvio Berlusconi is the richest man in Italy (*Forbes Magazine*, 2007) and the owner of the largest commercial television group, *Mediaset*, through which he personally controls three country-wide television networks (*Canale 5*, *Italia 1*, *Rete 4*). The late Indro Montanelli was a strong critic of Berlusconi's power and one of the most respected Italian journalists of the twentieth century. For Montanelli, Berlusconi with his predominant position in the Italian media landscape represented a great danger for democracy. "Nowadays," Montanelli argued "to introduce a regime, one no longer needs to march towards Rome, nor does one need to set fire to the Reichstag, neither one needs a coup at the Winter Palace. All that is needed are the so-called mass communication media: and among them, sovereign and irresistible is television" (Gomez & Travaglio, 2004: back cover).

Serving as prime minister, between 2001 and 2006, Berlusconi, effectively, was also in control of the Italian public service broadcaster, *Radiotelevisione Italiana* (RAI). Created in 1954, RAI has developed in a complex state-owned media company comprised of three terrestrial nation-wide networks, radios, satellite and Internet television. Its main revenue is based on a national TV license fee and is administered by a nine-member board. By law, these board members are chosen by political parties—seven elected by a parliamentary committee and two by the Ministry of Finance (*La Repubblica*, 2005).

Due to Berlusconi's media monopoly—his strong institutional grip on RAI, his business control of Mediaset,² and the silencing of the center-left press (Blatmann, 2003; Gomez & Travaglio, 2004: 217–246) he was able to establish a firm media regime during his five years in power, run by people *willing to* support Berlusconi's own version of truth. Furthermore, as the historian Paul Ginsborg puts it, Berlusconi “has always had his own team of ‘organic’ intellectuals of variable quality [. . .] whose programmes have barked out the line incessantly, at all times of the day and night” (Ginsborg, 2003: 38).

One famous example of the influence of the regime on Italian media is the Italy-Germany diplomatic row that took place in the summer of 2003. When in July of that year Berlusconi caused a wave of indignation throughout Europe by comparing a German member of European Parliament, Martin Schultz, to a Nazi concentration camp commander (*The Guardian*, 2003a), RAI's main evening news program did not show the incident and only briefly reported on it; coverage on other stations was “deliberately softened and cut” (Arie, 2003). The Italian press downplayed the affair, “with many papers relegating the story to the back pages” as reported by the BBC (2003).

Between 2001 and 2006, Berlusconi's unique media regime³ was capable of casting a heavy curtain of silence over information that might have damaged the prime minister's image and business interests. Amid a series of trials and investigations into the sources of Berlusconi's wealth that could have ruined him politically and economically, his control of media muzzled any attempt at thorough analysis of those trials and their revelations.⁴ Not surprisingly, in this political milieu, Freedom House listed Italy as the least democratic country in Europe: Italy was ranked eightieth in the world, immediately after Tonga and Botswana and just before Antigua and Burkina Faso (Freedom House, 2006).

The part of the Italian public who disagreed with Berlusconi's politics and his methods resisted by seeking ways to break through the censorship and control that sustained the regime. Traditional means of resistance, such as public gatherings and picketing, are ineffective when television networks refuse to report them (Gomez & Travaglio, 2004: 284–291). For example, during the 2003 campaign against the Iraq War, 3 million people gathered in Rome, yet the protests were not reported by RAI in order to spare politicians pressure from the people (*The Guardian*, 2003b). Roberto Natale, head of RAI Journalists Union, said he and his colleagues at the station were instructed to downplay the size of the protest, not to show the pacifist flag, and to refer to the protesters not as *pacifisti* (pacifists) but with the negative adjective of *disobbedienti* (disobedient people) (Gomez & Travaglio, 2004: 289; *The Prime Minister and the Press*, 2003). However, there are other ways to defeat the kind of *media regime* operated by Berlusconi. For instance, for Grillo one of the best ways is to infiltrate it with the information that they are trying to censor (Grillo,

2004: 405). Grillo in fact uses the Web to “perforate” the system, to make the public aware of different truths (Grillo, 2004: 405).

Origins, Features, and Numbers of an Italian Blog: Beppegrillo.it

Beppe Grillo’s blog is a compelling example of the political challenge posed by new media to older mainstream media. In a country like Italy, where politicians control both media and government, *beppegrillo.it* can be seen as an archetype, a model of a new type of civic engagement that has the potential to reform Italian politics.

In the words of Grillo, a “blog is an amazing thing that connects people,” virtually and practically. *Beppegrillo.it* aims at providing a free platform for all citizens who are willing to communicate and share information, regardless of their political views (Grillo, n.d. -a). Facilitated by a direct link with the online social networking portal *Meetup.com*,⁵ the blog aims at being the first point of call for people who are looking to engage both online and off in a fight against the monopoly grip on truth exercised by politically biased media.

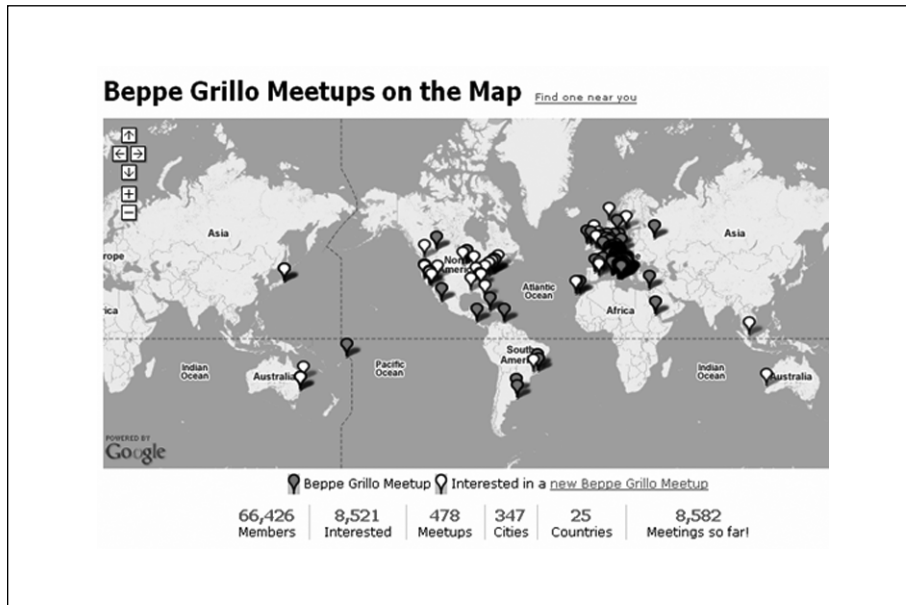


Figure 9.1. Beppe Grillo Meetup groups on the map.

To date, the Meetup.com group category “Friends of Beppe Grillo” has around 66,000 members, themselves organized in 478 groups located in 347 cities in 25 different countries (Figure 9.1).⁶ The friendship groups meet regularly; they have organized more than 8,000 meetings, and sometimes, when possible, Grillo himself attends their meetings, either in person or in video-chat.⁷ Moreover, this multitude of Meetup groups is slowly shaping up into a self-aware international committed network of political activists capable of organizing itself beyond geographical boundaries, independently from the blog. The network uses Meetup to coordinate itself (as in the case the V-day protest—see more below) and harness the power of free software such as Skype, the free Internet-based phone software, to organize International online meetings between its members and discuss the future course of actions.⁸

The Blog's Features: *La Settimana*

Less than a year after its first post, in mid-December 2005, *beppegrillo.it* was voted *best Internet site* in the category “News and Information” for the renowned *WWW 2005 Prize*. The yearly prize, organized by *Il Sole 24 Ore*, the most popular Italian daily financial newspaper, was awarded to Grillo’s blog “for the interactivity with the public, the ample documentation on the Internet and the commitment to tackle topics of use to citizens” (Grillo, 2005b). Like any standard blog, *beppegrillo.it* stores posts by relying on two different kinds of archives: one is organized by months, while the other is organized according to categories, of which there are ten (see note 13). The blog, however, displays some unique features that are strong indicators of the political character inherent to the blog. One of the most important features of Grillo’s blog is the way it seeks to widen its own reach through *La Settimana* (“The Week”; see Figure 9.2).

La Settimana is a print magazine containing the posts published on the blog during the previous week. Recently, Grillo has also begun to post a video version of *La Settimana* on the free-video-hosting platform YouTube.com (See StaffGrillo, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c), widening even more the reach and appeal of the magazine. The videos of *La Settimana* are viewed by hundreds of thousands of people each week. In Italy, where 52 percent⁹ of the population is disconnected from the Web, this rather old-fashioned weekly pamphlet is an attempt to export information from the Web onto the streets. In an editorial published in the first issue of *La Settimana*, Grillo called for taking what he called a step back. He wrote (making fun of Lenin) that *La Settimana* was in effect “one step back in order to go forward” (Grillo, 2006a). What he meant was that the blog uses a traditional method of distributing political information (the printed pamphlet) in order to bridge two different worlds: the world of bits with the world of bricks.¹⁰

Volume 1, numero 01

La Settimana

di Beppe Grillo



Temi dal blog www.beppegrillo.it

Sommario 09.01.2006

Informazione
Lo scoop di Padellaro

Muro del pianto
Niente paura, hai letto bene.
Rapimenti (costosi?) a lieto fine

Politica
Dipendenti co.co.co.
Il meno peggio

Primarie dei Cittadini
Primarie dei cittadini: energia

Salute/Medicina
H5N1: informazione diretta

Trasporti/Viabilità
L'aria è nostra

Dipendenti co.co.co.
Politica
02.01.2006



Siamo tutti preda di un incantesimo. Un incantesimo creato da noi. Ci siamo autoipnotizzati! Abbiamo creato un gruppo di persone che parla, che fa e disfa, che influenza le nostre vite. Giornalisti che sentenziano (in base a quale competenza?), politici (ma ormai che mestiere è?), finanziari che creano soldi (ma i soldi non si creano), ministri (senza conoscenza di ciò che gestiscono), dirigenti di azienda (che pensano di essere loro i padroni al posto degli azionisti). Signori del nulla. Un incantesimo malato, che premia i peggiori, quelli che non creano valore, quelli che non hanno una professione. E che fanno della politica e dell'informazione una cosa loro, privata, non un servizio. Un incantesimo che emargina chi vuole cambiare, che fa emigrare i nostri migliori ragazzi, che ha impoverito la nazione. Esorcizziamoli, proviamo ad annullare l'incantesimo, questa gente non ci serve, è indispensabile solo a sé stessa. L'incantesimo si può spezzare con qualche amuleto. Incominciamo con un primo amuleto, dedicato ai nostri dipendenti: una proposta di legge popolare per ridurre a due sole legislature la possibilità di essere eletto al parlamento, italiano o europeo. Ovviamente con effetto retroattivo. Basta con i pomiciniandrettimastellacasinidalemavi oianterutelli. No ai politici a vita, si ai dipendenti a tempo determinato.

H5N1: informazione diretta
Salute/Medicina
03.01.2006



La notizia più "submarine" di questo inizio 2006 è l'influenza aviaria (H5N1). Non ne parla più nessuno. Gli italiani che hanno comprato decine di migliaia di dosi di tamiflu cominceranno a pensare che i temuti effetti dell'influenza aviaria (milioni di morti nel mondo) siano in realtà una brillante idea marketing delle società farmaceutiche. Il tamiflu non si trova più da nessuna parte (esaurito) e neppure notizie sull'epidemia. Che sia un caso? Sul tamiflu non posso aiutarvi, ma sulla diffusione dell'influenza aviaria qualche informazione posso darvela. L'ultima morte sospetta per H5N1 è avvenuta lunedì 2 gennaio 2006 all'ospedale Sulianti Saroso di Jakarta in Indonesia. La persona colpita dalla malattia era spesso in contatto con pollame d'allevamento ed è il dodicesimo decesso di H5N1 in Indonesia. La contabilità mortuaria è a questo punto di 75 morti per H5N1 dal dicembre 2003, tutti in Asia: -Cambogia 4 -Cina 3 -Indonesia 12 -Tailandia 14 -Vietnam 42 Ad oggi il pericolo di pandemia dai flussi migratori degli uccelli è considerato marginale. L'influenza si diffonde con l'aereo e il pollame contaminato. Queste informazioni si trovano in un sito che ogni giorno fornisce tutte le informazioni sull'H5N1: www.promedmail.org, usatelo per saperne di più e iscrivetevi alla sua newsletter giornaliera. E, se la notizia che ricevete è importante, inviatela con una mail ai giornali, così, tanto per informarli, e in copia anche a Storage.

Beppe Grillo

Figure 9.2. *La Settimana*, January 9, 2006 (Grillo, 2006a). Permission courtesy of www.beppegrillo.it.

One Year In Numbers, a First Assessment: Hints on the Future Trajectory of a Rising Star?

One of the most common ways to measure the “authority” or importance of a blog is to count the number of other bloggers that link to it. This is the methodology used by Technorati.com, the leading blog search engine to determine the search rank of blogs. According to Technorati, *beppegrillo.it* ranks 9 in a list currently tracking and ranking over 112 million blogs.¹¹ There are 13,087 other blogs that link to it.¹² According to a 2006 Pew Internet & American Life Project Report, in the American Blogosphere the average number of inbound links to any blog is about 13 (Lenhart & Fox, 2006: p. v).

Calculating the number of inbound links, however, is only one way to evaluate the importance of a blog. This chapter argues that alongside Technorati’s methodology, it is also relevant to assess and measure (1) the quantity and quality of the comments posted on a blog by its daily visitors; (2) the by-products deriving from the ongoing activity of the blog.

Data drawn on comments (i.e., the chosen topics, the length and content quality of the text posted) give a clearer picture of the cultural and political spectrum of the community orbiting around a blog. In fact comments are the prime means by which the readers can actively enter the conversation, engage, and influence the discussions about the issues raised on the blog.

Moreover, the assessment and evaluation of the growing influence of a virtual political space such as *beppegrillo.it* cannot only be related to its online and textual existence, that is confined within the electronic boundaries of its Internet domain. A thorough assessment of it needs to look beyond those borders and take into consideration the wider footprint of such endeavor, that is to say understanding and monitoring the effectiveness and influence of its many by-products. In the specific case analyzed in this chapter, it means to take into account by-products such as Meetup groups, campaigns, *Liste Civiche* (Civic Lists, with no connection to political parties) supported and sponsored by the blog but organized independently by citizens for the 2008 General Election.

At the core of this chapter are data on *beppegrillo.it* drawn from its first year of life, the 12-month period starting from May 1, 2005. The period is relevant because it culminated in the Italian general election held the following year, in April 2006. Data show a constant growth in number of comments, with a focus on politics.

During this overall period, 401 posts were published on Grillo's blog, in other words, a daily average of 1.18 posts. Each post received an average of 1,154.92 comments (see Figure 9.3).

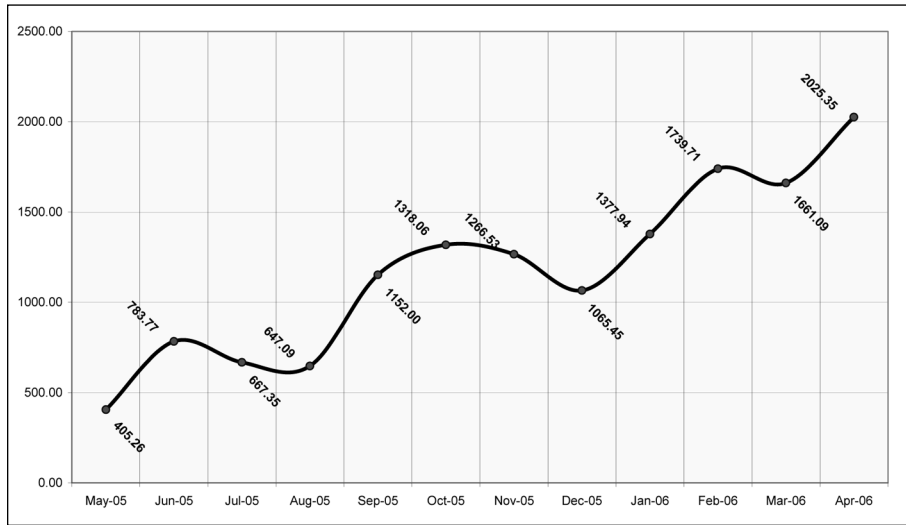


Figure 9.3. Average comments per post per month.

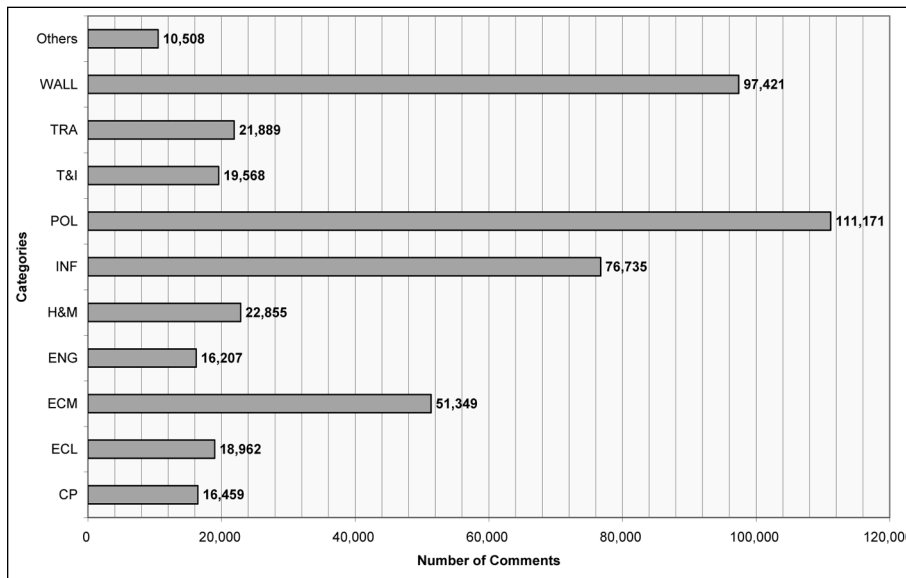


Figure 9.4. Number of comments per section.¹³

The most active site of comments was “Politics,” which received more than 111,000 comments for the whole year—almost a quarter of the total number of comments posted on the blog (463,000). On average, the subject of politics scored over 1,300 comments per post. The second in the list is the general category named the Wailing Wall, 21.04 percent, but with the highest average of comments per post, 1,476.08 (see Figure 9.4 and see note 13 for the list of categories).

The overall number of comments (see Figure 9.5) grew in one year by 368.87 percent. It jumped from 17,021 comments (May 2005), to 62,786 (April 2006).

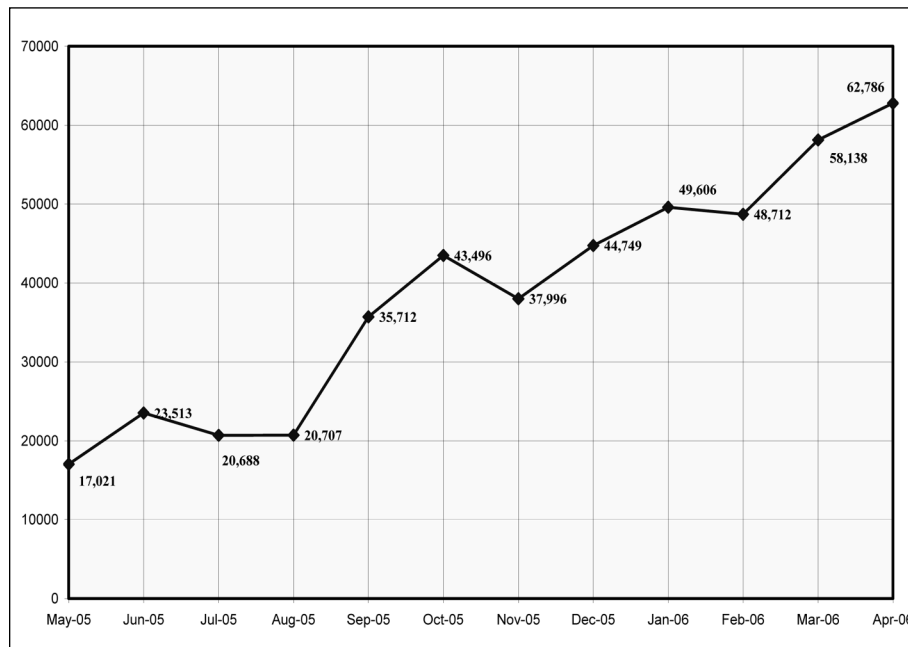


Figure 9.5. Comments per month—one year-period.

Italy's General Election (April 9–10, 2006)

In May 2005, there was a monthly average of 405 comments per post. During the year, the number of posts increased constantly, while in April 2006 the figure topped 2,025 (see Figure 9.3)—nearly 500 percent more than during May 2005.

Given the political nature of *beppegrillo.it*, it is not surprising that it became increasingly active around the 2006 general election. During that month, the average number of comments per post peaked at 2,025. The message posted by Grillo the day after the election, April 11, “*C'è chi*” (“There are those . . .”), produced 4,198

comments, the highest number of comments for the whole year examined here. Grillo's message commented on the close-call victory of the center-left coalition, led by former EU Commission President Romano Prodi over the center-right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi. The closing words of the message can be interpreted as the motto of the blog and its community: "There are those who looked up at the ceiling from under the covers [of their bed] and decided never to give in" (Grillo, 2006b). However looking closer at the content of the comments the impression that one gathers is of a jubilant optimism mixed with several degrees of caution; there is a sense of shared faith in changing and improving the quality of life of the Italian people, and at the same time an acknowledgment that the close-call election victory shows a divided country and makes things more difficult for Prodi's coalition. Jubilant manifestations of hope coexist with skeptic fear that a difficult path lays ahead for the new government, that hard work is needed to heal Italy. The first comment unsurprisingly is: "*evviva è finita!!! evviva la legalità!!*" ("Hurrah! It is over!!! Hurrah for legality!!") Then later, more cautiously, Roberto Rondini writes: "Now let's be careful of the dirt deals and above all let's start working to return straight away free information to the (many) citizens who still know nothing [. . .] 9 Million Italians [. . .] voted again, in 2006, a person like Berlusconi [. . .] How many would they be if they could listen to news? I don't mean partisan news, but simply news"¹⁴ (Grillo, 2006b). And it goes without saying that, even though the majority of comments belong to readers who voted for Prodi, there are also comments posted by Berlusconi's supporters. Some of these, naturally, are denigratory of the thin victory of the Center-Left; others instead are particularly balanced and democratic in their approach to the debate. For instance, Beppe Boselli asks for respect for those 49 percent of Italians like himself who voted for a center-right coalition and he wishes best luck to Prodi's coalition, hoping that Italy will be governed better than in the past (ibid.).

Beppegrillo.It: Campaigns

In its first year beppegrillo.it organized a number of grassroots campaigns, ranging from efforts to protect and sustain scientific research to economic and political issues. It often took a firm stand on matters that have been underrepresented or misrepresented within the mainstream media. Of these campaigns, two stood out for their success in engaging the public participation and the interest that surrounded them: *Parlamento Pulito* (Clean up the Parliament) and *Le Primarie dei Cittadini* (Citizen Primaries). These two campaigns and their organizing processes represent an important blueprint of beppegrillo.it: on the one hand they show the strengths of the blog in functioning as a virtual agora where its community can actively debate

and engage with social and political matters that are often neglected by mainstream media; on the other hand they raise questions about the organizational process of the campaigns, the strength of the involvement of the citizens, the procedures of accountability inherent to these two campaigns, and the ultimate political impact of the campaigns.

Clean up the Parliament

Clean up the Parliament stemmed from an initiative of the Beppegrillo Meetup group in Milan and aimed to inform the Italian public of a simple but rarely discussed fact: that within the Italian parliament there are several *Deputati* and *Senatori*¹⁵ who, although they have been convicted by the courts, are still allowed to represent their constituents (see Gomez & Travaglio, 2006). The ultimate aim of the initiative was to protest against the lack of adequate legislation for preventing such corruption (Grillo, n.d.-b). Beppe Grillo and his fellow bloggers published 25 posts which received 29,382 comments (on average, 1175.28 per post) and raised almost 60,000 euros, most of which was used to purchase a one-page advertisement in the *International Herald Tribune (IHT)* that drew attention to the problem and asked the members of parliament who were among those convicted to resign (Grillo, 2005a, 2005c). The campaign raised some interest and support overseas, most notably from Anupam Mishra, secretary of the Gandhi Peace Foundation of New Delhi in India, who, in a long letter addressed to Grillo and then posted on the blog, commented: "We congratulate you on such a courageous advert and the important piece in the services of civil society. [. . .] We have circulated [widely] your inspiring advert to some news channels and Hindi newspapers [. . .]" (Grillo, 2006f).

Citizen Primaries

On the 16th of October 2005 for the first time in Italy, a political coalition, *L'Ulivo* (The Olive Tree) asks its supporters to vote for one from a list of seven candidates as the 2006 general election prime minister nominee. These primaries had an unexpectedly large turnout of over 4 million voters, with 74 percent of the votes going to Romano Prodi, who eventually defeated Berlusconi's coalition in the General Election.¹⁶

At the beginning of 2006, in preparation for the election, the center-left coalition presented to the press and their electorate a first draft of their political program (Unione, 2006). The 281-page document was judged by many commentators as too long and complicated to be able to reach out to the electorate (Triglia, 2006).

Echoing the successful 16 of October initiative, in an attempt to overcome the 281 pages of flawed text, in January 2006, Beppe Grillo launched a new campaign entitled *Citizen Primaries*. The campaigners used beppegrillo.it as a platform from where to stir up a political debate among politicians and citizens on topics that according to Grillo, his staff, and his readers, should be at the core of the political program of Prodi's coalition. Its goal was to produce a new program (from below) of political and social reforms that would reflect more adequately the people's needs.

In the first post outlining the new campaign Grillo wrote: "Up till now it's been our employees¹⁷ who've done Primaries. Now is the time for the employers to do Primaries. From today [8 January 2006] I'll be publishing proposals about important issues like Energy, Transport, Electoral Regulations and I'll be assisted by recognised experts in the field, so that I can receive your comments" (Grillo, 2006c). The message continues with an invitation to the politicians to take part in the debate.

Under the category "Citizen Primaries" there were 11 Messages divided in 4 subsections: Energy (*energia*), Health (*salute*), Information (*informazione*), and Economics (*economia*). The first post is dated January 8, 2006 and the last one April 4 of the same year, six days before the general election. Overall the messages posted on this section of the blog received 16,458 comments, on average 1,496.18 comments per post.

The proposal on energy (Grillo, 2006c) was the most commented up on throughout the whole campaign (7,846 comments¹⁸ or 47.67 percent of the total number of comments; health received 3,306 messages, information 2,894, economy 2,412). It focused on the optimization and reduction of energy waste ("half of the energy consumption is wasted" (Grillo, 2006c) and on using new technologies to allow the development of renewable sources, such as wind power and solar energy. Among the many suggestions proposed by Grillo and his community were (1) to increase the incentives for reducing energy waste and for the production and the use of alternative energy-powered vehicles, (2) to use public roofs for solar panels, (3) to stop the production of nuclear energy, (4) and to fight against the monopoly of oil companies

As the campaign took place in the four months before the general election, it is not surprising to find out that not all comments were directly linked to the topic of the posts, some in fact were more election driven and addressed topics such as the importance of voting and the merits and shortcomings of various candidates. Comments were posted by people from all walks of life and political backgrounds, and they critiqued both parties for their short-sighted energy policies (Grillo, 2006c).

A few months later on June 8, 2006, Grillo on behalf of the community that developed around his blog met the newly appointed Prime Minister Romano Prodi

and gave him a book containing the suggestions for the government collected through the blog during the primaries (Grillo, 2006d; StaffGrillo, 2006d), and an “end of employment” letter warning him that he would be dismissed from his post if he decided not to give the appropriate attention to the proposals that resulted from his blog’s Citizen Primaries. The letter was signed “the Employer” (Grillo, 2006e). The meeting was video-recorded and posted on Google Video and YouTube.com. Many users uploaded copies of the video. Since the first posting (June 15, 2006) many hundred thousands of people have watched the video online; for instance, to date just one of the many versions available on the two hosting platforms has been viewed 73,096 times (Retrieved on April 17, 2007; see StaffGrillo, 2006d).

Accountability, Representation, and the Problem of Lack of Transparency

Although these two campaigns used innovative techniques to facilitate grassroots political engagement, some elements of their organization and strategies were not entirely democratic or transparent.

Clean up the Parliament was an initiative clearly originating from below and outside Beppe Grillo’s entourage. It represented a group of people who were eager to spark a debate on an important issue related to the legal and moral status of the members of the Italian Parliament. It raised money to achieve a very simple goal: to raise awareness on the issue through publishing an appeal in a national newspaper. The page appeared however in the *International Herald Tribune*, because, so Grillo explained (Grillo, 2006e), the Italian newspapers he had contacted refused to publish the appeal. However, although many praised the initiative, some of the blog’s readers openly disagreed with Grillo and his way of conducting the campaign: they criticized the use of his own name as beneficiary of the donations, instead of opening a bank account with the name of the initiative, as some suggested, or simply, as others wrote, use an online payment service, such as Paypal, which would have been easily verifiable. After all most of the donors were people using the Internet and probably familiar with online payments. Criticism also was on the lack of full transparency in the using of the donations: Grillo in fact never published the certified copy of the invoice of the almost 60.000 euros payment made to the *IHT*. He also wrote that he intended to publish the initials and the amount donated by each contributor to cover the costs of the initiatives (Grillo, 2006e), but neither the list nor the invoice was ever uploaded on the blog. Moreover, readers pointed out the undemocratic flair of Grillo’s behavior: without previous discussion with the donors through the blog, he autonomously decided to go ahead and publish a page in the *IHT* only with the description of the campaign but not the names of the politicians

convicted—as it was in the original proposal from which the whole campaign had stemmed.¹⁹

The other campaign, the Citizen Primaries did not originate from an open debate about which topics and issues should be addressed. In fact, it was never clear how Grillo came up with the original proposals on the four topics chosen for the campaign and who exactly his “experts on the field” were (see Grillo, 2006c). Apparently, Grillo was the *Primo Mobile* of the proposal and only afterward the readers of the blog were able to post comments regarding those proposals and suggest new ones. Readers however were never requested or put in a position to cast their vote. In fact, notwithstanding Grillo’s bold statement that the proposals were “a concrete example of direct democracy and participation of people in public affairs” (Grillo, 2006d), there was no true and clear polling mechanism provided to the users to reach an agreement on issues and solutions. There was no open mechanism available to readers to propose topics and discuss them. A dedicated Webforum for the campaign for instance could have helped make the whole debate more transparent and attach to the Citizens Primaries a sense of true belonging for the readers of the blog. Moreover, an Internet-based survey could have clarified the preferences—that is, the numbers—of the public. Because of this lack of transparency and plain democratic mechanisms, it is even less clear how those original proposals changed in accordance with the inputs received from the sixteen thousand comments posted on the blog throughout the entire length of the campaign. The behind-the-scene remains hidden to the public, in fact it is not clear how many emails, proposals, and ideas Grillo received before and after posting those messages and how he used them. Moreover, primary and secondary sources in the blog are rarely ever given.

For more than a year since the end of the primaries, the final electronic version of the printed hard-bound document which Grillo hand-delivered to Prime Minister Prodi was absent from the blog. To some this is evidence of Grillo’s flawed approach to the problem of accountability and transparency in the process of information sharing. He films himself bringing the document to Romano Prodi, saying “I bring this on behalf of my bloggers”(Grillo, 2006d), but he fails to provide the electronic version of that document to his readers, an act of transparency that would allow the beppegrillo.it community to verify and analyze the document. On this matter Alessandro Esposito commented: “Dear Mr. Grillo, I am 17 years old and I have been following you since it has been again possible to get in touch with you via your blog. I would like to receive a copy [. . .] of the document you delivered to our employee Prodi.” (Esposito, 2006)

Conclusions: Lights and Shadows

Those who read and comment on Grillo's posts are members of an active public inspired by the comedian. In addition to posting thousands of comments on the blog, they post videos on external platforms, create and participate in social and political campaigns, publicize the blog and the work of its community, and organize regional and international gatherings via Meetup. In these ways they fight against the political establishment and actively attempt to give life, substance, and direction to a form of politics that aims to create a more democratic alternative to that status quo. This is a public that understands the value of the democratic political process and the importance of new communication media to be successful in that process.

Notwithstanding its evident success, Grillo's blog is not without shadows or immune to criticisms. Enrico Lincetto, one of the thousands of readers of the blog, in a comment he posted in response to Grillo's visit of Prodi (June 8, 2006), questions the comedian's self-proclaimed status as *messenger of the people*. The document delivered to Prodi is—in Grillo's view—a document allegedly listing the problems of the Italian people and therefore it “should be taken in great consideration by [. . .] the Government.” So, addressing the subject rather frankly, Mr. Lincetto asks: “Are the majority of the Italian people participating in Beppe Grillo's blog? How can you interpret the will of the Italian people when you represent no one?” (Lincetto, 2006).

The question is an important one, but the answer is not as simple. On the one hand Beppe Grillo does not officially represent anyone because he has not been elected. On the other hand the growing number of people that turn to his blog to read and assiduously comment on issues that he raises seem to embrace Grillo as a de facto leader. Commenting on his unusual position as a political guru, Grillo says, “People continuously write to me on my blog to tell me that I am the only person who can say certain things [. . .] but really I am only a comedian, I shouldn't have this weight” (Povoledo, 2006).

The latest episode in the Clean up the Parliament initiative is perhaps the most convincing evidence of his political clout. Almost two years after the appeal published on the *IHT*, on September 8, 2007, Grillo and his followers organized a protest called the *V-Day* or *Vaffanculo Day* (*Vaffanculo* means “fuck off” in Italian). On the day commemorating the Italian armistice in World War II (September 8, 1943), Grillo asked his public to gather in the squares of their cities throughout Italy and the world and to sign a petition to propose a new law to the Parliament. The proposed law is composed of three different elements: (1) candidates convicted by courts of law should be forbidden from running for public office; (2) political

careers should be limited to only two terms; and (3) that the members of the Parliament should be directly chosen by the people (Grillo, 2007a).



Figure 9.6. Map of the location of the petition desks for V-day throughout Italy. Source: Google Maps.²⁰

The V-day was a success both in terms of numbers and media exposure: 350 thousand people gathered in more than 200 cities worldwide (see Figure 9.6 for map of V-day activity throughout Italy). The meetings were organized through the blog and through Meetup.com. In the aftermath of the event, the issue was debated in the pages of the Italian newspapers and on television,²¹ and it sparked harsh reactions from politicians from both sides of the Parliament. Commenting on this success, Grillo said: “I was really surprised. I didn’t expect such a big turnout. . . . What happened out there was the release of a virus that’s about to attack the political class. But in this case there’s no vaccine” (Povoledo, 2007).

Riding the momentum of V-day, soon after the event ended, Grillo launched Liste Civiche (civic lists), a new challenge to the political establishment. Liste Civiche are collaboratively created lists of local administrators who meet the standards of the Grillo community. For the lists to get the Beppe Grillo stamp of approval they must fulfill a set of requirements; for instance, they cannot be linked to political parties; their members must have a clean record, each candidate should reside in the same location as his or her constituents, and candidates may not have served previously more than one term in office—either at local or national level (see Grillo, 2007b). Grillo, however, is not attempting to create a new political coalition, but rather he stresses that each of these lists should be autonomous. He says, “I am

not promoting any Civic List, neither local, nor national. The participants of the V-day do not lend their voices to anyone. They are megaphones of themselves. They are citizens that do their own politics" (*La Repubblica*, 2007a).²²

Thus, willingly or not, the success of his blog and of the initiative like the V-Day, coupled with daring and innovative projects such as the *Liste Civiche*, show that Grillo is the (nonelected) representative of the dissatisfied public orbiting around his blog. Not surprisingly, many of the comments posted on the blog ask the comedian to enter politics in a conventional way via the election process (see for instance comments in Grillo, 2006c). Seen from this perspective, *beppegrillo.it* represents a new emerging trend in the political sphere: a politics outside formal politics, and according to Grillo, this trend is *a blueprint for the future* (Povoledo, 2007).

To give this future stable foundations and more credibility, however, Grillo (and others in his position) needs to confront the moral obligations that bear upon the shoulders of any political representative within any democratic environment: he needs to be accountable and his actions need to be fully transparent, or he will not be able to escape the accusations of mere populism that many of his critics attach to his endeavors.

Notes

1. In 2005, *Time Magazine* included the *rebel* Grillo in the list of the 37 European Heroes of 2005 "who illuminate and inspire, persevere and provoke" (Israely, 2005).
2. The two networks' groups combined account (on average) for 87 percent of the daily share of the Italian television audience (*La Repubblica*, 2006a).
3. No other democratic country worldwide has witnessed similar ties between political leadership and media ownership (Gomez & Travaglio, 2004: p. xvii).
4. Berlusconi, was accused, among other things of having ties to the Mafia (see Gomez & Travaglio, 2004: 28–62).
5. In the center right-hand-side of the webpage there is a red bordered logo labeled Meetup. Underneath the logo there are two sets of lists: the first is a list of Italian cities; the second is a list of international cities. Meetup.com is an online portal that facilitates social networking. The stated aim of the portal is to help "people find others who share their interest or cause, and form lasting, influential, local community groups that regularly meet face-to-face" (Meetup, n.d.). Searching by topics and/or postal code, Meetup members can find and then join other people organized in groups that meet regularly. To create a group, the organizer is required to pay a fee of 19 dollars.
6. <http://beppegrillo.meetup.com/about/?gmap=1>, Retrieved February 15, 2008. The data relative to Meetup.com have almost doubled since May 1, 2007; back then "Friends of Beppe Grillo" had around 33,000 members, themselves organized in 199 groups located in 157 cities in 15 different countries.
7. See for instance the International Meetup (January 19/20, 2008), organized by the Beppe Grillo's Friends Amsterdam Meetup Group; during that meeting Beppe Grillo himself con-

- nected to the audience via video through Skype. A programme of the meeting is posted here: <http://beppegrillo.meetup.com/434/messages/boards/view/viewthread?thread=3871169>. A recording of his message is uploaded on the Ustream TV: <http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/GraU4QNdsf,HhpRDmDhnsjXC2JHyRUF> (Retrieved February 2008)
8. Personal communication with Ethel Chiodelli, Organizer of the London Beppe Grillo Meetup Group.
 9. Source: the Internet World Stats Website, March 31, 2006 (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats9.htm>).
 10. Sifting through the many thousands of comments posted on beppegrillo.it, I found one that indirectly seems to be linked, although it was never acknowledged by Grillo, with the origins of *La Settimana*: just over a month before the publication of the first issue of *La Settimana*, Vincenzo Curcio wrote a comment on one of Grillo's posts (Grillo, 2005c, the comment is dated: November 29, 2005 15: 39) addressing the issue of how to make available the content of the blog to those who cannot use the Internet. Mr. Curcio suggested that on a weekly basis the various arguments discussed on the blog can be collected in a few pages and be published in those newspapers—such as *City*, *Metro*, *Leggo*—that are distributed freely in many Italian cities (in Grillo, 2005c).
 11. To date Technorati is “currently tracking 112.8 million blogs and over 250 million pieces of tagged social media” (<http://www.technorati.com/about/>, data retrieved February 21, 2008).
 12. Data retrieved from <http://www.technorati.com/pop/blogs/> February 21, 2008. It is important to note that this is a number that has doubled in less than a year: in April 2007 beppegrillo.it was number 18 in the list and it had 6,974 inbound links (Date: April 13, 2007).
 13. The ten categories are: Primarie dei Cittadini (in English CP, Citizen Primaries), Ecologia (ECL, Ecology), Economia (ECM, Economics), Energia (ENG, Energy), Salute/Medicina (H&M, Health/Medicine), Informazione (INF, Information), Politica (POL, Politics), Tecnologia/Rete (T&I, Technology/Internet), Trasporti/Viabilità (TRA, Transport/Getting About), Muro del Pianto (WALL, Wailing Wall).
 14. The original is in Italian; translation is mine: *“Adesso occhio agli inciuci e soprattutto al lavoro per restituire subito un'informazione libera ai cittadini (tanti) che ancora non sanno nulla o quasi. 9 milioni di italiani—dicesi 9—votano ancora, nel 2006, uno come Berlusconi; non è che magari è perchè. . . te Beppe che ne pensi ? Quanti sarebbero se potessero ascoltare delle notizie? Non di parte, solo delle notizie.”* Roberto Rondina, November 4, 2006 16: 32.
 15. The Italian Parliament is formed by two chambers: *Deputati* (deputies) are those elected to represent the people in the *Camera dei Deputati*—the Lower House—and *Senatori* are those elected for the Senate, the Upper House.
 16. <http://www.perlulivo.it/2005-primarie/primaria-2005.html>
 17. Since he started the blog, the ideas of “politicians as employees” and “citizens as employers” have been two of Grillo's more successful slogans, and the Citizen Primaries campaign played along those lines to remark the temporary nature of the political mandate of those who are elected, something that seems forgotten in a country like Italy, where there is very little turnover among the members of the political class.
 18. Comments are in Italian and are available at: http://www.beppegrillo.it/2006/01/primarie_dei_ci_3.html
 19. See for instance the comments of Antonio D'Arpa—November 22, 2005 16: 54—and Silvia Landi—November 22, 2005 17: 37—in Grillo, 2005c.

20. Il V-Day nelle piazze d'Italia, 8 settembre 2007, Google Maps: <http://maps.google.it/maps/ms?ie=UTF8&hl=it&ct=h&num=200&start=0&com=1&msa=0&msid=105899767908383675040.00043790d3bb18fa8203b&dl=42.114524,11.25&cspn=10.053068,20.566406&cz=6> (Retrieved February 21, 2008).
21. For articles and news about the V-Day, see the section of [beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it) dedicated to the event; it is available at: <http://www2.beppegrillo.it/vaffanculoday/>
22. From *La Repubblica*, 2007a. The original text is in Italian; translation is mine. "Io—puntualizza—non parteciperò a nessuna manifestazione nei prossimi mesi. Non sto promuovendo la presentazione di nessuna lista civica, nè locale, nè nazionale. La loro voce, i partecipanti del V-day non la prestano a nessuno. Sono i megafoni di sè stessi. I cittadini che si fanno politica."

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