Social meets civic

Civic social media and open government data: An inquiry on collaborative fact-checking for citizens' empowerment

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Abstract

While talks about an “open data revolution” raise expectations on the democratic outcomes of open data, the sole release of open government data is not enough to fulfill those aims of transparency, accountability and citizens’ empowerment that democracies seek to achieve. In this thesis I analyze how social media can be used to widen the potentiality of open government data, in order to favor the emergence of an active citizenship. This inquiry is carried out through the qualitative study of an exemplar case: a platform for crowd-sourced fact-checking developed by the Italian Fondazione <ahref. Fondazione <ahref was founded in 2010 and its activity in centered mainly on media and quality of information, Internet technologies, and citizens’ participation. In 2012 it launched the Civic Links project, formed by three different social media platforms, among which the one for crowd-sourced fact-checking addressed in this research. While the project is still in its infancy, its evolution so far offers insights on the characteristics and challenges facing the emerging field of civic social media.

The research is conducted through a triangulation of methods, specifically content analysis of a digital entity (the social media platform); semi-structured interviews with members of Fondazione <ahref; and a survey of the users of the platform. The outcome is a broad overview on the concept of civic social media and on the characteristics of a social media that promotes civic engagement and citizens’ empowerment.

INTRODUCTION.

BEYOND PROPAGANDA:

Unleashing the potentials of Open Government Data

Open government data (henceforth, OGD) are "open data for an open government purpose, […] data [that is] machine readable and accessible in order to promote government transparency and accountability" (Yu & Robinson, 2012, p.192). Open government data are the new catchword for governments. There seem to be clear, beneficial, democratic implications of releasing OGD, even beyond those of transparency: they contribute to "a full "read/write" society", which is "not just about knowing what is happening in the process of governance but being able to contribute to it" [1]: a society in which citizens become more deeply conscious about the governments' activity and the public life of their country. Initiatives to open up government databases have been mushrooming over the last few years (Alonso, 2013), taking advantage of the developments of Internet and new technologies, which allow for unprecedented levels of openness. The DataCatalogs.org[2], which collects open data from countries around the world since 2011, now contains more than 300 catalogs; the Global Open Data Initiative[3], seeking to favor implementation of OGD, is being launched this year. Individual governments are also participating actively in this trend, both autonomously and in partnerships: it is the case, for example, of the United States with their Open Government Initiative[4], or of the European Union with the Open Government Data Initiative and the Open Data Portal launched in February 2013.[5] This phenomenon not limited to the Western world, as shown by the list of countries participating in the Open Government Partnership[6], which has grown from eight to 57 members from all over the globe in less than two years.

While these projects present OGD as a key element in ensuring the developments of democracy that recent technologies allow, a growing literature is questioning whether the sole release of OGD can be enough to talk about a democratic step towards accountability, as governments often advertise it. Some authors claim that OGD risk of actually empowering the already empowered, meaning that their use remains limited to a small elite of skilled citizens (Janssen & Darbishire, 2012). We can safely argue that OGD are not magic keys that automatically open the portals of democracy: to fully assure that they are employed in a way that benefits citizens, we still have to address many questions. Above all, we have to think of "how can we harness modern technology, in particular the information, data sharing and collaboration it enables, to make

realistic improvements in how government solves problems and serves its citizens*"* (Drutman & Furnas, 2013).

a. An unsettled debate: Why open government data risk of not being enough

To make sense out of the debate around open government data, it is important to outline the development of the concept. This because open government and open data are two distinct notions, each with its own specific history, and only in a later stage they have found a meeting point in open government data.

The roots of the open data concept can be traced in the technical, technological and scientific field, on the same grounds as the open access and open source movements[7]. What these different "open" realities have in common is the core idea that the greater the number of people who have access to material and who can work freely on it, the greater the quality of the product and the benefits to the whole community. In short, the power of the term "open" resides in its encouraging collaboration rather than closure, in its involving people to contribute and to feel empowered by engaging with the open material in their own terms, by shaping it, reusing it and creating new material from it. The Open Knowledge Foundation[8]'s current definition of open data acknowledges this in the principle of the universal right to access, reuse and share the data, as open data is "a piece of data or content is open if anyone is free to use, reuse, and redistribute it — subject only, at most, to the requirement to attribute and/or share-alike"[9].

On the other hand, open government is a doctrine that theorizes citizens' right to access information on governments' activity (Lathrop & Ruma, 2010, p. XIX). In some sense its roots are traced back to the Enlightment, but in its modern version it began to be discussed after the Second World War - particularly in the United States - where this debate led to the first approval of the federal Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in 1966. FOIA, which has undergone changes, amendments and repeals up to 2010, allows citizens to request to the disclosure of information in the possession of executive government agencies, even if with some limitations (United States Department of Justice, 2008).

While being two distinct notions, as new technologies developed, the concept of open government came in contact with suggestions from other "open" movements in the technology field, and this combination led to theorize a whole new range of concepts. Some of them are generally describing the transformations that occur when new ICTs are applied to government practices. This is the case of concepts like "e-democracy" (Clift, 2003) or "government 2.0", defined as "the use of technology—especially the collaborative technologies at the heart of Web 2.0—to better solve collective problems at a city, state, national, and international level" (O'Reilly,

2010, p. 12). Other terms are more deeply rooted in culture of the "open movements", as with the case of "open source democracy", which was used to indicate the underlying potentials for collective cooperation and active participation in governance that reside in new interactive technologies, and to theorize a bottom-down model of democracy inspired by the dynamics of open source software development communities (Rushkoff, 2003). In these modern conceptualizations, the stress is not simply on applying technology to governance, but instead on *"*engaging the citizen as a full participant rather than an observer of their government" (Lathrop & Ruma, 2010, p. XX). The concept of open government data developed in line with these technological evolutions, but this contamination came at the price of some ambiguity: the same notion of open government data can be interpreted either to mean the public release of data that guarantees transparency and open government, or the release of open data by the government, even if it has nothing to do with transparency issues.

On one hand, OGD, intended as publicly accessible and easily reusable data about the government, can only boost all of the trends fostering civic engagement, as an informed citizenry is an essential aspect to a functioning democracy (The Center for Democracy and Technology, 2009). When aimed at transparency, OGD can allow citizens to evaluate their representatives' actions and put pressure for better governments. At the same time, the disclosure of such information can promote the education of citizens into active and involved participants of the democratic processes, as *"*rather than treating government as something distant and strange, they will view government as accessible and familiar, which can lead to increased trust" (Drutman & Furnas, 2013).

On the other hand, confusing open data aiming at open government from open data released by the government is a dangerous risk, as it permits to promote OGD practices without touching debates about transparency. By combining the terms of open government and open data, the concept of OGD blends the line between the two notions that constitute it, and therefore can be applied policies that, while releasing open data, have no impact on a government's accountability towards its citizens. (Yu & Robinson, 2012; Tauberer, 2012; Ubaldi, 2013).

This contradiction emerges increasingly in the debates around OGD, as the arguments are not just about the opening of governments' databases in itself, but also about whether there are specific conditions needed both for transparency to occur and then for it to have an impact on citizens' empowerment (Murillo, 2012; Gurstein, 2011).

b. An issue for research: Social media and open government data to benefit citizens?

The problem of how to go from the release of open government data to empowerment is a complicated one, which cannot be answered just through generalized theories, as societies are complex and each with its own individual specificities and needs. On general terms, for OGD to unleash their potential, they require all those conditions that are needed for a vibrant public sphere and all those democratic rights that allow a healthy public debate. Furthermore OGD are frequently in a raw digital format, and so widespread digital literacy and data literacy are needed to really allow citizens to access and interpret the information. Additionally there are also technical and technological issues: an affordable and extensive Internet coverage becomes vital in exploiting equally the civic potentials of such data releases.

This ***problématique*** frames my research, which investigates how technology can be deployed to promote debate around open government data, so that they become actively part of the conversation and of the civic life of citizens. It focuses on the opportunities offered by social media and the participative features of Web 2.0, intended as "an Internet increasingly influenced by intelligent web services that empower the user to contribute to developing, rating, collaborating on and distributing Internet content and customising Internet applications" (Wunsch-Vincent & Vickery, 2007, p. 4). I aim to explore a specific question, that is if – and, if yes, how - social media can give benefit to the public sphere by empowering citizens and encouraging civic engagement through open data. In Chapter 1, I present a review of the literature that has brought to the development of such research question, by defining public sphere and civic engagement, and then by illustrating the debate around media's role in empowering its users - with a focus on the role of digital information and communication technologies, as this supports my choice to investigate social media. Chapter 2 discusses the research design and methods, explaining how the theoretical framework described in the previous chapter motivates the choices made for the methodology, the hypothesis and the chosen case to study. Chapter 3 moves to present the results of the study, while the Conclusion argues their relevance and their contribution to expand research in this direction.

I.

MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE:

Civic engagement and citizens' empowerment through communication practices. A theoretical overview.

It is vital, in order to investigate the research question, to define each of the key terms that appear in it, as this allows to develop a methodology appropriate to explore their presence in the case study. In this chapter I draw from studies in the field of social sciences, to introduce the concepts of public sphere and civic engagement, and then I present notions elaborated by media and communication scholars, to illustrate empowerment through media practices, both in general terms and with specific reference to the digital world. Such framework is essential to develop a suitable research design, both as it allows choosing a fitting case study and as it guides the methods with which to collect and analyze the data about the presence of these aspects in the case chosen for the study.

a. Common spaces to exercise citizenship: Defining the public sphere and civic engagement.

Habermas defines the public sphere "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens" (Habermas, 1974, p. 49). Citizens take part in this "realm" whenever they gather to discuss issues of public interest under freedom of assembly, association and expression guaranteed. By exercising in this activity, they shape the public opinion, intended as "the tasks of criticism and control which a public body of citizens […] practices vis-à-vis the ruling structure organized in the form of a state" (Habermas, 1974, p. 50). In this sense, the public sphere functions as an intermediary between the private sphere and the State. Habermas traces the origins of the public sphere in a precise historical moment, the emergence of the "bourgeoise public sphere" in the 18th century – initially in England – and he connects its existence with the development of the press and the flourishing of coffee houses. The first has an important function for the public sphere, due to its role of informing the body of citizens who can critically debate about it and form public opinion. The coffee houses are also a key part in the origin of the public sphere, as they physically allow for the social interaction between citizens, by giving a space where they meet and discuss information.

While Habermas' work is object of contestation[10] , his general definition of public sphere remains useful for the purpose of the study. What this research investigates is therefore how open government data can become part of and enhance the "discursive space in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest" (Hauser, 1998, p. 86). It is important to stress that this discursive space has now wider boundaries, as cyberspace has enriched the public sphere with a digital realm for civic engagement and participation to public life (Milan, 2012).

Civic engagement is defined as *"*individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern"[11].The writings of Robert Putnam are central to understand this notion, as he refers to civic engagement as a society's participation in activities that form an "active, public-spirited citizenry", a "social fabric of trust and cooperation", and "networks of organized reciprocity and civic solidarity" (Putnam, 1994, p.15).

Part of the appeal of Putnam's definition probably stands in its ability to communicate an intuitive notion of civic engagement. However, some scholars have criticized its usefulness as an analytical category. They have argued that this definition of the term is in fact too broad to be of some utility in research, and made attempts to restrict it. Some proposed to distinguish between political, social, or moral engagement (Berger, 2009), while others suggested to separate political, electoral and civic forms of engagement, with the latter comprising, for example, of forms of "community problem solving*"* (Keeter et al., 2002, p. 3). This aspect of collaborating for the community and offering a contribution to the collectivity is present in most of the definitions of civic engagement, figured as a common effort in which the single members of the community share their knowledge and skills to benefit the whole (Ehrlich, 2000, p. VI).

Another useful consideration on civic engagement comes from the "citizen-centered approach" (Gibson, 2006). According to this, when considering how civic engagement contributes to democracy, the focus should not be in quantifying the outcomes of civic practices, but rather in assessing citizen's active participation in them. The same act of civic engagement, for example voting, has different civic impact depending on how different subjects takes part in it. In this view, people are seen as "proactive citizens, rather than as consumers of services" (Gibson, 2006, p. 2) and the main goal of civic engagement practices should be that of "embedding a deeper ethic of civic engagement across communities so that it becomes part and parcel of everyday life, rather than episodic activities*"*. (Gibson, 2006, p.10). It is perhaps with this latter notion of civic engagement, defined as the process of transforming people into active and deeply rooted members of their community, that media's role in it becomes more evident, as illustrated in the following section.

b. Communication beyond information: Media practices for user's empowerment.

In general terms, empowerment is referred to as "the process of enhancing an individual's or group's capacity to make purposive choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes" (Aslop et al., 2006, p. 47). It is often used for minorities who are marginalized, but in the present research I use it in terms of *citizens'* empowerment. Citizens are empowered when they have the tools to make "purposive choices", and this means both political tools typical of democracies, but also a whole range of tools less explicitly political, such as access to good information and spaces for informed public debate.

In media studies, a vast literature has developed a range of similar - yet not overlapping – concepts to describe media's "emancipatory role*"* when the "the communication process is addressed not only in representative terms ('for the people'), but in participatory terms as well ('from the people')" (Vatikiotis, 2009, p.4). For the purpose of this research, I have decided to focus on the notions of alternative media, community media, citizen media, and civic media. Apart from their different approaches, these concepts have a core idea in common: they all emphasize the emancipatory outcomes of the shift from the consumer of a media product to the active user of a media product. It is precisely in this shift, and in the consequent "appropriation of the medium" that empowerment resides, being interpreted as a *"*process through which individuals and groups take control over their media technologies and messages by participating in the actions that reshape their communicative processes*"* (Milan, 2013, p. 11).

Although this literature started to emerge decades ago, in the framework of social movements and development students, over the last few years it received a boost from scholars of new technologies, who articulated new theories and concepts to account for the innovation brought by the Internet, like User-Generated-Content (UGC) and social media platforms.

b.1. Alternative media and alternative public spheres

Alternative media is a term used to embrace a wide variety of experiences in the realm of civil society. On general terms, the concept is in fact used to describe an alternative organizational and economic media structure, engaged in delivering complementary information from that the main public discourse offered by mainstream media (Kidd, 1999). If the latter offer the building blocks of public sphere, scholars have argued that alternative media on the other hand contribute to *"*an alternative public sphere" (Atton, 2002, p. 21), or "parallel discursive arenas"[12] (Fraser, 1990, p. 67).

These notions of alternative or counter public spheres are the starting point to reflect on another characteristic of alternative media, related to their impact in promoting social change. The first part of the concept contains the verb "to alter", an indication of alternative media's role and value in fostering social change in the community of their participants (Kidd, 1999). The power to do so does not reside simply in the messages that are delivered, but in the way in which alternative media engage with their audiences and trigger practices that empower participants by directly involving them in media processes (Atton, 2002, p. 18). Therefore the term *alternative* in media stands to represent not merely a different approach in the selection, production and distribution of information, but also an element dynamically interfering with society, as it offers means for its transformation by promoting horizontal bottom-down modes of communication and informal education through active participation.

Alternative media are also essentially community-centered: *"*if the first part of alternative is alter, the last part of the word alternative is native. Alternative media is valuable when it is native to the communities it serves*"* (Kidd, 1999, para. 16). This community-centered perspective is traced also in the concept of community media.

b.2. Community media

Certain aspects of alternative media can be found also in the notion of community media. First because of the attention on the "native" part of *alternative*: for example, Howley defines community media as *"*grassroots or locally oriented media access initiatives predicated on a profound sense of dissatisfaction with mainstream media form and content, dedicated to the principles of free expression and participatory democracy, and committed to enhancing community relations and promoting community solidarity" (Howley, 2005, p. 2). The central feature of the notion of community media, can be found in the fact that the community – however slippery the term –appropriates the medium: the information proposed in it arises from the interests of the community, is aimed at the community as an audience, and its structure is largely dependent on the community itself.

All the characteristics that constitute the empowering aspects of alternative media are present also in the concept of community media, especially in regards to the promotion of participatory organizational models, in which the audience is not a mere passive consumer of information but shapes the content of the media product while also acquiring the skills necessary to its creation (Howley, 2010, p. 4).

Despite these similarities, Howley actually finds limitations in the concept of alternative media, which he sees as often used very broadly to embrace realities that are very different between

them (Howley, 2005, p.4), while for community media it is of uttermost importance their being deeply "localized" media, something not so vital for alternative media, but that is also central in the notion of citizens' media, coined by Clemencia Rodriguez, as explored in the section that follows.

b.3. Citizens' media and civic media

The concept of citizens' media first appears in the works of Clemencia Rodriguez as an attempt to place importance in the empowering processes that media favor, rather than focusing excessively on a binary distinction between mainstream and alternative media. According to her definition, citizens' media "accounts for the processes of empowerment, conscientisation, and fragmentation of power that result when men, women, and youth gain access to and re-claim their own media" (Rodriguez, 2004). It is not of primary relevance what the content of information is - if alternative to mainstream media or not - rather that citizens are not merely passive recipients of information. They dynamically transform the medium – as they shape it with their action – and are transformed by it – as through their direct participation they are empowered, emancipated and receive educations. Like with community media, the core of the power of these communication practices lies in the fact that users appropriate the medium, and "actually define, claim, and give meaning to their citizenship" (Pettit, 2009, p. 9).

The reason why Rodriguez's work is important for this research is that, while drawing from grounded literature on alternative media, community media and similar, she specifically refers to citizens and to "enacting citizenship" through direct and collective intervention in media practices (Rodriguez, 2001, p. 20).

A newly coined and emerging concept in someway similar to citizen media is that of civic media, developed by the MIT Center for Civic Media. Civic media is defined as *"*any form of communication that strengthens the social bonds within a community or creates a strong sense of civic engagement among its residents*"*[13]. Regardless of the many common themes, there is a crucial difference between citizen and civic media. While the first explicitly promotes citizens' expression and appropriation of the medium, it is not so in the case of civic media, which can embrace also forms of top-down communication, like traditional journalism - if it is aimed at spreading information useful for the empowerment of a community (Jenkins, 2007). Civic media aim to offer **tools** that are useful to make citizens aware and able to exercise their rights consciously, and that help people develop " to process, evaluate, and act upon the knowledge in circulation"[14] .

b.4. Digital media: The Web 2.0 and social platforms

Web 2.0 has reshaped the forms of communication, requiring the update of concepts elaborated for the offline world and the creation of new ones, like Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005; O'Reilly, 2010) or "participative web", in order to account for the unprecedented level of interaction, contribution and collaboration that new technologies allow. One of the most famous notions is that of User-Generated Content (UGC), which refers to the vast spectrum of user's production of content online. UGC (or UCC: User-Created Content") is defined as "content publicly available over the Internet", that reflects "creative effort" and is "created outside of professional routines and practices" (Wunsch-Vincent & Vickery, 2007, p. 4). With UGC a new concept arises, which takes further the empowering aspects of media practices previously theorized: the "people formerly known as the audience". This stresses how the Web 2.0 is an environment where the roles of information providers and information receivers tend to be more and more blurred. The term is also linked to that of citizen journalism, as the process through which "the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another" (Rosen, 2006). Citizen journalism can be seen as a step further in terms of participation to media practices, a step which is the result of the democratic potential that lies in digital technologies, as they offer not only a space – the web – but also the tools – like smartphones – that provide people with a degree of access to media production unthinkable before (Gillmor, 2008). This unprecedented level of audience integration does come at a price, as from the same collapse of "the gates" of professional journalism come both benefits – like the exponentially increased availability of news sources and of expertise – and drawbacks. Web 2.0 implies a loss of control over the creation of content that then becomes a part – sometimes the main one - of the way people consume information. While this can mean increased democratization, it also places obstacles in evaluating the reliability of what circulates online, as verification becomes complicated by the overwhelming amount of content created, by the possibilities to use fake identities and by the increased ease in manipulating pictures, videos and other digital material.

While citizen journalism, in its definition, doesn't necessarily include acts that empower citizens and promote their engagement in the public sphere, it could be used in this direction, as it upgrades the "former audience" to a primary actor in the information creation and distribution processes (Gillmor, 2006, p.137). Thanks to digital technologies, forms of civic engagement and empowerment can so take place more easily, through citizen journalism. In addition, the penetration of the "people formerly known as the audience" in the media production occurs also in mainstream media, challenging their traditional conceptions and blurring the lines between mainstream media as opposed to alternative, community, citizen and civic media. The contamination between the two

transforms the debate to the point that it has been questioned whether it still makes sense to talk about alternative media in the digital age, as most of their primary characteristics have become a structuring element of digital media (Atton, 2002, p.150).

All of this is especially true for the case of social media, intended as those online services that allow for different levels of social interactions between their users, or "Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of the so-called Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Möller, 2013, p.13). Along with their irrumption in the media landscape, these social platforms are also entering the public sphere, as they contribute to the transmission and discussion on information that forms public opinion. There has been research on social media's role in the public sphere, revealing a "relationship between using SNS [Social Networking Sites] for news and reporting higher levels of social capital" (de Zúñiga et al., 2012, p. 329) and particularly that, when social networking sites are used for informational purposes, they achieve a "significant and positive impact on individuals' activities aimed at engaging in civic and political action" (Ibid.).

Similar considerations acquire relevance in the light of the fact that social media, with their increasing role in news consumption, are not anymore just an optional and marginal aspect of the way people search and access information, but "an indispensable infrastructure" (Möller, 2013, p.13). As such, social media require studies that relate their use to civic engagement and that evaluate their contribution to citizens' empowerment, just like similar studies have in the past developed around offline communication practices.

II.

CIVIC SOCIAL MEDIA THROUGH QUALITATIVE RESEARCH:

Design and methods

The characteristics and the scope of the research questions make it particularly suitable to adopt a qualitative research design, as I research seeks to explore a "*how",* and so the accent is "on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 8). The research is implemented through the case study of a crowd-sourced fact-checking platform launched in 2012 by the Italian Fondazione <ahref, whose details are presented in the next section. The study is a triangulation of three research methods: content analysis of the platform, semi-structured interviews with its developers and managers, and a survey of its users. The purpose of the content analysis is to infer the structure and characteristics of the communication that takes places in the platform. The semi-structured interviews of the members of Fondazione <ahref involved in the project of the fact-checking platform, are intended to gain a deeper and insider's knowledge on what has emerged from the content analysis. The survey is carried out among the users of the platform, to further verify, through their feedback, the main findings both of the content analysis and of the interviews. Triangulation of methods allows qualitative data to speak to and build upon each other, in view of strengthening the validity and reliability of the research (Morse & Lyn, 2002).

a. Defining the issue: hypothesis development and choice of the case study

Chapter 1 explored how media can foster citizens' empowerment and civic engagement, especially when combined with the properties of so-called Web 2.0. Going a step further, I argue that social media, as one of the main Web 2.0 tools, could be used to unleash the democratic potentials of open government data. To explore this assumption I have conducted research on an Italian crowd-sourced collaborative fact-checking platform developed by the research hub Fondazione <ahref in 2012.

Fact-checking means to "investigate (an issue) in order to verify the facts" (Oxford Dictionaries, 2013). It is – or should be – part of the information creation and distribution process, from science to politics to journalism. Fact-checking includes also a specific journalistic genre distinguished by

”its emphasis on providing factual information about current events, marked by a commitment to accuracy, to reliability and to comprehensiveness” (Graves & Tom, 2012, p. 8). This emphasis means that when fact-checking becomes a genre, the point is not to correct errors on journalistic reporting before delivering information to the public, but to actually draw attention to errors made by the sources of this information. Fact-checking as a journalistic narration has enjoyed alternating fortunes. Its rise has been linked to the Reagan presidency in the United States (1981 – 1989) and studies have underlined the boosting impact of Internet and digital technologies in such practice, as they play a role in how it has increased in the last decade, both quantitatively - in terms of number of fact-checking - and qualitatively - in terms of the range of subjects covered through this activity (Graves & Tom, 2012 p. 17). With the US *The New Yorker* - who actually has a fact-checking department since 1927 (Silverman, 2009) - and the German *Der Spiegel* in the lead, more and more news publications hire personnel in the role of the fact-checker, creating a specific profile of expertise that goes beyand the verification done by the same journalists who writes the article (Silverman, 2010). This development is perhaps a consequence of the proliferation of sources of information sprung by the Internet, and of the integration of UGC in mainstream media, both phenomena that require more and distinctive skills - not to say, also, simply more time. Again, just like in other parts of news' processes audiences are becoming more integrated in fact-checking, to the point that it has been predicted that “Wikipedia-style “crowd sourcing” will loom large in the future of fact-checking” (Dobbs, 2012, p.13). Completely crowd-sourced forms of fact-checking - like Truth Squad[15], launched in the United States to check political claims during the 2012 election campaign - are still rare as we speak. For this reason, a study of one such case, the platform developed by Fondazione <ahref, offers insights on a phenomenon that, while still a niche, is likely to become widespread in the near future.

FONDAZIONE <AHREF, CIVIC LINKS AND FACT-CHECKING

Fondazione <ahref[16] is an Italian research-oriented, non-profit foundation established in 2010 in the city of Trento, in Northern Italy. Its team of 19 people (and a few external ad-hoc collaborators) focuses on researching and promoting the quality of information in digital media, with a specific attention to active citizenship through education and participation. Since its creation, it has directly developed and sponsored a long list of initiatives - like the summer Data Journalism School[17], a mechanism of contest and grants to prize quality information[18], or a project called “Civic Infographics”[19] - while also grounding them on the research on civic media, digital technologies, and the epistemology of social media. On the same wavelength as these efforts, the foundation has developed Civic Links[20], a “platform aggregator for civic media content”, a space

for civic participation where "to produce grassroots information and to rebuild or reinforce social fabric ties"[21].

At the time of writing, three different projects constitute Civic Links: Timu, Wavu and Fact-checking. Timu [22] is a platform designed to promote citizens journalism, by collecting the contributions of its users, offering an organized space for the visibility of their products, and favoring their participation in creating stories by prizing valuable works. Wavu[23] is a space where to find information about citizen journalism – either in the form of analysis, opinions or examples of narratives. Finally, the fact-checking platform[24] object of this analysis is designed as a tool that allows users to link or upload information, which they ask the community to document and verify.

This description illustrates how the distinctive scope of the Civic Links project is to allow citizens to participate in information development processes - through UGC - and to do so responsibly, by respecting four principles of good information explicitly and repeatedly addressed on presenting the service: accuracy, impartiality, independence and legality. These are the ethical foundations that emerge from journalists' deontology (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996) and embody the values of the profession. The presence of such notions reinforces the tie of the Civic Links' platforms with citizen journalism, and specifically with one whose participants are inspired by the same values as professionals, regardless of their title.

The fact-checking platform presents therefore many of the characteristics that make it an excellent case study for my research question, some shared with the other two Civic Links websites, but others peculiar to it. First it has those features encountered when discussing about empowerment through media and "Web 2.0": it supports the participation of the users, who propose the facts to check, collaborate in their verification and create content by documenting them. Delivering the verification process to users is a central characteristic of why the platform was chosen as a case study, as it allows to address one of the main criticism moved towards UGC and the information that circulates on social media: it lacks the quality and the expertise of professional journalists in accurately verifying their sources. Secondly, it is explicitly inserted in the context of civic media. Thirdly, the specific nature of the social activity performed on the platform – fact-checking – exposes the users to open data, including OGD. Furthermore, studying such case offers insights on the dynamics of the phenomenon of crowd-sourced fact-checking. This is remarkable because, despite being seen as the future form of this journalistic genre, research has shown how "experiments in 'crowd-sourced' fact-checking have failed to gain traction so far" (Graves & Tom, 2012, p. 18). The project by Fondazione <ahref, launched online officially on April 28, 2012, is still in its infancy, but has already gone through a series of changes and adaptations. Notwithstanding the efforts of its proponents, only a limited number of the users subscribed to Civic Links actively

participate. It is however a project in which Fondazione <ahref has conducted, and is still conducting, extensive research; the Foundation also plans to expand the project in the near future, by implementing other features and functionalities.

b. Content analysis: Socio-Technical System Approach and Web Epistemology.

For this research I carried out a qualitative content analysis, which is defined as "a process designed to condense raw data into categories or themes based on valid inference and interpretation. This process uses inductive reasoning, by which themes and categories emerge from the data through the researcher's careful examination and constant comparison" (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 308). I carried out the content analysis of the platform taking into account the specific nature of the object of study: the web. To do so, it has been developed on the basis concepts taken from the disciplinary fields of *socio-technical-system approach* and *web epistemology*.

A socio-technical system (STS) is "*a social system built upon a technical base*" (Whitworth, 2009, p. 3). In this sense, the fact-checking platform is a socio-technical system, as it is a website where social interaction takes place and where there is use of "technology to connect people socially" (Whitworth, 2009, p. 3). As technology is developed to foster social practices, the socio-technical-systems approach studies the interplay between the social and technical elements of such systems, based on the idea that "the status of every Internet user as a consumer, a sharer, a producer and possibly a manager of digital content is informed by, and shapes in return, the technical structure and organization of the services (s)he has access to: their mandatory passage points, places of storage and trade, required intersections" (Musiani, 2012, p. 1). In this view, technologies are not something developed independently from the society that makes use of them, and social knowledge has to be taken into account by designers in order to develop STS effectively. For the purpose of this research, an important concept that emerges from this approach is that of the translation of "social needs" into technology. A translation that is vital because "the interactions between the users of the system create a number of social needs which the technical dimension must meet" (Coenen et al, 2012, p. 621).

As the fact-checking platform by Fondazione <ahref is a social platform, this research adopts concept of "technological translation of social needs" to guide its content analysis. The categories used to implement this content analysis are those that represent the needs behind the social activity of crowd-sourced fact-checking. The reason behind this is that "the most important question in understanding socio-technical systems is how their technological infrastructures modulate collective capacities for performance and experience" (Carroll et al, 2012, p. 608). By understanding if and how the fact-checking platform is designed to meet the needs of the users

engaged in collaborative fact-checking, this research can then proceed to investigate if the platform is in fact a social media platform that could foster citizen empowerment and civic engagement through open government data.

For the content analysis of the platform, this research used six categories that correspond to basic needs of social fact-checking. I have developed these categories by considering the social activity of collaborative fact-checking in itself, regardless of the fact that it is carried out through a technological interface, and analyzing without what elements the activity would cease being collaborative fact-checking. The primary aspect of the task (fact-checking) requires at least two things: (1) source and information about that source in order to have something that is object of verification and (2) a resulting judgment of the checking activity. The other aspect is the "collaborative" part, and for fact-checking to be defined this way four elements need to be present: (1) the people involved –more than one- offer information about themselves to allow others to evaluate the reliability their claims, (2) the debate about the fact to verify, (3) a result of the debate, and (4) the possibility to widen and include others in the processes. These six categories and the corresponding needs are illustrated in the following table:

CATEGORY	CORRESPONDING SOCIAL NEED
FACT	The need of the actors involved in collaborative fact-checking to know the source of the object to verify and its contextualization, as without this, it is difficult to ground any argumentation around a fact. This means including precise quotes, names, locations, dates and all other available details.
PERSONAL JUDGEMENT	The need of expressing a personal judgment on the fact that is being verified.
DEBATE	The need to interact with others participating in the collaborative fact-checking process and to express the reasons behind the different personal judgments
IDENTITY AND REPUTATION	The need that the participants have to know the identity and level of trustworthiness of other participants and the documents they bring to support their arguments.
COLLECTIVE JUDGEMENT	The need to reach an aggregated decision at the end of the debate around the verification of a fact.
EXTERNALIZATION	The need to make the results of the fact-checking part of the common knowledge, shared by fellow members of the society.

TABLE 1: The social needs of collaborative fact-checking

These categories allow to explore the modes of the communication that take place in the platform by analyzing what the digital objects fall into each of these categories and how they

correspond to digital translation of these social needs. That of digital object is a concept developed in the field of web epistemology. Yuk Hui refers to digital objects by saying they are "simply objects on the Web, such as YouTube videos, Facebook profiles, Flickr images, and so forth, that are composed of data and formalized by schemes or ontologies that one can generalize as metadata" (Hui, 2012, p. 380). When studying digital objects there is a distinction between the "natively digital" and the "migrated" (Rogers, 2009; Rogers, 2013). The first refers to those objects that exist only in a digital format – like the hyperlink, the blog, the tag, or the forum – while the second is used to indicate those objects that, while having also a digital form, exist prior to the web – like pictures and videos. There are multiple ways in which to study digital objects, as there are multiple aspects under which to consider them: "digital objects appear to human users as colourful and visible beings. At the level of programming they are text files; further down the operating system they are binary codes; finally, at the level of circuit boards they are nothing but signals generated by the values of voltage and the operation of logic gates" (Hui, 2012, p. 387). What this research looks at is at to determine which digital objects present in the fact-checking platform embody those forms of social interactions that correspond to the social needs of the users, identified in **Table 1.** After having determined what digital objects translate the different social needs, I proceed to analyze what they reveal in terms of social media being a public space for civic engagement and citizens' empowerment.

c. Semi structured interviews and frame analysis: The lived world of the authors and the designers

Semi-structured interviews allow to "understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations" (Kvale, 2007, p. XVII). I have carried out semi-structured interviews precisely because they provide data that complements the findings of the content analysis by portraying the platform (and the decisions behind it) through the eyes of its designers and authors.

I have developed two different interview guides (see Appendix 1), one aimed at the interviewees who have a general overview of the fact-checking platform, the other more specifically aimed at those involved in the technological aspects and in its design. Despite this difference in form, the questions of both interview guides are similar in the data they seek to collect, and both focus on exploring the following areas:

1) How the technological infrastructure of the platform is designed to respond to the "social needs" of fact-checking as a social interaction.
2) The platform's potentials for civic engagement.

3) What is debated in this public arena.
4) The platform's potentials for educating and empowering users through the collaboration and the direct participation in the fact-checking process.
5) The use of data and open government data in the platform.

All the members of Fondazione <ahref involved in the fact-checking platform have been interviewed, in the number of four. **Table 2** provides an overview of the interviewees, who have consented to being identified by their names. As the table shows, they have all played different roles in the developing of the platform, and can so provide different points of view and levels of analysis on the same issues.

INTERVIEWEE	ROLE	INTERVIEW GUIDE (cf. Appendix 1)
Bosio, Enrico	Researcher. Has worked on the on the system that calculates the "reputation of the users" (detailed in section (a) of Chapter 3) and on the graphic interface of the platform.	Interview 2
Frediani, Adolfo	Involved in promoting the platform and maintaining the relationships with external partners, like news publications.	Interview 1
Kettmaier, Michele	General Manager of Fondazione <ahref	Interview 1
De Paoli, Stefano	Researcher. Has worked on designing the profile of the users of Civic Links and on the system that calculates the "reputation of the users" (detailed in section (a) of Chapter 3)	Interview 2

TABLE 2: The interviewees.

The data collected with the interviews are analyzed through frame analysis, a particular form of discourse analysis. In doing frame analysis, the researcher examines a discourse – in this case in oral form – to locate "frames". A frame is intended as the result of the a subject's active framing process, whose objective is "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993, p.52). Identyfing and analysing frames means investigating how a wider problematic is composed of many "aspects of perceived reality", to which the subjects assigns a particular relevance, meaning and interpretation. I therefore use frame analysis to explore how the primary elements of my research question – social media, public sphere, civic engagement, citizens' empowerment and open data – are perceived in the experience of the interviewees, in relation to the fact-checking platform. For

this purpose I have developed a coding scheme that breaks down the research questions in key words, each one made up of sub-categories that allow for their identification and comparison across the different interviews. The decision on the categories and sub-categories is guided by the literature presented on the different topics and by the findings of content analysis.

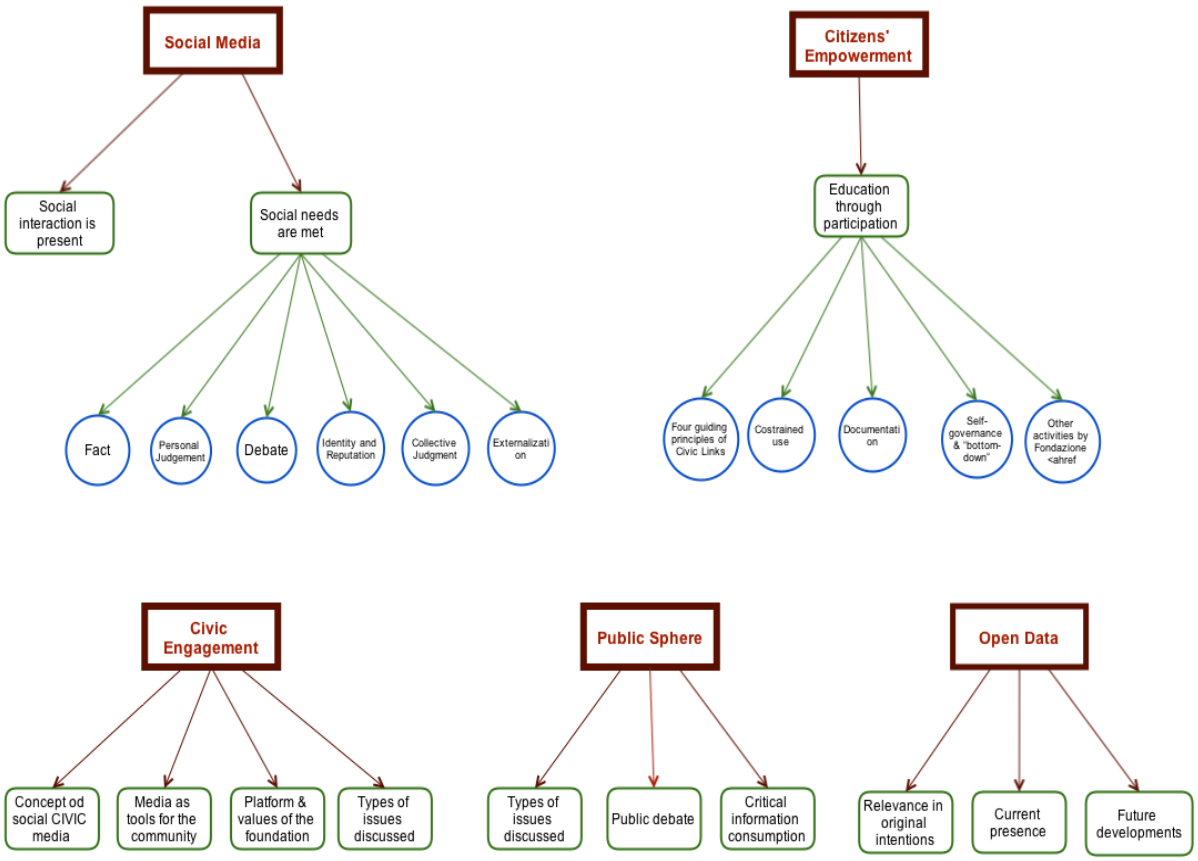

FIGURE 1: Coding scheme for frame analysis of the interviews**.**

d. Survey: Fact checkers' use of civic social media

The logic guiding the survey of the users of the platform is that to collect data that complements what emerges from the content analysis and the interviews with feedback from the users of the platform. For this reason the survey questions have been developed to investigate the following areas:

1) The platform's potentials for civic engagement and its role as a digital public sphere, with questions to explore the topics and issues debated, the level of social interaction and the level of collaboration.

2) The platform's potentials for empowerment through participation and education, with questions to explore its role in exposing to new sources of information, in fostering a critical attitude towards news consumption and in teaching other skills.
3) The platform's role in exposing users to OGD, with questions to evaluate user's current engagement on the platform with statistics and data sources.

The online survey has been sent out by e-mail to all the users with a profile on the Civic Links platform. In total 12 respondents have participated. It is difficult to put this number in perspective, as the organization does not have any official count of the total number of active users of the platform. This is because the "sign in" process and the profile that is created as a result of that, is the same when a persons signs up for any of the services offered on Civic Links as a whole; therefore, there is no way to identify which of the users who sign up within Civic Links actually uses the fact-checking platform. Asked on this subject matter, members of Fondazione <ahref claimed that the platform is not being promoted at this precise moment, and it has indeed reached a decline in usage, after a period of intense engagement in February 2013, in the run up of the Italian general elections to form the new government.

Because of the scarce number of responses, the data collected with the survey do not aim at giving insights on the questions the survey was initially designed to provide findings on. The role of said survey in the research design is therefore mainly to complement the findings of the content analysis and the interviews, especially by providing suggestions from the open text questions. The survey has been analyzed qualitatively through coding, a practice backed up by methodological literature studies (Jansen, 2010). For this purpose I used the same frame analysis used for the interview responses, to label the answers to the survey according to the coding scheme presented in **Figure 1**.

III.

CROWDSOURCED FACT-CHECKING:

Citizens as "civic documenters"

This research aims to investigate whether a collaborative fact-checking platform can represent a social media that gives benefit to the public sphere by empowering citizens and encouraging civic engagement through open data. To validate such claim and investigate the ways in which it happens in practice, this chapter explores how each of the key elements of the my assumption – social media, public sphere, citizens' empowerment, civic engagement and open data – are present in the fact-checking platform implemented by Fondazione <ahref.

a. Social needs of collaborative fact-checking: The structure of the communication

When studying a social media platform, it is crucial to explore interplay between the social interaction that takes place on it and its technological infrastructure. As illustrated in section (b) of Chapter 2, this means two things: (1) the way in which the social aspects of the interaction shape the technological infrastructure, as the latter has to take them into account, and (2) how the technological infrastructure defines the way in which these social aspects are translated into digital. Analyzing both of these aspects serves to understand the communication that occurs on the platform, as this tension between its social and technical components plays an ultimate role in defining the modes of the interaction between users.

The content analysis detects how the social needs defined in **Table 1** are embedded in the platform through specific digital objects**.** The interviews with creators and designers of the platform, reveal that all of the interviewees address the presence of the digital translation of these needs, but, by comparing the responses, some of these social needs received a stronger attention, either explicitly or implicitly, thus showing the difference degrees of importance attributed to them.

Fact: The need to have a source and a context.

The first basic need that I have identified for a collaborative fact-checking activity is that of knowing the context of the fact that is exposed to the verification process. When submitting a new fact to the community, the users are presented with the interface shown in **Figure 2.**

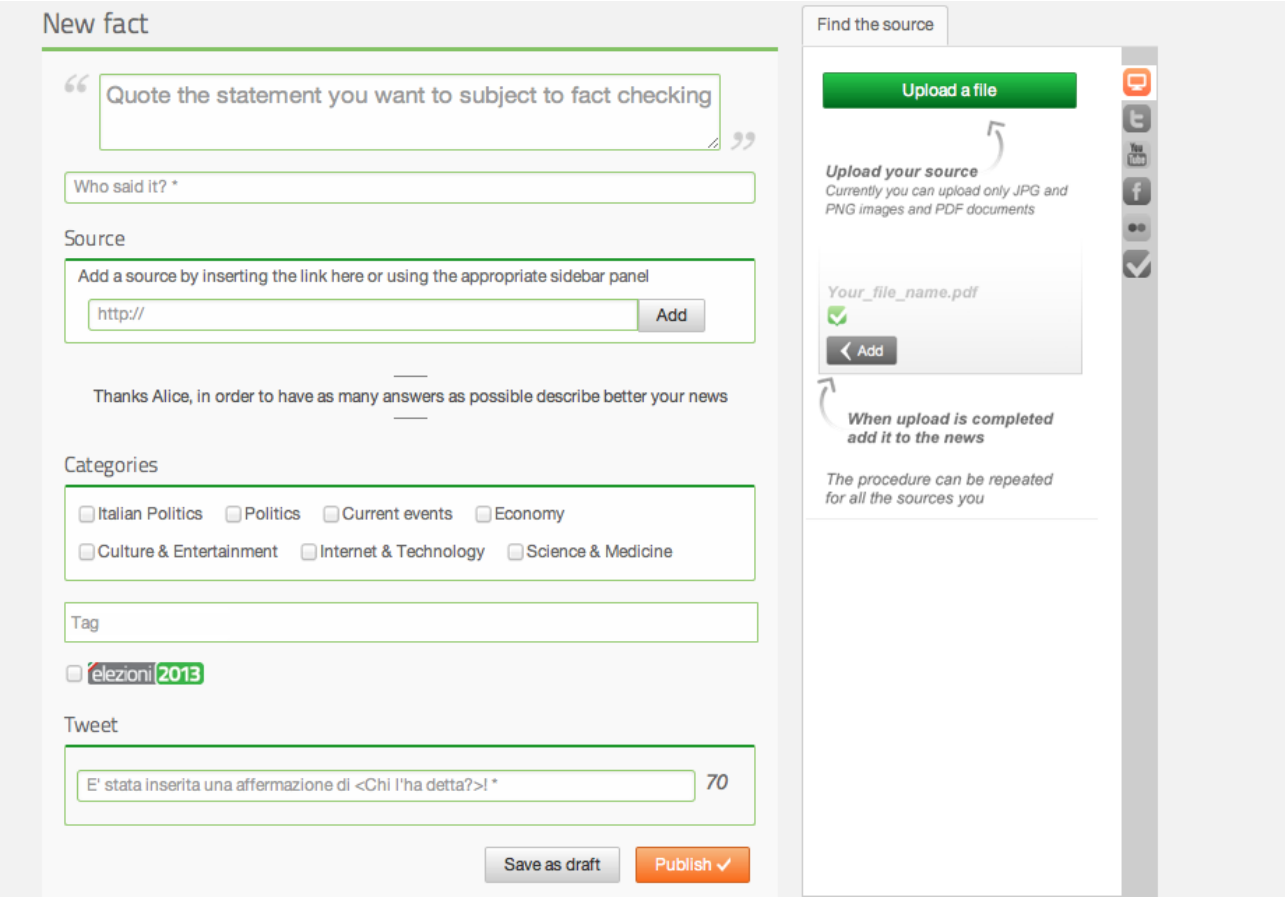

FIGURE 2: Screenshot of the "Insert new fact" page.

On the platform developed by Fondazione <ahref, this need is translated in the following digital objects: text, links, categories and tags. Through the texts users insert the actual fact: the quote to be verified and to who it is attributed. The link represents the source of the information, and it can refer to a website, a document, a picture or other objects taken from social media. At the moment the interface directly supports Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and Flickr, but any other source or blog can be included as long as the URL is provided. By inserting the link, the user gives the community the context and the details that are necessary to proceed with the documentation and verification process of the fact. Categories and tags also correspond to the contextualization of the fact, by framing the issue: the categories are seven and predefined by the interface (Italian politics, politics, current events, economy, culture & entertainment, Internet & technology, science & medicine), the tags are freely typed by the users. Once the user submits this information to the judgment of the community and other users start to engage in the fact-checking process, (s)he is not allowed anymore to modify it, as it would interfere with the debate around the fact.

Personal judgment: The need of stating the single user's conclusions on a fact.

Other than proposing facts that (s)he wants to verify, every user can contribute to the platform by collaborating in checking facts (s)he or others have proposed. This can be done either by commenting the fact or by engaging in the actual fact-checking process. The first activity is explicated through the comment as a digital object, through which (s)he can express thoughts about the fact or someone else's contribution to documenting it. If the user decides to participate more fully in the fact-checking process by expressing a personal judgment, (s)he is presented with the screen shown in **Figure 3**.

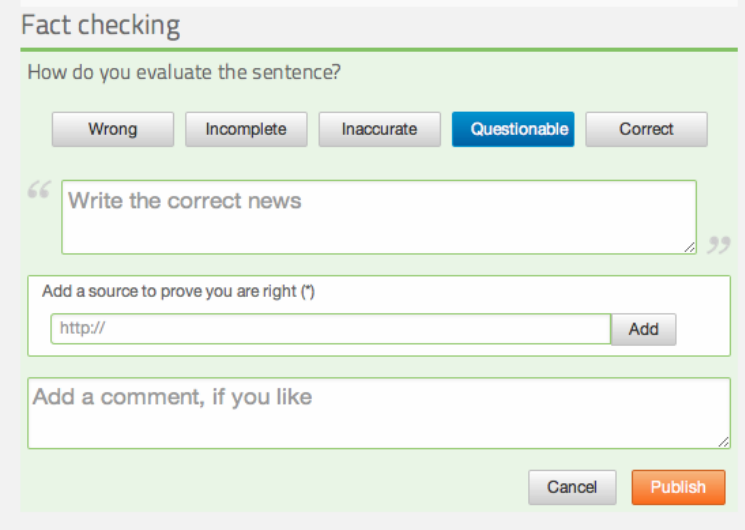

FIGURE 3: Screenshot of the "Check this news" page

The expression of the user's personal judgment is explicated through the following digital objects: five categories, text, link, comment. The five categories – wrong, incomplete, inaccurate, questionable and correct – embody the personal conclusion a user has drawn about the correctness of the fact proposed. It is interesting to notice that the choice of the how to let users express their judgment has undergone a series of changes, and that the evolution reflects the values that the foundation tries to communicate. E. Bosio illustrated this by saying that some of the options previously available – like *I think it's wrong* or *I think it's right* – have been dropped, as they reflect an opinion, and are so "contrary to the spirit of fact-checking. Additionally, it is important to notice the words chosen for the current categories: *wrong* and *correct* instead of *false* and *true.* In the first fact-checking proposed, it was not so, as **Figure 4** illustrates.

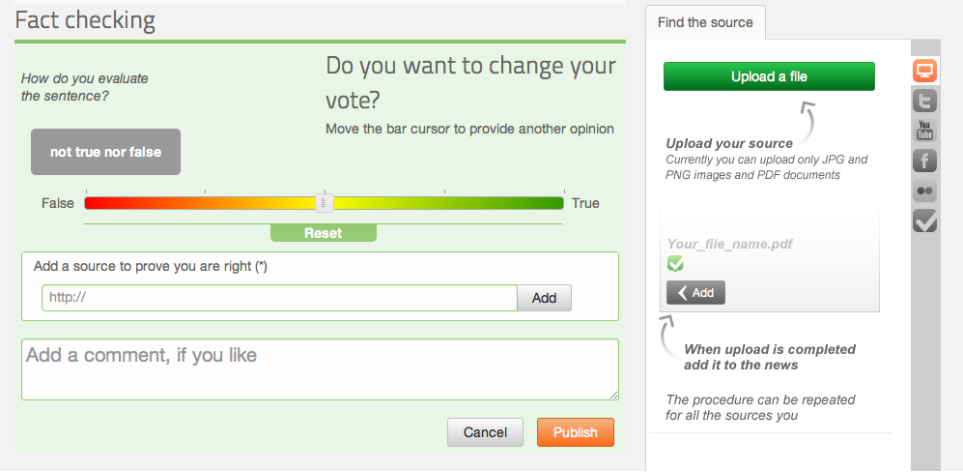

FIGURE 4: Screenshot of "Check this news" for news inserted in the initial stage of the platform.

This change is infused with meaning and cannot be considered simply a design choice. It is an epistemological statement – it's not easy to define what is True and False straight-forward – but also an indicator of the purposes of the platform. M. Kettmaier in fact develops on such issue by saying that "what we care about most is that it's not so important to define if a fact is true or false. Well, of course it is important to reach a sort of order and broader idea about it, but assessing if something is true or false is really complicated. […] What we care about most is that trustworthy sources are collected to document facts". This stance is in line with the presence of the other digital objects used to express judgment, the text and the link: whenever a user chooses a certain category to evaluate a fact, he is obliged to provide a text with the quote that grounds the choice and a link to it, to prove that it has been cited appropriately and to offers other users the possibility to form an opinion about its credibility.

Debate: The need for analysis and interaction

The debate around each fact-checking takes the shape of a forum thread, made up of the single contributions, that is those digital objects that translate the need to express a personal judgment (five categories, link, text, comment). In talking about the social aspects of the platform, all four interviewees referred to the importance of having a public debate around the facts to verify, and particularly to the centrality of comments – and so of the forum thread that results from their aggregation. E. Bosio explained how a very basic interface was chosen, in order to achieve essentiality and efficiency. The crucial role of comments not only was explicitly stated by all the interviewees, but M. Kettmaier also talked about the fact that the foundation is doing an ongoing research on comments to develop this function further.

The debate doesn't involve only the individual judgments but also other forms of the social interaction around them, expressed through: the flag button, the follow button and the voting

arrows. The follow button allows users to be notified about updates in specific facts they are interested in. The flag button can be used for facts or comments, when they the user considers them illegal, discriminatory or an infringement of someone's rights. The voting arrows allow users approve or disapprove of other user's contribution to fact-checking: by assigning an upward or downward vote to a user, its reputation is increased or decreased by a certain number of points that depends on the reputation level of the users who assigned this vote. The flag button and the voting arrow, beyond having a function in the social dynamics of the platform, also embody a specific choice about the intrinsic nature of the website, as both these objects are in fact a way of placing in the hand of participants themselves the management of the debate, which is not organized by some external authority. The implications of this aspect of "self-governance" are further developed in section (b) of this Chapter.

Identity and reputation: The need to know who/what you're facing

The identity of the users on a social media corresponds to their profile. For the Fondazione <ahref's fact-checking platform, the profile is constituted of a picture (optional) and of information on the user's activity on the platform: fact-checking proposed and on which (s)he has collaborated, basic statistics on the use of the platform, and the reputation level of the user. It is a sort of guideline for those who want to have an idea of the trustworthiness of fellow users they're engaging with. The digital translation of the notion of reputation is a badge that indicates a user's "reputation level". This "reputation-level mechanism", still in beta-phase, is formed by three levels (beginner, intermediate and advanced), each made up of four sub-levels. Being a social media, user's reputation is defined by their social activity, and so is "commensurate to your level of active participation on the platform, and to the community's evaluation of your actions"[25] .Its function is not only to introduce a gamification element and promote engagement. Nor it is only to signal to other users each one's ability. It has a significant impact on how the "final judgment" is assigned to each fact, because as a user's level goes up, so does the weight of its social actions, like assigning votes to other users or judgments to facts.

The reputation system is the element that has received the most consideration by the interviewees. The same fact that the website asks for users to give feedback about it indicates its relevance. A. Frediani, when asked about what is an essential aspect of the platform, spontaneously referenced to the reputation system and explained that much thought was given to its development. E. Bosio has been directly involved in the implementation of the judgment system and so worked also on the algorithms that take count of the reputation in order to aggregate the personal judgments into the collective one. He traced what has changed through time, and, in explaining lengthily how

this algorithm works, he revealed how one of the main concerns was that the reputation of the users had to have a significant impact in calculating the collective judgment on a fact. Also S. De Paoli worked on the reputation mechanism and said that an interesting research has been done to back up the judgment systems devised for the platform. The motivations behind the importance given to the reputation system arise especially from the words of M. Kettmaier and A. Frediani. The first referred to the system as an element tightly linked with the values of responsibility and reliability. By developing a solid reputation mechanism, users can be prized for their responsible use of the platform and for their accurate and relevant contributions. This link between the reputation system and the values the platforms tries to promote is more explicitly detailed by A. Frediani, when he states that "the only tool that allows the quality of common contributions to emerge is a reputation mechanism that takes into account the quality of your work and of that of others. And the reputation mechanisms on which we are working on are precisely this attempt to let the quality surface. I think this is one of the most important elements".

Collective judgment: The need for synthesis

The digital object corresponding to the collective judgment is one of the five categories used to express also the personal judgment. This is the product of an evolution through time, as explained by both E. Bosio and S. De Paoli. The previous system consisted of a "progress bar" that increased to indicate the *level of reliability* of a fact, as more users contributed to its verification – something that can be seen in the top right corner of **Figure 5**.

FIGURE 5: Screenshot of news inserted in the initial stage of the platform.

E. Bosio explains how the change occurred because the previous version was considered "misleading, in the sense that it's not correct to talk about reliability of a fact as a percentage". The current system, instead of referring to reliability, offers as a collective judgment the "winning"

category that emerges from the aggregation of the personal judgments of the participants. In order to choose which one is assigned to each fact, there is an underlying algorithm that not only counts the different judgments of the single users who contributed, but also weighs them by the reputation of each. The result of the fact-checking is therefore an object that embodies the social interaction that is behind the activity from which it arises.

Externalization: The need to communicate

The need to spread the social activity that takes place on the platform with people in other "digital arenas" is represented by the share button, which allows users to embed fact-checking content across social media (Twitter or Facebook) or on their website. This functionality is extremely important, as it allows the debate not to be limited to a restricted public but initiates a flow of information that can spread across multiple platforms, and reach a varied public beyond the people directly active in fact-checking. This way, the debate started on a small platform - where probably the users are already to some degree conscious about critical news consumption and the importance of fact-checking – has the possibility to involve a very diverse audience, as it lives a life of its own by being shared across the cyberspace.

The importance of constraints in structuring the modes of communication

The content analysis and the interviews revealed one of the characteristics of the communication on the platform is the presence of some constraints to the activity of the users: these appear in the presence of the mandatory information that has to be inserted and in the impossibility to modify information submitted after the verification process has started. **Table 3** offers a summary of all the digital objects analyzed so far, allowing also to notice the presence of these constraints.

DIGITAL OBJECT	FUNCTIONALITY	SOCIAL NEED THE DIGITAL OBJECT TRANSLATES	MANDATORY O OPTIONAL
TEXT	Used to insert the actual fact to be checked and the person who claimed it.	Fact	Mandatory
LINK	Embodies the digital counterpart of the source of information where the user found the fact, and therefore provides its context.	Fact	Mandatory
CATEGORIES	Corresponds to the contextualization of the	Fact	Mandatory

	fact to be verified by the community.		
TAGS	Corresponds to the contextualization of the fact to be verified by the community.	Fact	Optional
COMMENT (TEXT)	Allows to express thoughts about a fact proposed.	Personal Judgment	Optional
	Allows to specify your contribution to document a fact.		
	Allows to express thoughts on someone else's contribution to document a fact.		
CATEGORIES	Corresponds to the personal judgment the users has on a proposed fact.	Personal Judgment	Mandatory
TEXT	Serves to insert the quote that backs up your judgment and its author.	Personal Judgment	Mandatory
LINK	Provides the proof that the user has cited appropriately the quote used to ground its judgment, and offers other users the possibility to form an opinion about its credibility.	Personal Judgment	Mandatory
FORUM THREAD	Corresponds to the debate structured as a collection of the single contributions of the users participating.	Debate	Not Applicable
FLAG BUTTON	Used to signal facts, fact-checking or comments that the user considers illegal, discriminatory or an infringement of someone's rights.	Debate	Optional
FOLLOW BUTTON	Allows users to be informed through notifications of the developments of a fact-checking they're interested in.	Debate	Optional
VOTING ARROWS	Allows users to express their approval or disapproval of other user's contribution to fact-checking.	Debate	Optional
REPUTATION BADGE	Explicates a user's reputation, so that the users (s)he's interacting with can form an opinion about the trustworthiness of its	Identity and Reputation	Not Applicable

	activity.		
	Allows for the final collective judgment to be weighted according to each one's reliability		
	Gamification element		
CATEGORIES	Represents the collective judgment formed through the aggregation of single contributions.	Collective Judgment	Not Applicable
SHARE BUTTON	Represent the possibility to widen the debate to other social arenas.	Externalization	Not Applicable

TABLE 3: The social needs of collaborative fact-checking embedded in the digital objects of the platform.

The presence of this series of constraints on users' input is a peculiar characteristics of the platform, and embodies a specific design choice backed up by specific values, and so is better described in the next section, where the research moves from the structure of the platform to the ways in which it promotes citizens' empowerment.

b. Education through participation: Horizontal collaboration, accurate documentation and quality of content

The vast literature on the characteristics of media that have an empowering effect on their users has stressed the central importance of the users' involvement in the information processes. This section presents the ways in which this participation takes place in the platform by Fondazione <ahref and whether it can have empowering outcomes. I do so by juxtaposing two levels: the actual structure of the platform and the subjective intentions of the interviewees. The main finding that arises from both the content analysis and the interviews is that by collaborating on the platform the user is informally educated through this participation. This claim is complemented by the survey, as 11 out of 12 respondents claimed of having learned something from the platform. Furthermore, when asked to indicate what in one word, interesting replies were: "collaboration", "always verify facts", "participative journalism". These replies reflect the three sources of empowerment that emerge also from the content analysis and the interviews: self-governance on the platform, obligation to document what is claimed, and direct engagement with the fundamental principles of good information.

Users are completely "self-governed" and their use of the platform shapes the activity that takes place on it. This is evident from what exposed in the previous section on the structure of the platform: everything is handled by the users themselves, from the choice of facts to verify to the

documentation and fact-checking process; from the reputation to the debate; from the flagging and evaluation of other users to judgments.. The users have to engage in a collaborative documentation and debate of facts in order to reach the goal of fact-checking. The centrality of self-governance appears also from the responses of the interviewees, that stress how this aspect is in line with the goal to maximize participation. As M. Kettmaier says "There are no editors. […] The spirit is precisely that to allow for participation". Also A. Frediani underlines that there is no central authority moderating the platform "because at that point it would become an editorial platform and not a civic media. [...] The main challenge is to find what mechanisms permit that quality work rather than shallow work emerges in a autonomous and democratic way." This introduces a second issue: this platform has a series of mechanisms that guide the participating users in a process of informal education.

Education through participation occurs as, while being generally free from a central moderator, the users are necessarily bound by some constraints placed on their activity by the structure of the platform itself. In the content analysis I have individualized these constraints as the mandatory fields and the interviews revealed the motivations behind the presence of such constraints, by showing how their function is that to shape users' action in order to guarantee quality of the content. This is exemplified in the words of A. Frediani, who says "We are developing a tool that forces you, even at the cost of dedicating time to it, to produce a work of quality". Fondazione <ahref therefore decided to ask its users to engage on the platform in a way that requires them to think actively about their actions and to document their opinions. This comes at the price of complicating the participation on the medium, and was object of debate, but by being literally "forced" to comply with these constraints, the users are more conscious about their contributions. In the words of M. Kettmaier, putting the responsibility to document facts in the direct hands of users is so fundamental to the point of being even more important than the outcome of the fact-checking itself. Also A. Frediani explicitly referred to the importance of the documentation process.

Other than being "forced" to respect constraints aimed at guaranteeing the quality of the content created, for the same purpose users are asked to engage responsibly on the website by respecting the four guiding principles behind the Civic Links project: accuracy, impartiality, independence and legality. These principles are chosen because of their being "part of the deontology recognized by journalists", as M. Kettmaier explicated. The fact of asking users to be inspired by these principles when producing content is seen as a way to indirectly educate them on how to produce quality information, as both M. Kettmaier and A. Frediani underlined. The central idea behind this is to give citizens means to produce quality content: "we want citizens to generate

information and we want it to be quality information". This takes the empowering aspects present in UGC a step further: not only citizens have the tools to generate and distribute content, but – through the same fact of engaging on the platform – they are also educated in producing quality content by respecting the four guiding principles behind Civic Links. This happens at different levels. On a preliminary level, by signing in the platforms the users are explained what respecting the principles means and are asked to follow them. Furthermore, there are design choices to either pressure (reputation system) or "force" (constraints on user's input and mandatory fields).

It is finally important to notice how citizen's empowerment through participation and education is not simply a marginal aspect of the platform, but one of its underlying values. This has emerged especially from the interview with M. Kettmaier who, as the general manager of the foundation, illustrated other projects that are being developed, some of which will be integrated with the fact-checking platform. He talked about projects to develop a platform on "continuous democracy"[26] and collective decision-making, about a platform (Timu) for collaborative storytelling and about games and informal lessons on fact-checking and documentation that are carried out by the foundation in schools. This information allowed to document how the characteristics of self-governance, participation in decision processes and education are building blocks of Fondazione <ahref's philosophy and of the activity it is putting resources in.

c. Collaboration for civic purposes: Embedding civic values in a social media

To explore in what ways the fact-checking portal by Fondazione <ahref fosters civic engagement, this research analyses if it can be considered a civic media, by showing how the core values behind civic media and the foundation's civic motivations have concretely been embedded in the platform. The platform was openly intended as a civic media, being part of the project Civic Links. This also explicitly emerges from the words of the interviewees, all four of which brought the concept in the conversation. It was stated that fact-checking was actually one of the first projects to be thought of in Fondazione <ahref's activity on civic media. More specifically, M. Kettmaier described the platform as a civic media because "the information is an information of 'mutual benefit'. You help others while at the same time you help yourself also, by improving the overall quality of the information".

The structure and the dynamics of the conversation in the website are centered on the community and on its collaboration to reach a common goal through shared expertise. This is emerged from the content analysis of the platform – which disclosed the mechanisms of cooperation – and from the words of the interviewees, which revealed how the platform is a social media serving the community: a "***civic*** *social media*", as M. Kettmaier specified. A. Frediani

claimed, “the work that is done on it is to the benefit of citizens, who can do what they want with it. In this sense so it is civic: because it has a civic goal, which is the quality of the commonly shared information. And this ‘commonly shared’ is important, of course, this is the social aspect obviously”. The fact that content generated through the social interactions and engagement of the users is of civic utility is a central aspect throughout all the interviews, and explicitly stated by M. Kettmaier, who claimed that “we try to call them civic media rather than social media”. The difference lays in the fact that, while being a social media, the fact-checking platform is presented as an “antagonist” to most common social media, because of its focus on the quality of the information produced by and for the community. Even more, according to A. Frediani, one of the motivations behind the platform was actually to counter the information that circulates on social media and blogs. As he states: “we are not developing a social network where you press like and you write the first thing that comes in your mind. We are building a tool that forces you […] to produce quality content”. The platform by Fondazione <ahref so makes a specific design choice which is not always in line with what social media that try to attract users do: preferring to make the use of the service “complicated” by “forcing” users to think their activity through. This choice is motivated by the intention to offer the community product of increased utility, generated through the collaboration of users. It is precisely in this that the civic engagement aspect resides, as the users collaborate on the same task – fact-checking – which produces knowledge that profits the community, by combining the single contributions – judgments, links and comments – in a collectively documented narration aiming at “the mutual benefit of citizens”. In line with this purpose is the fact that the media is perceived as a tool rather than an outlet limited to the delivery of information. All of the interviewees explicitly used the term “tool” for the community when referring to the platform, a central term also for the definition of civic media presented in section (b.4.) of Chapter 1. In other words, the civic utility of this social media is reinforced by the fact that is serves as a space for citizens to build quality information, rather than a channel to simply passively consult for information. Such feature reflects also the so-called “citizen-centered approach” to civic engagement (Gibson, 2006), according to which citizen’s active participation in civic practices is a crucial element to considere when evaluating the impact on democracy of such practices. Additionally, the civic aspect arises also from the analysis of the content of the conversation that occurs on it. This is illustrated in the next section as it is tightly linked with how the platform can be intended as a digital public sphere.

d. Cyber public arenas: The role of digital fact-checking in the public sphere

The fact-checking platform by Fondazione <ahref serves as a digital public sphere, a "cyber arena" for citizens' to debate issues of public interest. This because the digital objects that allow for the social interaction on the website are explicitly linked with its civic goal to promote quality information for the community through a public debate around facts and documents. The importance of the debate has already been illustrated, when discussing how social needs are translated and how having a space for social interaction around fact-checking is central for all interviewees. The platform's function as a public sphere has then been suggested when explaining how civic engagement occurs on it, as the interviewees shared the idea that the website is a place for users to contribute with their individual expertise to help other members of the community and increase the common knowledge. This was suggested by the fact that interviewees talked about a "collective intelligence" and about a "very vast community with small information that, put together, form a big body of expertise", or referred to open source movements as "collective verification of facts is in fact a bit like open source: when many different eyes, with different abilities, look at a code, sooner or later they will find the bug*"*. This public sphere function emerges also when considering at what are the facts that are discussed on it. The count of how many fact-checking fall in each of the different possible categories showed the user's primary interest for politics, particularly national politics.

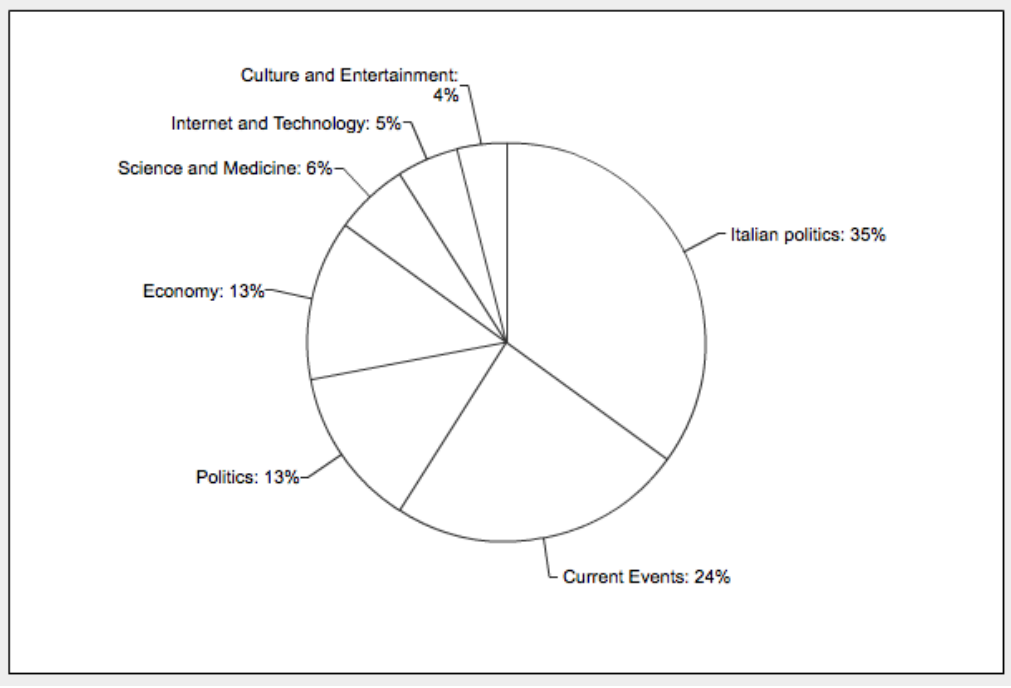

FIGURE 1: Breakdown of fact-checking per category. (Source: Data from Fondazione <ahref's Fact-checking platform, retrieved on May 21, 2013)

The survey respondents confirmed this hierarchy, as facts that fall in the categories of "Italian politics" and "current events" are the ones that the majority of them claim to insert and follow more, while also being the ones they perceive the community in general inserts and debates more. All the interviewees addressed this interest for politics, and revealed how the platform reached peaks of usage during election times. These topics are not only the most present, but also – according to A. Frediani – the ones where the debate becomes livelier. Users meet on the platform to discuss about facts stated by politicians and about claims made during their speeches. It is so a way to discuss the country's public life by engaging in a rich conversation that aims at maintaining the quality of the information produced. M. Kettmaier added that, apart from politics, other themes that attract attention are environment, ecology and health, which are typically topics of high interest for citizens. S. De Paoli expanded by saying that the platform was initially designed also with the aim of giving users a meeting space where to place under scrutiny and discussion the claims made by politicians in popular TV talk shows. From TV, the platform then actually developed to include mainly textual claims contained on other media sources, especially online newspapers. In fact Fondazione <ahref explicitly allowed for collaborations between major Italian newspaper publications and the fact-checking platform. The fact that the interviewees described the platform in a way that it appears as a sort of "crowd-sourced watch dog" towards statements made by public figures and towards what is produced on traditional media outlets reinforces even more its functionality for the public sphere. Like the coffee houses of the Eighteen century, users engage in documented exchanges of opinions about issues of public interest, in an arena that guarantees freedom of (virtual) assembly and expression and that therefore functions as a digital public sphere.

e. Integrating open data: A work in progress

The previous sections have shown how Fondazione <ahref's platform is a social media that responds to the needs of a collaborative fact-checking activity, how it empowers citizens, how it promotes civic engagement and how it has a function in the "cyber public sphere". Now I turn my attention to whether all of this can be integrated with open government data, so that OGD can benefit the citizens and become part of the public debate. While fact checkers use open government data to verify facts, at the moment open data do not really have a distinct role in the platform. It is up to the users to navigate the web to search for sources that validate their claims and to spontaneously decide to use OGD. The structure of the platforms allows users to link to public databases as their source of information, but doesn't have a specific interface to foster and smooth the process. In describing the service, the website however does have a link to a page suggesting what sources to use to contribute in the fact-checking. The title of the page is "Data and statistics

for Fact-checking" and it contains links to public databases, including open government data suppliers. This shows how, in the mind of the authors of the service, data had an important role, as it is confirmed in the interviews. When asked about what kind of sources work well in fact-checking, three interviewees talked about data and referred to the Italian National Statistical Institute (Istat), releasing its data in an open format – as an example. Additionally all interviews revealed how providing tools to engage with open data is a matter of high relevance for the foundation and the fact-checking project. S. De Paoli talked about a grant proposal submitted to the European Commission to integrate OGD on the platform. E. Bosio explained how there have been past discussions on ways to integrate databases more explicitly in the main interface of the platform, to allow users to access data sources and statistics more easily. He also said that the foundation is still working on the matter, as confirmed by M. Kettmaier and A. Frediani. A. Frediani actually puts this as a central element, by saying that *"*our purpose is to give to the users sources with important data relevant to what he is verifying – for example on economy or demography. It's something we are working on because it's not that easy".

Even if at the current state this potential integration with open data is not yet fully implemented, the words of the interviewees expose how it is an important feature being currently pursued. Furthermore, given the user's primary interested in politics, it is highly possible to assume that open government data would play an important role on the platform. A successful implementation of the integration between the fact-checking platform and open data sources is so not only a possibility, but would also make the website a space for citizens to come into direct contact with OGD. Additionally, given the structure of the communication that takes place on the platform, it would be an active and conscious contact, in line with its purposes to promote civic engagement and citizens' empowerment. A civic social media for collaborative fact-checking could so give a contribution to widening the democratic potentials of open government data releases.

IV.

CIVIC SOCIAL MEDIA:

An emerging frontier for open government data

This research set out with the ambition to explore how technology can be used to unleash the potential of open government data to favor democratic processes. The main question is whether and how social media can be used for civic purposes, and in particular to foster citizens' empowerment through open data. More specifically, the research focused on the assumption that a crowdsourced fact-checking platform, given the type of activity users engage in, would fulfill this prospect. The literature on empowering media practices supports this assumption, as seen both in the concepts of *alternative media, community media, citizens' media, civic media* and *User-Generated Content*. I targeted a collaborative fact-checking platform developed by Fondazione <ahref as an appropriate case for the study, then I collected and analyzed the data to explore the research question through qualitative content analysis and frame analysis of semi-structured interviews. I also collected data through a survey of the users of the platform, but did not proceed in the analysis because it did not obtain more than 12 respondents. This scarce number is probably related to the fact that the platform is under a phase of low user engagement and is not being promoted by Fondazione <ahref, who is waiting to implement more features before doing so. This surely constitutes one of the areas for further research, as illustrated in the last paragraph of the chapter. The research investigated the presence of the key concepts of the research question – social media, public sphere, civic engagement, citizens' empowerment and open government data- in the fact-checking portal. The most interesting finding however is not that these notions are present, but **how** they are present, as this way the research can offer a contribution to the literature on empowering media practices, by including among them a case of civic social media. Furthermore, in detailing the dynamics of the platform's functioning, this thesis contributes on the topic of those *"Wikipedia-style"* crowd-sourced forms of fact-checking that experts have identified as a future development of the genre. The main finding of my research are summarized in the following paragraphs.

The structure of the communication and technological "constraints". The social interaction that takes place on this media shapes its technological layer, which is designed to take into account the needs that arise from a collaborative fact-checking activity. This means that there are digital objects

into which social aspects have been translated. At the same time, however, also the platform structures the social interaction that takes place on it, and the way in which it does so is one of the peculiar characteristics of this civic social media. When engaging in it, users have to conform to some constraints that the specific technological interface - in mediating their social interaction - places on their action. These technological constraints shape the activity of the user of the platform considerably, by forcing to document carefully the information submitted.

Participation that promotes education and empowerment. The inquiry exposed how these technological constraints – like the presence of mandatory and non-modifiable fields – are the product of choices that reveal a tension between the two core values that Fondazione <ahref tried to embed in the platform: the aim to promote participation and the goal to maintain quality of information. By placing constraints, participation is in some ways hindered, but at the same time user's contribution is increased in value: he is forced to be actively conscious about the information he inputs and to research before being able to submit it. This way, the same design of the platform embeds the main value that the authors wanted to promote: responsibility in producing quality content. Because of this, the users are informally educated through participations, as they are "forced" to follow basic guidelines for producing content that is properly documented and researched upon. Other than from the characteristics of its technological layer, education – and empowerment - through participation is achieved thanks to three other elements. First of all the same activity of fact-checking fosters a critical consumption of information and a debate about it in which the single users share their knowledge and expertise with the community, so that members can learn from each other. Secondly the users who sign up in Civic Links are asked to share a common methodology for producing content, a methodology that is centered on the four guiding principles of Civic Links (accuracy, independency, impartiality, legality). By respecting these principles, users are in fact engaging in a form of citizen journalism – with all the empowering aspect of such media practices – that aims to achieve the same level of quality as professional journalism. Thirdly the platform is completely in "self-governed" by the users, who appropriate the medium and define it in their own terms. The users shape the platform by deciding over its content in terms of facts proposed and management of the debate (comments, flagging, voting on other's contributions). Also, interestingly, their social activity is accountable for the outcome aim of fact-checking - the collective judgment - as this is influenced by their reputation level, which is defined by their engagement on the platform.

Technology to convey civic values. The fact-checking website by Fondazione <ahref is intended as a **civic** social media because of the values that permeate it. These values are first of all present in the intentions of the authors, but are then translated into specific design choices, some of which

already addressed in the previous two paragraphs. The presence of constraints to produce quality information is in fact not only linked with the education aspect, but also with its civic goal to produce quality information for the community. Furthermore, civic engagement is explicated in the self-governance of the website, which triggers mechanisms of mutual aid and collaboration. Regardless of the outcome of the fact-checking processes and whether a crowdsouced form of fact-checking yields better results that that produced by professional journalists, the same fact that users are actively participating and collaborating towards a common goal of civic utility can be considered as an impactful form of civic engagement. The platform is again civic because it functions much more as a tool to help the community collaborate to fulfill a task of common benefit, rather than only media for social interaction or a news outlet.

Digital arenas for public opinion. With the fact-checking portal, Fondazione <ahref in fact created a new digital space for the forming of public opinion. The research revealed the importance, for the dynamics of the platform and the intentions of it authors, of having a debate around matters of public interest. In practice, the platforms' role in the public sphere emerges also from the topics that are most discussed on it, which fall in the category of Italian politics. But the platform does not only offer a digital space for conversation about information of common relevance, as it is also promotes a critical consumption of it – an aspect related to the forming of public opinion. Such critical consumption is exercised by the users in the same act of fact-checking, and also further encouraged in the occasions in which the platform is used in connection with mainstream media outlets.

A future for Open Government Data . The research identified how both the structure and content of the communication seems particularly suitable to be more integrated with open government data, because the users need to argument each of their judgments with reliable information and because politics is a main interest of the platform's users. Furthermore, it emerged how the authors of the website had in mind statistical data when thinking of optimal sources to recommend for fact-checking and that options to explicitly integrate open databases with the fact-checking platform are at study. In this field the research would need to advance further in the future, as at the moment the integration between open data and fact-checking has not yet been fully implemented. The study of the fact-checking platform by Fondazione <ahref does suggest however that, once this feature will be implemented, a crowdsourced fact-checking social platform could indeed be an option worth considering when thinking about how to exploit technology so that the release of OGD can augment its democratic effect and foster citizens' empowerment.

Areas for further research

The fact that Fondazione <ahref as on its agenda new features to enrich its fact-checking portal means that there is still room for investigation on these subjects. In future research would need to be focused more on the user-side. The survey designed for this study attempted to do so, but faced the material limitation that at the moment the platform is somewhat in a dormant phase, with few users engaging regularly with it. Carrying out a similar survey among the users, and possibly follow-up interviews, would add value to the issues touched in this thesis, by allowing the evaluation of the outcomes of their civic participation on the platform and by offering a third point of view – after that of the content analysis and of the interviews. A quantitative survey conducted in the near future (when for example the platform counts a broader user base) could also expand what this paper researched through qualitative methods, offering additional insights on the *problematique*.

While investigating the specific characteristics of the portal by Fondazione <ahref did already offer some insights, the research would benefit from comparison both with similar cases of crowd-sourced fact-checking – which experts have predicted to spread – and with other types of civic social media. A similar study would allow to understand better which of its features are peculiar to it and which are shared an generalizable, a process which would help to define more clearly the concept of civic social media by grouping the common features of its different realizations.

Finally, there are reasons to believe that this of civic social media is a field in rapid expansion, both in terms of research and of technological implementations. First because academic research is increasingly involved in studying social media in relation to civic engagement and empowerment, just like it has done widely for "analogic" media. Secondly because the concept of "Web 2.0" addressed in this paper is already starting to be questioned, as a controversial debate is sprouting around the future – but in some sense already started- development of a so called Web 3.0 (Maxwell, 2010), that extends to new levels the features of its predecessor and incorporates semantic technologies, therefore opening new opportunities for development of the civic social media platforms of the future. Lastly, as noted throughout this paper, experts have predicted the diffusion of completely crowdsourced fact-checking websites. All of these points suggest that it is worthwhile to continue investigating civic social media as an option to consider when thinking about how to exploit technology so that the release of OGD can augment its democratic effect and foster citizens' empowerment.

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Appendices

a. APPENDIX 1: Interview guides for the authors and designers of the platform

INTERVIEW GUIDE n.1

(Targets interviewees who possess a general overview of the platform)

Introduction: This interview is composed of 10 questions about the fact-checking platform developed by Fondazione <ahref. You can choose to remain anonymous, otherwise your name will be used for reference in presenting the results.

*Introductory questions on the **interviewee's role**, on the **guiding principles** of the platform and on how it relates to the **vision of the foundation**.*

1) What did, or do, you work on, in relation to the fact-checking platform?

2) Why did Fondazione <ahref have the idea that a similar platform (for crowdsourced fact-checking)was needed?

a) Is there any added value to the activity of fact-checking when it is done this way?

b)If yes: Why? ; What impact do you think it has on the cultural sphere and on the civic participation of the users?

3) The presentation page of Civic Link contains the guidelines for the activity of the users and in doing so it addresses four principles: Accuracy, independence, impartiality and legality. Why were precisely this four principles chosen?

4) In what way are these four principles present in the fact-checking platform?

(For example the website, in regards to accuracy, says that "A story must provide proper and accurate context, quoting, data, identities and facts".)

a) These principles echo the ideal ethic code of journalism. Is having a crowdsourced platform inspired by them a way to educate users in this practice?

-If yes: How?

b) Is the absence of a moderator – except in special circumstances like repeatedly flagged content – in line with this vision?

c) Did difficulties emerge in this "self-governance" of the users?

- If yes: Which? How were they solved or are going to be solved?

5) About the "social" aspects. Are they relevant to the platform?

-If yes: why?

- Do you think the users are active in commenting and participating in the debate?
- Are there topics that attract more participation?
- Does the debate spread also on other platforms and websites?

*More specific questions on the **structure and functioning of the platform**.*

6) Was the platform ideated having a specific typology of facts?(For example: political claims…)

a)Given your experience so far, are there types of facts around which the fact-checking seems to work better?

7) On the basis of what I have documented in May, most facts proposed fall under the category of "Italian politics". Was this something expected or programmed in the original plans?

8) Do you think that there are certain types of sources particularly suitable to be used in fact-checking?

*Conclusive questions about **future developments** and **extra information**.*

9) What future developments do you have in mind for the platform?

10) Are there any other aspects that I have not touched but that you think are relevant to understanding the platform?

INTERVIEW GUIDE n.2

(Targets interviewees were/are involved in the technological aspects and design of the platform)

Introduction: This interview is composed of 11 questions about the fact-checking platform developed by Fondazione <ahref. You can choose to remain anonymous, otherwise your name will be used for reference in presenting the results.

*Introductory questions on the **interviewee's role**, on the **guiding principles** of the platform and on how it relates to the **vision of the foundation**.*

1) What did, or do, you work on, in relation to the fact-checking platform?

- Why did you decide to become involved in this project?

2) The presentation page of Civic Link contains the guidelines for the activity of the users and in doing so it addresses four principles: Accuracy, independence, impartiality and legality. Why were precisely this four principles chosen?

3) In what way are these four principles present in the fact-checking platform?

(For example the website, in regards to accuracy, says that "A story must provide proper and accurate context, quoting, data, identities and facts".)

*More specific questions on the **structure and functioning of the platform**.*

4) *Reputation of the users*: The reputation system for the users is still in *beta-phase*. At the moment "Reputation is commensurate to your level of active participation on the platform, and to the community's evaluation of your actions". I was wondering…

a) Was there a mechanism prior to the current one?

-If yes: How did it work?; Why it was changed?

b) Why was the current one chosen?

c) Has there been any feedback from the users about it?

-If yes: What kind?

d) Will there be any more changes in the future?

-If yes: Which?

5) *Reputation of the sources:* You don't specify if there's algorithm that calculates the collective judgment calculates all sources equally or not.

a) Is there any hierarchy in the sources that the users bring to document a fact?

(For example is quoting a government agency attributed the same weight as quoting a blog?)

-If yes: What type of sources have more weight?; Why?

-If not: Why?

b) In describing the website, there are links to where to find useful statistical data for fact-checking. At the moment however these recommended databases are not explicitly part of the interface. Will there be developments in this direction?

- Why / Why not?

c) Do you think that there are certain types of sources particularly suitable to be used in fact-checking?

6) *Individual judgment and collective judgment:* I've noticed that there have been changes in the way the collective judgment on a fact is aggregated.

(For example: in older fats there was the "reliability progress bar", then disappeared.)

a) What do you know about the evolution of this aspect?

- What was the initial idea? ; Why?
- What changed? ;Why?
- Why did you choose the current system?
- Is there something that can be improved / will be improved?; Why?
- Are you going to add any other features to this in the future?

7) *Comments and engagement*: In describing the service it is common to find words like: participation, collaboration, common effort and community. How are these social aspect embodied in the platform?

a) Do they "work"; that is: is there a debate around news?

8) *Self-governance:* As there is no moderator, what strategies have been implemented to guarantee the smooth self-governance of the users?

a) Have difficulties emerged in allowing this?

- If yes: Which? How were they solved or are going to be solved?

b) Will other features be implemented in regards of this?

9) *Facts:* And now, for the primary element: the fact to check.

a) Was the platform ideated having a specific typology of facts in mind?

(For example: political claims…)

b)Given your experience so far, are there types of facts around which the fact-checking seems to work better?

Conclusive questions about ***future developments*** *and* ***extra information***.

10) What future developments do you have in mind for the platform?

11) Are there any other aspects that I have not touched but that you think are relevant to understanding the platform?

b. APPENDIX 2: Questionnaire for the users of the platform

The following questionnaire has been designed for a research for the Master in Communication and Information Sciences, at Tilburg University (The Netherlands). Its aim is to understand the modes of your participation to the fact-checking platform by Fondazione <ahref. Answering the questionnaire will require approximately 10 minutes of your time. The data collected will be treated confidentially for the sole purposes of the project. The responses are registered anonymously, but in the end you can leave your e-mail address if you want to be contacted about the results. Thank you for your participation! For any questions, contact me at a.corona@uvt.nl

*Questions on the **use of the platform***

1) How long have you been subscribed in the platform?

Options: 1 year; about 6 months; about 3 months; less than 3 months

2) On average, how often do you use it?

Options: less than 1 time a week; 1 time a week; more than 1 time a week

3)Are there some aspects that hinder a more frequent use?

Options: yes; no

4) If yes, which one(s)? Explain shortly.

Options: open text

*Questions on **participation and collaboration***

5) Rate from 1 to 4 how well the following sentences describe your use of the platform:

- I look at fact-checking cases done by others without interacting too much.
- I look at fact-checking cases done by others and I contribute to the discussion.
- I look at fact-checking cases done by others, I contribute to the discussion and I propose new facts to verify.
- I'm interested especially in proposing new facts o verify.

6) Generally speaking, in documenting facts, collaboration is…

Options: Absent, Functioning; Transparent; Reaches results that are less accurate than when verification is done singularly; Other (open text)

*Questions on **education** and **data sources***

7) Rate the following circumstances with: Never; Rarely; Sometimes; Often; Always. How often..

- You've discovered new sources thanks to suggestions offered in fact-checking cases done on the platform.
- It occurred to you to see statistical data used prove a fact right or wrong.
- It occurred to you to see fact-checking used to reveal a misleading use of statistical data.
- You've used sources used on the platform to investigate matters of personal interest.

- It occurred to you to see an unexpected judgment about a fact you thought was true.

8)You think you've learned something by participating in this fact-checking platform?

Options: Yes; No

9)If yes, explain in one word

Options: open text.

10) The platform asks users to assign each new fact to a category. The available ones are: Italian politics, politics, current events, culture and entertainment, Internet and technology, science and medicine. In your opinion, which one is the one in which…

- you've inserted more news
- the news you check out more often are located
- you think the community inserts more news
- there's a livelier debate around facts

Options: the categories

11) You have other considerations on the platform and on your participation in it?

Options: open text

Questions for ***information on the respondent***

12) Sex:

Options: Male, Female, Not declared

13) Age

Options: open text

14) Education:

Option: Open text

15) Job (weekly hours)

16) If you want to be informed about the results of the survey. Insert your e-mail address here:

Options: open text

Notes

[1] http://opengovernmentdata.org/ [Last accessed 15-07-2013]

[2] http://datacatalogs.org [Last accessed 15-07-2013]
The DataCatalogs.org project was launched in 2011. The aim of the initiative is to publish a list of available open data catalogs from around the globe.

[3] http://globalopendatainitiative.org/ [Last accessed 15-07-2013]
The Global Open Data Initiative is a project focused on delivering resources on open data to society and especially to governments, with the intent to favor effective implementation of open government policies that involve technologies and open data. It's aim is to "help share valuable resources, guidance and judgment, and to clarify the potential for government open data globally" (Global Open Data Initiative, 2013).

[4] http://www.state.gov/open/ [Last accessed 15-07-2013]
The Open Government Initiative originated from Barak Obama's Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government in 2009 (The White House, 2009a). Its guidelines have then been established with the president's issuing of the Open Government Directive (The White House, 2009b), where concrete actions are defined in order to ensure the principles of transparency, collaboration and participation addressed in the Memorandum.

[5] http://www.govdata.eu/en/europeanopen.aspx [Last accessed: 15-7-2013]
The Open Government Data Initiative is a cloud-based open software to facilitate governments in implemnting open government initiatives and overcoming the barriers that hinder realization of the guidelines issued by the European Union on the subjecy. These are contained in the Public Sector Infromation Directive of 2003 (European Union, 2003), which has then been and revised in 2011 to facilitate data re-use (European Union, 2011). In 2011 the European Union continued on this line by launching a Open Data Strategy for Europe, which also officialized the launch of EU's Open Data Portal (European Union, 2013), currently containing over 6000 datasets. More information at http://open-data.europa.eu/ . [Last accessed 15-07-2013]

[6] http://www.opengovpartnership.org/ [Last accessed: 15-7-2013]
The Open Government Partnership was founded in September 2011 by 8 countries: Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico, Norway, Philippines, South Africa, United Kingdom, and United States. The aim behind the partnership is to ensure the achievement of the commitments submitted by the member countries in terms of open government, application of technologies for governance and citizens' empowerment.
The 57 currently participating countries are: Albania, Argentina, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Ghana, Greece, Guatemala, Honduras, Hungary, Italy, Indonesia, Israel, Jordan, Kenya, Latvia, Liberia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Malta, Mexico, Moldova, Mongolia, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Philippines, Romania, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Spain, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, Tanzania, Trinidad and Tobago, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States, Uruguay.

[7] Open access started being discussed in the 1990's (Jeffery, 2008), argueing in favor of freely availbale research literature. "Freely availble" means much more than the removal of costs to access this material, as put in the Budapest, Bethesda and Berlin statements (a.k.a. BBB), which affronted the problem of the definition of Open Access. In these statements the focus is on the fact that for OA material:

> *"the author(s) and copyright holder(s) grant(s) to all users a free, irrevocable, worldwide, perpetual right of access to, and a license to copy, use, distribute, transmit and display the work publicly and to make and distribute derivative works, in any digital medium for any responsible purpose, subject to proper attribution of authorship, as well as the right to make small numbers of printed copies for their personal use"* (Bethesda Statement on Open Access Publishing, 2003).

While open access began to be advocated for scholarly articles, it now can apply theoretically to a broader range of mateiral, as "in principle, any kind of digital content can be OA, since any digital content can be put online without price or permission barriers. Moreover, any kind of content can be digital: texts, data, images, audio, video, multimedia, and executable code" (Suber, 2012).
The open source movement roots back in the 1970's, primarily from the GNU project, which aimed at building a free operating system, and from the discussions in the communities working of versions of the Unix operating system (Gonzalez-Barahona, 2000). The core idea of the movement is that the source code of software should be available freely. Just like the case of open access, this freedom needs to be intended in a broader sense, as freedom to view, modify, create derived works and redistribute the source code.

[8] http://okfn.org/ [Last accessed 15-07-2013]
The Open Knowledge Foundation is a non-profit founded in 2004 to promote open knowledge – therefore open content, including open data. It has ran several award-winning projects, including the OpenSpending platform to help citizens track governments' and corporate financial operations. (More information at: http://openspending.org/ [Last accessed 15-07-2013])

[9] http://opendefinition.org/ [Last accessed 15-07-2013]

[10] Nancy Fraser disagreement on Habermas' conception of the public sphere rose initially from feminist critique, and then moved to criticize the fact that the concept is now unadapt to describe the reality of a globalized world.
She argued how Habermas' is "the liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere.", in which, first of all, groups of society are implicitly excluded from it. It is the case of women, as "masculinist gender constructs were built into the very conception of the republican public sphere" (Fraser, 1990 pp. 59.). This exclusion however did not touch only women, but in general all groups for which it impossible to contribute to the public debate and shape the pulic opinion, for example because information and/or clubs, coffeehouses and similar arenas were inaccesible to them. Secondly she debates that Habermas' conceives a single comprehensive public sphere, which incorporates all public opinion and allows for no alternatives. Fraser sees this as a misconception, as it ignores the presence of contemporary "competing counterpublics, including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women's publics, and working class publics" (Fraser, 1990 p. 61).
In later works, Fraser moved against the fact that the public sphere theory is "implicitly Westphalian and/or nationalist; it has always tacitly assumed a Westphalian and/or national frame" (Fraser, Transnationalizing the Public Sphere, 2005). This because it presupposed a notions elaborated from a Westphalian perspective, and required elements rooted in a national frame, like sovereign power exercised within national territorial boundaries, a national economy, a national citizenry, a national language, a national literature and a national media infrastructure. This way, if in her previous critique she argues in favor of groups marginalized from the liberal bourgeois public sphere, in her later ones Fraser tries to incorporate a more globalized and transnational perspective to the studies on the public sphere.

[11] http://www.apa.org/education/undergrad/civic-engagement.aspx [Last accessed 15-07-2013]

[12] See endnote 8

[13] http://civic.mit.edu/about [Last accessed 15-07-2013]

[14] http://civic.mit.edu/about [Last accessed 15-07-2013]

[15] http://newstrust.net/truthsquad [Last accessed 15-07-2013]

[16] http://www.ahref.eu/en [Last accessed 15-07-2013]

[17] The summer school is launched in collaboration with the Italian National Institute for Statistics (Istat). More information available at: http://www.ahref.eu/it/ricerca/educazione/data-journalism-school-terza-edizione

[18] The initiative was presented at the International Journalism Festival in Perugia, in April 2013. Detail can be found on their website: http://www.festivaldelgiornalismo.com/post/29540/

[19] The project collects research on infographics, and especially on how those that have civic aims in the narration they present. More information on the project can be found on http://datablog.ahref.eu/en/ahref-log/civic-infographics and http://www.futurize.cc/data-journalism-school-roma-2013/

[20] https://www.civiclinks.it/en/ [Last accessed 15-07-2013]

[21] https://www.civiclinks.it/en/vision/ [Last accessed 15-07-2013]

[22] https://timu.civiclinks.it/it/ [Last accessed 15-07-2013]

[23] http://wavu.ahref.eu/ [Last accessed 15-07-2013]

[24] https://factchecking.civiclinks.it/en/ [Last accessed 15-07-2013]

[25] https://factchecking.civiclinks.it/en/service/#reputation [Last accessed 15-07-2013]

[26] The term is a translation from Italian to English of "democrazia continua". The concept was developed by Stefano Rodotà (Rodotà, 2004) to distinguish it from "intermittent democracy" – which is used to inlcude all those forms of democracy where citizens are asked to participate only in specific moments, for example during elections or assemblies. In "continuous democracy" citizens can make their voice heard in virtually any occasion, thanks to the potentials offered by new technologies in giving users space and tools to express opinions, concerns and preferences.