

# **CONTENTIOUS BRANDING**

**Reassembling social movements through digital mediators**

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**Davide Beraldo**

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## **Promotiecommissie:**

Promotor:	prof. dr. W. G. J. Duyvendak	Universiteit van Amsterdam
	dr. P. A. Rebughini	Università degli Studi di Milano
Copromotor:	dr. J. L. Uitermark	Universiteit van Amsterdam
Overige leden:	dr. A. E. Arvidsson	Università degli Studi di Milano
	prof. dr. E. Colombo	Università degli Studi di Milano
	prof. dr. H. O. Dijstelbloem	Universiteit van Amsterdam
	dr. S. Milan	Universiteit van Amsterdam
	prof. dr. R. A. Rogers	Universiteit van Amsterdam

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Autore:

Davide Beraldo

Supervisor:

Prof. Jan Willem Duyvendak

Prof. Paola Alessandra Rebughini

Prof. Justus Uitermark

Coordinatore:

Prof. Luisa Leonini

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Ah, thank again to my wonderful paranymphs, Burly and Rens. You have a great responsibility on your shoulders: to organize a proper party. But please remember:

*You don't need a party to celebrate something. You need something to celebrate a party.*

## *Someone was a communist*

Translated from Giorgio Gaber, *Qualcuno era comunista*.

(Source: <http://lyricstranslate.com/en/qualcuno-era-comunista-someone-was-communist.html>).

Someone was a communist because he was born in Emilia.

Someone was a communist because his grandfather, uncle, dad... mom wasn't.

Someone was a communist because he saw Russia as a promise, China as a poem, and communism as "Heaven on Earth."

Someone was a communist because he felt alone.

Someone was a communist because he had an education that was too Catholic.

Someone was a communist because the cinema demanded it, the theater demanded it, the painting demanded it, the literature demanded it...everything demanded it.

Someone was a communist because: "History is on our side!"

Someone was a communist because they had said so.

Someone was a communist because they weren't told everything.

Someone was a communist because first he was a Fascist.

Someone was a communist because they understood Russia was going slowly, but far.

Someone was a communist because Berlinguer was a good person.

Someone was a communist because Andreotti was not a good person

Someone was a communist because he was rich but he loved the people.

Someone was a communist because he drank wine and was moved to tears at working-class rallies.

Someone was a communist because he was such an atheist that he needed another God.

Someone was a communist because he was so fascinated by workers that he wanted to be one of them.

Someone was a communist because he didn't want to be a workingman anymore.

Someone was a communist because he wanted his salary increased.

Someone was a communist because of the bourgeoisie - the proletariat - the class struggle. Easy, isn't it?

Someone was a communist because of the revolution... today no, tomorrow perhaps, but after tomorrow surely...

Someone was a communist because: " Long live Marx, long live Lenin, long live Mao Tse-Tung".

Someone was a communist to anger his father.

Someone was a communist because he always watched RAI TRE.

Someone was a communist to be fashionable, someone for principle, someone due to frustration.

Someone was a communist because he wanted to nationalize everything.

Someone was a communist because he didn't know any government workers, civil servants or their kind.

Someone was a communist because he had exchanged "dialectical materialism" for the "Gospel according to Lenin".

Someone was a communist because he was convinced the working class was behind him.

Someone was a communist because he was more of a communist than others.

Someone was a communist because there was the great Communist Party.

Someone was a communist despite the fact that there was the great Communist Party.

Someone was a communist because there was nothing better.

Someone was a communist because we have the worst Socialist Party in Europe.

Someone was a communist because when it comes to government the only state worse than us is Uganda.

Someone was a communist because he couldn't take more than forty years of slimy ass-kissers governing.

Someone was a communist because of Piazza Fontana, Brescia, the Bologna train station, the Italicus, Ustica, etc. , etc. , etc. , etc.

Someone was a communist because anyone against things was a communist.

Someone was a communist because he could no longer stand that dirty thing that we persist in calling democracy.

Someone believed he was a communist and perhaps he was something else.

Someone was a communist because he dreamed of a different freedom than that in America.

Someone was a communist because he thought he could only be alive and happy if others were too.

Someone was a communist because he needed a thrust toward something new; because he was prepared to change every day; because he felt the need for a different morality; because maybe it was only a force, a flight, a dream... movement... a desire to change things, to change life.

Someone was a communist because with this movement everyone was more than himself; he was like two people in one. On the one hand daily toil and on the other hand the sense of belonging to a race that wanted to fly and to truly change life.

No, no regrets. Perhaps even then many had opened their wings like "hypothetical" seagulls without being able to fly.

And now? Even now you feel like you are split in two, on the one hand the man put here that obsequiously moves through the squalor of his own daily survival, and on the other hand, the seagull, without even the intention to fly, because now the dream has been crippled.

Two miseries in only one body.

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# 1 - Introduction

*A concept is a brick. It can be used to build the courthouse of reason.  
Or it can be thrown through the window.*

(Brian Massumi, 'Introduction to Capitalism and Schizophrenia', 1987)

*A stone, we say, is 'hard,' 'small,' 'heavy,' 'yellow,' 'dense,' etc. That is how our language is made: 'The stone is hard.' And so on. And that way of talking is good enough for the marketplace: 'That is a new brand.' 'The potatoes are rotten.' 'The container is damaged.' ... And so on. [...] Language continually asserts by the syntax of subject and predicate that 'things' somehow 'have' qualities and attributes. [...] It is necessary to be quite clear about the universal truth that whatever 'things' may be in their pleromatic and thingish world, they can only enter the world of communication and meaning by their names, their qualities and their attributes*

(Gregory Bateson, 'Mind and Nature: A necessary unity', 1972)

## 1.1 – The branding of contention

This book weaves together two core themes: branding and social movements. At first glance, the juxtaposition may seem paradoxical: corporate brands have been the targets of recent social movements. This introduction presents the reasons why I treat them together.

### 1.1.1 – *What's in a name?*

A birds-eye view of the two empirical cases analyzed in this dissertation – Occupy and Anonymous – will set the stage for introducing the puzzle that guides this research.

#### *Snapshot #1*

On 17 September 2011, a crowd gathers in Zuccotti Park, close to the New York Stock Exchange, and sets up an encampment, as planned by the Occupy Wall Street campaign. The main goal of the mobilization is to end the influence of financial markets and corporations on American politics.

On 15 October 2011, inspired by initiatives in the United States, hundreds of marches around the world end with an occupation, giving rise to 'Occupy movements' in hundreds of cities. The complex network of protest events and groups raise their voice against, among other things, economic inequalities. The range

of issues covered by the wave of protest expands dramatically, addressing global as well as various local concerns.

On 2 January 2012, demonstrations take place across Nigeria to protest the abolition of a government fuel subsidy. A sustained campaign against the cost of fuel and government corruption begins, and adopts the name Occupy Nigeria.

In May 2012, the Italian television channel DeeJay TV launches a music show that interacts with publics on Twitter and Facebook, named Occupy DeeJay.

#### *Snapshot #2*

On 7 April 2013, a coordinated cyber-attack labelled OpIsrael targets hundreds of Israeli websites, initiating a campaign launched in the following years by diverse groups, many of them affiliated with the entity known as Anonymous. The proclaimed goal of the operation is to 'wipe Israel off the web'.

After 7 January 2015, as a response to the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris perpetrated by self-proclaimed members of Al Qaeda, a large-scale online campaign emerges named OpISIS. The anti-jihadist operation launched by Anonymous aims to delete the Islamic State from the internet.

On 27 February 2015, an important Turkish Twitter account associated with Anonymous asks its followers to join the OpISIS campaign by reporting ISIS-related accounts. On the very same day, the same Twitter account applauds a successful OpIsrael cyber-attack that 'defaces' an Israeli website. The target's homepage is replaced with a banner showing, alongside the notorious Guy Fawkes mask symbolizing Anonymous, the slogan: 'the Caliphate will transform the world'.

Notable in the first snapshot is an entity that survives the specific movement from which it emerged. 'Occupy' began to denote a protest movement, of people gathering in parks and squares to protest the political influence of corporate and financial power. As we will see, the 'Occupy' label soon evolved into a marker associated with diverse political goals and orientations, adopted for purposes that bear loose or even non-existent relations to its original meaning. The 'Occupy movement' is one thing; the 'Occupy brand' is something else. Otherwise, an Italian music TV show should be considered part of a protest against corporate power.

The second snapshot highlights another distinctive property of 'contentious brands': their adoption is so open that even opposed groups can appropriate them. How can it be that the same 'social movement' is responsible for both supporting and fighting the Islamic State?

How can these 'movements' be rendered meaningful from the perspective of social movement theory? What do their counterintuitive characters imply for epistemological and methodological practice? At its core, this dissertation argues that studying the process of contentious branding will enable social movement theory to better understand an overlooked dimension of contentious politics and to address the opportunities and challenges of digital research.

### 1.1.2 – *Social movements and branding processes*

In order to develop the argument that contentious branding is a key process within some contemporary social movements, social movement and contentious branding must first be defined.

‘Social movement’ has different connotations in the literature. Understandings of social movements range from those that focus on values and opinions unrepresented in the political arena and which adopt non-institutional *means* to promote social change (e.g. McCarthy and Zald 1977) to those that conceive of a social movement’s core as the production of cultural *meanings* that challenge dominant codes (e.g. Melucci 1996). The definition best-suited to mediate between these understandings states that a social movement is “a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity” (Diani 1992, 13). This minimal definition, I argue, remains useful to distinguish between social movement processes (with their informal and networked character, their engagement with conflict and the importance of collective identification) from other types of organizational or political processes. Nevertheless, it does not exhaustively cover the cases of Occupy and Anonymous. Individuals, groups and organizations are evidently not the only relevant nodes within these networks, considering the role that hashtags, slogans and symbols played in assembling diverse groups, places and issues. Both Occupy and Anonymous engage in political or cultural conflict in very different, sometimes opposite directions, dismissing definitions that presuppose a shared cause, political orientation or project of change. Consequently, it is not clear in which sense and to what extent identification processes are in these cases collective and, further, shared. The concept of social movement, more generally, does not always satisfactorily cover the diverse and counterintuitive logic that is so crucial to grasp in the analyzed cases.

We also need to clarify how the current work uses the terms ‘brand’ and ‘branding’.<sup>1</sup> An authoritative source in the field of marketing defines a brand as “a name, term, sign, symbol, or design which is intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors” (American Marketing Association 1960). While emphasizing the role of differentiation, this definition reflects a rather firm-oriented, top-down perspective (Smith and French 2009, 210-1). Other approaches in marketing place greater emphasis on consumers, defining a brand as “a collection of perceptions in the mind of the consumer” (Feldwick 2002, 4). Contemporary branding strategies indeed do not aim to discipline consumption, but instead seek to anticipate and capitalize on the spontaneous productivity of consumer publics (Holt 2002), subsuming their affective

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 2, Section 3 (‘The proliferation of branding’).

labor under the process of valorizing capital (Arvidsson 2005; 2006). Branding is characterized by relationality, openness and indeterminacy, a set of multidimensional relations remediating flows of production and consumption (Lury 2004). This implies that a brand does not fix a determinate constellation of significance, but works as a “flexible system of capture that is constantly adjusting to shifting meanings, identities, and affects” (Mumby 2016, 9).

This dissertation adopts elements from the various definitions presented above. It emphasizes the role of branding as a process of *differentiation*, understood as the production of the ‘conditions of recognizability’ of a social movement.<sup>2</sup> It acknowledges its *contentious* character, the controversies surrounding the adoption of a contentious brand and the contingency of attempts to control it. It qualifies the brand as an assemblage, emphasizing its *material-semiotic* as well as *affective* character.<sup>3</sup> This means that branding can be seen as both a matter of *strategy* deployed for organizational purposes and a matter of *identification* reflecting cultural processes.

The more immediate implications of a branding perspective on social movements is that *elements associated to the syntax of contention, such as labels, names, icons, symbols, slogans, should be granted a mobilizing potential in themselves*, alongside more classical elements that have been the focus of social movement studies. Occupy and Anonymous show that contentious branding does not depend on the rational articulation of an overall coherent semantic; on the contrary, contentious branding can articulate a more blurred ethic of contention<sup>4</sup> into quite autonomous cognitive schemata. The intended contribution of such a focus-shift in the theorization of social movements is to provide a conceptual device that emphasizes their non-essential character; branding can then be seen as *the*

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘differentiation’ is adopted here with an intuitive connotation, as the process that specifies relevant differences between otherwise indistinguishable items. The concept of ‘differentiation’, however, has a specific role in the Deleuzian vocabulary, and is distinct from ‘differenciation’ (Deleuze [1967] 1994, 230): the former describes the production of differences in kind (non-metric) in the virtual realm; the latter is the production of differences in degree (metric) in the actual realm. It must be stressed that it is not an ambition of this dissertation to integrate Deleuze’s proper ontology with the theory of contentious branding. However, the use of the term ‘differentiation’ hints at the idea that reality is the effect of the progressive differentiation (‘symmetry-breaking process’) of undifferentiated multiplicities (DeLanda 2002).

<sup>3</sup> An assemblage can be defined as the historical articulation of heterogeneous elements brought together by their mutual elicitation of changes in state (DeLanda 2006, 8-46; Deleuze and Guattari 1987). We can rule out two constitutive elements of assemblages: material heterogeneity (assemblages are made up of things of different natures) and affectivity (assemblages have the capacity to affect and to be affected).

<sup>4</sup> The use of the term ‘ethic’ points to the existence of a latent ethos among participants in social movements. This ethos acts as a motivational force for involvement and as a basis for the construction of shared social relations, on the basis of a blurred and abstract affective urge towards contesting the status quo, rather than on the basis of a clear-cut and rational assessment of the reasons to protest. This idea closely relates to that of affectivity, and contentious branding is precisely the process by which this unformed ethic is put into shape and thus has affective and effective consequences. This connotation of the term ‘ethic’ recalls the original Aristotelian formulation, rediscovered to help account for value creation in contemporary economies capitalizing on co-production (Arvidsson 2011); however, its use within this text relates closer to Roland Barthes’ idea of a mythological level of signification, deeper than denotation and connotation (Barthes [1957] 1972).

*process by which an abstract ethic of contention is differentiated into a recognizable form*, put into shape and put to work in the circuit of conflict. The ‘syntax’, the ‘semantic’ and the ‘ethics’ of contention are mobilized here as embedded layers of signification; there is no intention to reify them as they represent useful heuristics to show the more properly recursive character of meaning-making. There is of course a striking difference between corporate branding and contentious branding: the former comes with a set of properties that gives firms a greater degree of control over its brand (in particular, legal devices); the latter is generally a more open and less manageable process, lacking instruments to enact forms of exclusion. It bears repeating that recent theorization on the role of branding in the context of contemporary economic systems shows that brands are also the emergent accomplishments of distributed publics, appropriated and directed, but not fully controlled by corporations (Arvidsson 2006; Holt 2002; Mumby 2016). Moreover, the branding of contention is not necessarily the outcome of spontaneous and/or horizontal processes, as the initiatives of leaders and ‘choreographers’ play crucial roles in the management of contemporary movements (Gerbaudo 2012, 134-57; Poell et al. 2016).<sup>5</sup> The current work thus emphasizes the diverse and contested appropriations of contentious brands; the diversity of the actual instances of the Occupy and Anonymous brands is what renders visible the analytical distinction between processes of branding and movements.

Branding in itself is not synonymous with semantic diversity; ‘to brand’ something sometimes means to capture the specific universe of significance of a defined target. However, the adjective ‘contentious’ that qualifies the adoption of the term brand in this work highlights the open and diverse character of this process. This linguistic choice not only suggests that contention is an object of branding, but that *branding is an object of contention*. As the empirical analysis will reveal, the Occupy and especially Anonymous brands are at the center of continuous controversy, in that their definitions are highly contingent, shifting and often conflictual. Their contentious character, however, paradoxically seems to have become a pre-condition for their reproduction.<sup>6</sup> The articulation of diverse adoptions of the same set of digitalized signifiers moreover enables the mapping and exploring of a vast social movement surface that could otherwise be erroneously considered more homogeneous and circumscribed.

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<sup>5</sup> The ‘managerial’ side of the brand is outside the scope of the current study.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 5, Section 5 (‘Complexity unveiled’).

### *1.1.3 – The movement (h)as a brand*

My point is not to dismiss Occupy and Anonymous, or classical mobilizations, as ‘not really movements, but simply brands’. Rather, it is that any social movement has, to a certain degree, a branding dimension and that, in the analyzed cases, this branding dimension has become so crucial that it would be useful to conceive of them as (contentious) brands. While the study focuses on two cases – Occupy and Anonymous – that bring to light the branding dimension of contention, other examples abound.

For instance, following his untimely death, the image of Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara gazing to the horizon has become an icon of left-wing militancy, seen in settings ranging from protest events to music concerts and football matches. Whereas the ideals of Che Guevara are clear and specific, the icon has become shorthand for a blurred, general imaginary ranging from militant Maoism to leftism pacifism. Che ultimately became one of the most reproduced icons in history, creating vast opportunities for merchandizing and profit. This apparent contradiction between the many contentious meanings associated with Che Guevara and its exploitation for capitalist interests reminds us that the movement of signs across radically different domains is well known in history.

Social movements have already more or less explicitly experimented with the creation of ‘brands’ to serve their purposes. To generate awareness around the condition of precarious workers, the Italian collective Chainworkers developed an iconic figure named ‘San Precario’, a parody of a Catholic patron saint. The explicit aim was to express an emergent identity that could bring together the fragmented struggles against post-Fordist capitalism (Chainworkers 2006; Mattoni 2008).<sup>7</sup> Occupy Wall Street has already been termed a brand – not without controversy – by both commentators and some of its activists (Yardley 2011); a careful ‘cultural jamming’ strategy, planned by the editorial board of the anti-consumerist magazine AdBusters, preceded the stunning wave of worldwide protest. Another vivid example comes from one of the animators of the Egyptian chapter of the Arab Spring, who explicitly conceived of the movement’s Facebook page as a brand (Poell et al. 2016, 1000). It has thus become increasingly common and legitimate to talk about branding and political contention in the same breath, without any intent to disqualify the social movements. Nevertheless, we have yet to see a purposeful attempt to focus on the implications of the branding of contention for the theory of social movements. This represents the intended contribution of this work.

The decision to focus on Occupy and Anonymous is far from arbitrary. It is not by coincidence that *this theoretical argument developed in parallel with the challenges encountered during preliminary*

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<sup>7</sup> The term commonly associated with the San Precario experiment is ‘*media sociali*’ (literally: social media, though bereft of the current meaning of the expression). The term ‘meta-brand’ is also used synonymously (Chainworkers 2006).



*research on these particular cases* – challenges that included decisions such as where to draw the boundaries of objects of analysis and the linguistic choices that their investigation required. Occupy and Anonymous are objects of analysis because they represents extreme cases (Gerring 2006, 101-3), useful to emphasize the ideal-typical traits of contentious branding.<sup>8</sup> But without trying to generalize the findings here to other cases, the argument inspires reflection on a more general level of analysis.

Vietnam and Cambodia, backed by the USSR and China, have bloodied each other in repeated wars despite sharing the national banner of the red flag and other references to the ‘communist brand’. While some feminists fight for the same conditions for men and women, others emphasize gender differences. While we can refer to ‘feminism’ as a movement fighting for the improvement of women’s conditions, radical lesbianism shares politically little with the women’s suffrage movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Again, some branches of the LGBT movement place same-sex marriage rights at the top of their agenda, while others reject marriage as a heteronormative institution.

The implications of this work thus reach beyond the examples presented in the empirical chapters. Social movements have always relied on symbolic repertoires in order to articulate, condense and express identities. Moreover, this process has always been, to various degrees, open and contested. The relation between movement and branding processes, however, is not fixed. For the sake of clarity, we can distinguish between different types of movement-brand relation: ‘derivative’, when the brand is merely an extension of a mobilization (e.g. the semiotic repertoire of the communist movement); ‘instrumental’, when branding is a tool strategically deployed for a specific purpose (e.g. San Precario as an icon to represent precarious workers); and ‘constitutive’, when branding appears the only plausible element for the definition of a movement as an analytical unit (e.g. Anonymous as a universal agent of contention). To make its point visible, and for reasons of linguistic constraints, the argumentation will leverage an evident paradox: the more branding detaches itself from its many contingent utilizations, the more it becomes key to the assembly of these contentious entities, thus becoming part of their own definition. Sometimes, such as in the case of the feminist movement, branding can be understood as a dimension or a property of a social movement; in Occupy and Anonymous, however, it can be granted an autonomous ontological status, becoming a constitutive element of these movements. Whereas this subversion of the relation between the form and the substance may be deemed an epistemological contradiction, it actually follows the trajectory of branding in the conceptualization of markets: from a mere extension attached to a commodity, it

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<sup>8</sup> From this point of view, Anonymous is more radical than Occupy. It is thus analyzed more extensively.

moves towards becoming the main stake of contemporary economy (Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2004). What all the examples of contentious branding share with one another is the need to differentiate ‘one movement’ from another and, in so doing, project a more or less continuous, *uniform* shade out of a more or less discontinuous, *unformed* reality.

What exactly are we referring to when we use the term ‘Anonymous’ or, in some cases, ‘feminism’? And what exactly are we studying when we profess to study a specific social movement? These doubts evidently relate to a human necessity: that of calling things by a definite name. This act generally implies pretending that a definite name, or another symbol, bears a univocal, non-ambiguous relationship with the entity it refers to. The ontological complexity of reality is thus placed in brackets through signification – something which, to a large degree, cannot be avoided for meaningful communication to occur. But social scientific inquiry should not be complacent with the taken-for-granted. The range of examples of essential incoherence underlying entities condensed in a univocal symbol could expand almost indefinitely. Indeed, this has to do with the fundamental material and semiotic layers of assembling social reality.

#### *1.2.4 - Research questions*

The present research is guided by three inter-related questions: one methodological, one empirical and one theoretical.

- *How can digital research remediate the study of social movements?* What can be observed from the vantage point of ‘big data’? What are the implications for conceptualizing social movements? The digitization of social science research is providing tremendous opportunities for analysis, as well as novel challenges for interpretation. The decision to focus on Occupy and Anonymous was influenced by their extreme degree of digitization, making them suitable for experimenting with the research affordances of digital media and assessing the related epistemological challenges for social movement research.
- *What sort of assemblages are articulated around the contentious brands Occupy and Anonymous?* How coherent or diverse are the assemblages of these contentious brands? How do controversies influence their organizational and identificational trajectories? Both Occupy and Anonymous seem to elude the vocabulary of classical social movement studies; what I will argue is that this suggests a shift in the point of observation and trajectory of exploration: from digging towards their supposed unique deeper core to mapping their surface connections.

- *How does a branding perspective add to or amend traditional theories of social movements? How does branding fit into the conceptual toolkit of social movements? What does a branding perspective unveil about contentious processes? Since this work focuses on a process – branding – that has never been part of the conceptual toolkit of social movement theory, subsequent theoretical questions concern the relationship of branding to other classical notions and the possible contribution that its adoption would provide.*

## **1.2 – Complexity and digitalization**

### *1.2.1 ‘One’ ‘new’ ‘digital’ ‘movement’*

Epistemological questions undergird the current research. The theoretical argument I develop is grounded in insights borrowed from distinct, though inter-related, ‘complexity-oriented’ approaches: semiotic cultural theories (Barthes [1957] 1972; Baudrillard 1981; Hall 1980), actor-network theory (Latour 2005; Law 1992; Mol 2010), assemblage theory (DeLanda 2002; 2006; Deleuze [1967] 1994; Deleuze and Guattari 1987) and second-order cybernetics (Bateson 1972; Luhman 1986; Maturana and Varela 1980).<sup>9</sup> The more specific framing and terminology related to these approaches will be developed and explicated throughout the text. Rather than selecting a specific approach as a definitive framework, the dissertation aims to combine insights from diverse – though largely compatible – epistemological approaches, understanding their contributions as tools for orienting the interpretation of findings and for theory building. Whereas this strategy necessarily leads to a certain degree of ‘semantic violence’ towards the authentic interpretation of concepts and their relations, the foundations of these epistemologies are compatible with such an epistemic approach.<sup>10</sup>

Starting from the idea of studying ‘one new digital movement’, the work implicitly criticizes each term in this preliminary formulation.

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<sup>9</sup> This rather diverse *assemblage* of theories will often be summarized by the term ‘material-semiotics’, associated with variegated approaches sensitive to the material heterogeneity of reality (Law 2009). Although some of the arguments, especially those related to semiotics and cybernetics, are not strictly material-semiotic in this sense, the expression serves as shorthand for the entanglement of signification processes and the materiality of communication.

<sup>10</sup> This stance is reflexively compatible with the argument being made: after all, concepts are themselves involved in a process of branding, articulating diverse meanings by means of floating signifiers.

- *What is 'one'?* I engage with the underlying question of what counts as 'one' movement. While social movement theory has discussed at length the fluid character of its objects of study (Diani and McAdam 2003; Melucci 1996; Jasper and Duyvendak 2015), implicit delimitations are always drawn in the practice of empirical research and in the development of theoretical models. In very general terms, the process by which something is conceived as 'one' element of a certain set is a process mediated by language: the act of naming something participates in its ontological status. Whereas language strives to be coherent and stable, reality is irreducibly complex and changing. What counts as 'one' and what counts as 'many' is a matter of different points of view: this text can be one doctoral thesis, a bunch of words, a myriad of pixels. Ontologically speaking, any entity is not a unit, nor a multiple, but a multiplicity (DeLanda 2006; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Mol 2002).<sup>11</sup> This general consideration applies to social movements as well, which should not be understood as essential entities (Melucci 1996). But the assembling of disperse networks results in their punctualization into seemingly unified actors, which as long as they are effective are perceived and act as black-boxes (Callon 1986b; Latour 2005; Law 1992; Mol 2010).<sup>12</sup> This research largely represents an attempt to reverse-black box the two assemblages articulated around Occupy and Anonymous.
- *What is 'new'?* A further point concerns the ever-present dilemma between what should and should not count as new. Are the cases analyzed radically new phenomena? Is contentious branding a process specific to them? The contended nature of social movement processes, particularly striking in Anonymous, is present in classical mobilizations such as the communist, feminist and LGBT movements. Similarly, it has been debated what is really new about the so-called 'new social movements' of the 1970s and 80s: whether they turned conflict into the cultural domain (Melucci 1996; Touraine 1971) or simply unveiled latent aspects of previous mobilizations (Calhoun 1993). My argument, by remaining skeptical of claims to radical newness,

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<sup>11</sup> Inspired by Deleuzian ontology, the notion of 'multiplicity' has two related implications for this work. As mentioned, it resolves the tension between the one and the many, the unit and the multiple; moreover, it provides a non-essentialist but fully realist perspective. Reality has to be understood as an 'ontological multiplicity', in the sense that one object exists in many realities at the same time and is thus "more than one and less than many" (Law 1999, 11; Mol 2002, 82). The notion of multiplicity is employed to contrast with that of essence: whereas traditional realism defines identity in terms of resemblance to transcendental traits, the reality of multiplicities is that of immanent processes of differentiation (DeLanda 2002, 1-44).

<sup>12</sup> 'Punctualization' is a key concept of actor-network theory, extremely relevant for this dissertation. According to ANT, reality is made up of heterogeneous connections among distributed elements that nonetheless, once successfully assembled, are designated as singular centres of agency. The transition between these two poles, the network and the actor, is called punctualization (Law 1992, 384). Through this process, the complexity of reality is 'black-boxed' (Callon 1986b). When a system of relation (a computer, an organism, a state) works, it is commonly treated as a unit; when something goes wrong, however, its relational complexity becomes suddenly visible (a computer becomes a web of electronic components; an organism becomes a web of organs; a state becomes a web of apparatuses).

espouses historical epistemic reflexivity: insights inspired by ‘new cases’ may well be overlooked elements pertaining to ‘older’ movements.

- *What is ‘digital’?* Claims about the newness of social movements often build on the alleged transformative effects of communication technologies. The diffusion of ‘social media’ has spurred enthusiasm among activists and scholars on the rise of so-called ‘Twitter revolutions’ (Morozov 2009; Rheingold 2002). Without necessarily embracing such enthusiasm, important theories of social movements have accorded a game-changing role to digital technology (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Castells 2012). Given its empirical focus and methodology, this thesis addresses questions of how to conceive of the relationship between the online and offline, as well as between the social and the technological. Following recent trends (Jurgenson 2012; Rogers 2009), the work refuses the argument of ‘digital dualism’, according to which what happens on the web is a ‘virtual reality’, something ontologically subordinated to what goes on in the ‘real reality’ of supposedly non-mediated interaction. At the same time, it refuses the ontological distinction between the social and the technological, embracing a principle of ‘generalized symmetry’ that emphasizes the material heterogeneity and the ‘flatness’ of reality (Callon 1986a; DeLanda 2006; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Latour 2005; Law 1992).<sup>13</sup> Analogously, the relation between media and society is understood more in terms of mediation than in terms of mediatization, highlighting its non-linear, dialectic character (Couldry 2008).
- *What is ‘movement’?* As this research speaks to the sociological field of social movement theory, it engages with debate on what exactly is a social movement. Previous definitions of social movements have focused on the existence of demands and values that go unrepresented by political institutions, thus expressed by informal social groups mobilizing resources and solidarity to reach their common goals (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Tarrow 1994).<sup>14</sup> The rise of constructivist perspectives has problematized how these demands and values develop, unveiling the reflexive construction of meanings and identities at the core of especially ‘new social movements’ (Castells 1997; Melucci 1989). Whereas movements were previously conceived as fundamentally stable

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<sup>13</sup> Assemblage theory and actor-network theory share two important, related, assumptions: generalized symmetry and flat ontology. The principle of generalized symmetry states that, as anticipated, reality has to be understood as materially heterogeneous: things, humans, ideas, artefacts, all cooperate on the same level in assembling reality (Callon 1986; Latour 2005). Related to this, the principle of flat ontology assumes that reality is not stratified by predefined levels, as there is no difference in nature between scales: the distinction between the micro and the macro is contingent and reversible (DeLanda 2006; Latour et al. 2012).

<sup>14</sup> “A social movement is a set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society” (McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1217-8). “Movements [...] are better defined as collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities” (Tarrow 1994, 4-5).

and definite organizational structures, the emphasis has shifted towards their fluidity and the indefiniteness of their boundaries, thus emphasizing their network-like structure and processual nature (Diani and McAdam 2003). From this class of definitions, where recognition and boundary-making are properly constitutive dimensions of social movements (Melucci 1996; Pizzorno 1986), the importance of the branding of contention immediately follows. Whereas the notion of social movements, defined as networks engaged in conflict on the basis of collective identification (Diani 1992, 9) is not questioned *per se*, its application to the analyzed cases is problematized and reconfigured by focusing on the branding dimension.

### 1.2.2 – Follow the hashtag

The empirical analysis exploits some increasingly popular digital research techniques, inspired by approaches such as the mapping of controversies (Latour et al. 2012), issue mapping (Marres 2015), digital methods (Rogers 2013) and digital ethnography (Caliandro 2014). Another broad methodological anchor for this research is exploratory data analysis (Tukey 1977) – the application of data-driven, computational analysis not to confirm definite hypotheses but to derive insights, raise hypotheses and refine interpretations.

This dissertation is a methodological exploration in the sense that it is based on experimentation with methods, which necessarily leads to more or less ambiguous empirical findings, thus encouraging epistemological reflection to interpret the results. The materialization of the social by means of its digitalization (Latour et al. 2012) contributes to the remediation of social science methods (Marres 2012; Ruppert, Law and Savage 2013). The enthusiasm surrounding this methodological revolution is at times tempered by a number of biases and pitfalls that hamper online data and computational techniques (boyd and Crawford 2012; Tufekci 2015). Assessing the implications of digital methods for the study of social movements is an explicit goal of this research, given the popularity of techniques such as Twitter network analysis for this purpose (e.g. Bennett, Segerberg and Walker 2014; Conover et al. 2013; González-Bailón et al. 2011). Nevertheless, there has been a lack of epistemological reflection on their application.

The reasons to focus on digital data are many. Occupy and Anonymous both represent cases of the extreme digitization of contentious politics. Social media thus become vast repositories of data that can provide unprecedented amounts of information about movement trajectories. As extreme cases (Gerring 2006, 101-3), Occupy and Anonymous push to almost ideal-typical forms the idea of contentious branding; they also open possibilities to experiment with digital research techniques.

There is, however, a more substantial rationale behind the adoption of digital methods in this work which goes beyond the debatable argument of practical convenience. The aim is not to search for deep meanings that supposedly lie behind these movements, but to map the wider set of surface associations that their overall assemblages trace. *This specifically means focusing on the brand more than, or before, the movement.* Digital data offer a unique vantage point to pursue this goal, as they can provide synoptic, ‘structural’ overviews as well as zoom in on the qualitative dimension of interesting snapshots, when useful.

The focus on the surface rather than on the depth relates to another epistemological implication of a branding perspective, one that could be mistaken for a flaw in the operationalization of the concept of social movement: the fact that what falls under the scope of the analysis is not just the activity of militants, but also that of mere sympathizers, bystanders, journalists, or even opponents. Everyone who contributes to the circulation of the signifiers related to a movement, implicitly contributes to its contentious branding – even, sometimes decisively, social movement scholars. In this characteristic, the assemblage traced in the following chapters resembles the notion of ‘issue public’ (Marres 2015), with one notable difference: that the public, I will argue, is articulated around a brand more than an issue. To shift from delimiting social movements to unfolding contentious brands, therefore, means to extend the attention beyond the boundaries of the movement strictly defined, considering that these boundaries are analytical, more than empirical, in principle (Melucci 1996) and that they are more and more ambiguous to assess (Kavada 2015).<sup>15</sup>

The research strategy can thus be summed up by the slogan ‘follow the hashtag’.<sup>16</sup> The first step is to collect data using – as a ‘field-delimitation device’ – the tag that associates the activity of people and groups to a specific contentious brand. The following step is to unfold the composite network of associations articulated around the brand. Contentious branding thus provides a starting point, an objectified delimitation of an empirical object whose boundaries would otherwise be arbitrary and thus easier to erroneously take for granted.

The research exploits the research affordances (Weltevrede 2016) of mainly Twitter and Facebook. APIs (Application Programming Interfaces)<sup>17</sup> are adopted as sources of large-scale and long-term data collection, their native ontologies incorporated in the design of data analysis (Gerlitz and Rieder

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<sup>15</sup> This is also in line with the idea of assemblage and actor-network.

<sup>16</sup> Which echoes ‘follow the actor’ (Latour and Wolgrave 1986) and ‘follow the medium’ (Rogers 2009), the respective slogans of actor-network theory and digital methods.

<sup>17</sup> An API (Application Programming Interface) is a set of methods used to programmatically access a system. It provides developers with instruments to build applications that interact with other systems, in this case Twitter and Facebook.

2013; Rieder 2015). Given their popularity among the cases and the relative accessibility of their APIs, the main platforms constituting the field of observation are Twitter and Facebook. While the strategy to focus on corporate social media to study contentious issues – particularly when the cases involve shady hackers – may sound problematic, it is the most natural option when we keep in mind the concrete goal of analysis: mapping the visible surface of these phenomena and following their rhizomatic trajectories.

In practical terms, the empirical chapters explore massive datasets with network analysis and visualization techniques to assess and map the associations articulated around the hashtags #Occupy and #Anonymous, using computer-assisted content analysis of the textual and/or visual dimensions of the corpora. The rationale behind this work lies in the specific point of observation enabled by the adoption of digital techniques: to observe contentious processes through the lens of branding. Whereas this short-circuit may sound tautological from perspectives that erroneously assume the neutrality of research methods, acknowledging and problematizing the link between empirical objects, research techniques and theory-making grounds this work in the epistemological stance sketched above.

### **1.3 – Outline of the chapters**

The chapters introduce the theoretical framework, present the empirical findings and develop the dissertation's core argument as follows:

Chapter 2 ('Movements, signification and branding') reviews the literature on the intersections between social movements, (material-)semiotics and branding. The first section discusses various approaches to the study of social movements, with particular reference to their potential and limitations in understanding contemporary, digitally-mediated movements. A second section presents key insights on the intersection between signification, communication and contentious processes, introducing post-structuralist theories of signs, the entanglement between sign systems and media systems, and the relation between symbols and politics. The third part covers existing theories of branding and presents branding as a multi-dimensional process of differentiation between undifferentiated meanings as well as a latent feature within social movements processes. The chapter ends by proposing a heuristic classification of three 'orders of contention' (syntax, semantic and



ethic), which will be used as analytical prism to develop the argument of contentious branding. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 present original empirical contributions to the study of ‘digitally-mediated social movements’ through the lens of branding. The analysis exploits digital and computational techniques to map, analyze and visualize the diverse and counterintuitive character of Occupy and Anonymous. The first empirical chapter (‘Occupy what?’) examines the entity commonly referred to as ‘Occupy’. The first section follows the hashtag #Occupy on three interrelated dimensions – semantic, spatial and temporal – to show the existence of an ‘Occupy brand’ behind and beyond the proper Occupy movement/s. The second section shows that Occupy activists explicitly subvert the relation between what is commonly understood as a movement’s ‘form’ and ‘substance’, its ‘means’ and ‘meanings’. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the nebulous entity known as Anonymous. The first chapter (‘Unfolding Anonymous’) builds mainly on a 3-year Twitter dataset related to the hashtag #Anonymous, analyzed from a network perspective. It studies the associations articulated around the Anonymous brand on Twitter, assessing the structure and dynamics of the network of interaction, the complex articulation of Anonymous operations, and the relation between the Anonymous ‘umbrella brand’ and its many offshoots. The second chapter on Anonymous (‘Dividing by zero’) focuses on the contradictory political orientations, the controversies over authenticity and the self-reflexive definitions of this paradoxical collective, by means of a computer-assisted content analysis of a large dataset of Facebook conversations.

The Conclusion outlines the dissertation’s theoretical contribution. Its first section tests the proposed branding perspective against classical theories of social movements and defines the branding of contention in material-semiotic terms. The second section raises questions, hypothesis and suggestions related to classical mobilizations, the empirical dynamics of digital mediation, and the research practice of following social movements in digital environments. The dissertation concludes with a reflection on the shifting logic of collective or connective action: by bringing their own complexity to the surface and by abstracting a meta-level of meanings, I argue, contemporary movements may be able to cope with the growing non-intelligibility of complex societies.

## 2 – Social movements, signification and branding processes

*I work within the limits of the available language, confident that the shift toward new concepts is a matter not just of different words but of a new paradigm. [...] for the sake of communication, we cannot help but use old words to address new problems.*

(Alberto Melucci, 'The Process of Collective Identity', 1995)

*Semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used 'to tell' at all.*

(Umberto Eco, 'A Theory of Semiotic', 1976)

### 2.1 - Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the theoretical fields within which this thesis is grounded, intertwining insights from social movement theory, post-structuralist semiotics and critical perspectives on branding. The aim of combining these fields is to highlight a cleavage within social movement theory, to suggest that it can be approached from a (material-)semiotic perspective and, more particularly, to call for a focus on a specific process: the 'branding of contention'. In the background of these arguments lies the rise of what will be referred to as 'digitally-mediated movements' and, in particular, the challenging cases of Occupy and Anonymous, which will be explored in the empirical chapters. The first section provides a historical overview of the many theories of social movements, emphasizing the heterogeneity of the field; subsequently, it makes the argument that the theories develop around a cleavage between 'means-oriented' and 'meanings-oriented' approaches – the former focusing on the form, the latter focusing on the substance of mobilizations. In order to overcome this dichotomy, this work recommends relying on the distinctiveness of semiotic processes and their entanglement with the material dimension, insofar as the study of the production of meaning through signs and media explicitly allows problematizing and subverting this binary. Consequently, the second section introduces semiotics, both in its structural and post-structural interpretations. Sign systems are conceptualized as complex networks

of signifiers, the topological properties of which co-evolve with the history of media technologies and their bending effects, and that are highly entangled with power relations and the political dimension in general. The third sections focuses on a distinctive process, branding, which is understood as a process of differentiation and assembling, creating the condition of recognizability of an entity. The overall argument that branding is an underestimated process within the study of social movements is then justified, highlighting the heterogeneity of the concept, its centrality in highly mediated societies and its current application to various domains. Branding is thus suggested as a material-semiotic perspective on social movement processes that involves integrating the study of both the means and the meanings of contention.

## **2.2 - Social movement theories**

Social movements have entered into the public discourse in a significant way in the last few decades. Alongside formal actors and institutions, the political arena is inhabited, or has to confront with, these less conventional, less formal forms of participation. Many issues are discussed, questioned or challenged by networks and groups of individuals that, despite lacking a formal recognition and role, break into the political or cultural debate to express more or less definite positions and to challenge dominant schemes of decision-making and reproduction of the social system. These issues may overflow the boundaries of what has traditionally been understood as the realm of politics, by explicitly intervening in the cultural realm. The geographical magnitude of these networks and groups and the related geographical scale of the relevance of the issues discussed can range from local contentions regarding particularistic concerns, to global challenges to universalistic aspects.

Accordingly, the sociological discourse has largely taken into account this phenomenon: ‘social movement theory’ is a well-established field in the social sciences. Nonetheless, there are many different and sometimes competing approaches to the study of this field, and these approaches are, furthermore, continuously challenged by unpredictable and hard-to-frame empirical transformations. A brief historical review of the main families of theory that deal with social movements is thus presented, highlighting their strengths and limitations, especially with respect to ‘digitally-mediated’ movements. This section starts by introducing earlier socio-psychological perspectives and rationalist models of collective action, then moves to ‘classical’ approaches that focus on resource mobilization

and political opportunities, framing processes and collective identities in ‘new movements’. Subsequently, it presents the recent trends in the field, which emphasize emotions, geography and networks as key concepts. After this, a brief review of the relation between new movements and new media is provided. To conclude, the section develops the argument that the discourse on social movements is articulated around a divide between different approaches: in particular, what will be defined as the ‘means-oriented’ versus ‘meanings-oriented’ divide. The need to do away with dualist attitudes is justified by reference to both epistemological considerations and empirical observations.

### *2.2.1 - ‘Breakdown’ perspectives on collective behavior*

We can trace back the origin of the scientific interest in social movements to earlier studies of collective behavior. Protests and contentious activity in general were largely seen, on the one side, as a matter of contextual socio-psychological mechanisms and, on the other side, as consequences of general functional disarrangements of social systems.

One of the first attempts to give a scientific characterization to activities such as protests, riots and revolutions derives from the late-19<sup>th</sup> century socio-psychological interest in mobs and crowds (Le Bon [1896] 2001; Moscovici 1981; Tarde [1901] 1989). Gustave LeBon, in particular, notoriously formulated a theory of crowds in terms of contagion, in order to explain the emergence of disorders, uprisings and insurrections (Le Bon [1896] 2001): within crowd situations, individual rational judgment leaves space to a more impulsive ‘collective mind’, which may easily result in disordered and violent behavior. Social contagion has been generalized by symbolic-interactionist scholars, so as not to simply characterize circumscribed pathological behaviors, but rather to account for more general transformative processes (Blumer 1946; Park and Burgess [1921] 2009). According to the emergent norm theory (Turner and Killian 1957), for example, situations characterized by a lack of clearly shared definitions are prone to be conducive to the rise of new ones.

From a structuralist perspective, collective behavior and movements are seen as consequential to a lack of systemic integration in rapidly evolving social systems (Smelser 1962): collective behavior is understood as a mere release valve that is activated in the presence of structural strains. Similarly, ‘frustration theories’ (Brinton 1965; Runciman, 1966) explain individual adhesion to movements in terms of a diffuse situation of dissatisfaction among individuals, as a consequence of frustrated expectations, status incoherencies or relative deprivation.

Some of the above-mentioned theories are rooted in a psychological and situationist framework, while others are rooted in a sociological and structural one. Nonetheless, both can be collected under the

label of ‘breakdown theories’, insofar as they generally share some basic theoretical assumptions. Mobilization is mainly conceptualized in terms of circumscribed and situated collective behavior. It is often seen as an irrational, pathological and reactive manifestation of a failure in the normal functioning of social systems. In some cases, individual actions are linearly aggregated, without taking into account interaction effects and micro-to-macro mechanisms (Coleman 1990) – in particular, when it comes to frustration-aggression models. Other perspectives, by contrast, take a wider view of the non-linear dynamics typical of mobilizations and insurgent behaviors. In particular, the notion of ‘circular reaction’ (Blumer 1946) describes the self-sustained and disruptive process that takes place within an assembly of people in the form of crowds. This heuristic is crucial in order to understand ‘spontaneous’, unpredictable phenomena such as riots, but it is also extremely useful when seeking to account for the affective dimension and the non-linear character of ‘digital assemblies’, such as Anonymous (Wiedemann 2014). The notion of crowd is indeed often used to characterize the social form of new digitally-mediated entities like Occupy (Juris 2012; Bennett and Segerberg 2014). There are reasons for this, as processes that are typical of crowd behavior, like contagion (Gonzales-Bailon et al. 2011) and affective chain reactions (Wiedemann 2014), have been visibly at play at certain stages of recent contentious processes. However, the theoretical presumptions and implications of this adoption should be developed further, by generalizing the disruptive, self-sustained and circular dimension of crowd behavior from contingent to more extended waves of action. For this purpose, some rational choice models of collective action can provide useful insights.

### *2.2.2 - Models of collective action*

Despite often being used as inter-changeable terms, it is necessary to distinguish between the term ‘collective behavior’ and the term ‘collective action’. The purpose of distinguishing between these terms is to differentiate between conceptualizations of contingent, irrational and acephalous crowds, and those of sustained, rational and coordinated collective actors. The theoretical debate on collective action is mainly subsumed under the fields of economics and organization studies; nonetheless, social movements are commonly understood as special cases of, or sharing traits with, this broader analytical category (e.g. Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl 2005; Della Porta and Diani 2004, 1-28; Melucci 1996, 13-41;).

The study of collective action is famously rooted in the dilemma of free-riding (Olson 1965), which puts into question the necessary correspondence between individual and collective interests. Each

collective action effort can be understood as the production of a public good (Samuelson 1954), in which largely diffused individual motivations are not enough to ensure a successful provision of that good, in so far as its non-exclusive nature implies that each individual can ‘free ride’ and enjoy the benefits without taking the costs. This subtle analytic conclusion markedly contrasts with the obvious empirical evidence that, in the everyday real world, successful collective action attempts abound. The resulting paradox has subsequently stimulated intellectual efforts to provide solutions to this dilemma, with reference to repeated interactions (Axelrod and Hamilton 1984), social network structures (Coleman 1988), contextual definitions of benefits and costs (Hirschman 1981) or the existence of collective identities (Pizzorno 1986). While the classical literature has usually focused on the structure of incentives or the organizational arrangements needed to overcome free-riding tendencies, the question can also be approached in terms of social influence (González-Bailón et al. 2011).

In models of collective action, a key role is given to interdependence in explaining collective outcomes, as social phenomena are conceived as emergent effects of interaction between agents (Boudon 1981; Coleman 1990; Shelling 1971). This perspective also develops into so-called ‘threshold models’ in which, beyond individual motivation, the structure of the collective is crucial in determining the result of a mobilization (Granovetter 1977; Oliver and Marwell 2001; Shelling 1971): the benefits from participation, in fact, often depend on how many actually participate, and on the related individual thresholds of activation. According to theories regarding ‘critical mass’ (Oliver and Marwell 2001), an already-existent mass of highly-interested individuals can lead to widespread and self-sustained activation.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the assumption that participants are homogeneous in terms of the conditions that can trigger their activation is untenable. We can consider at least three categories of potential participants of a collective action (Elster 1989): those who would contribute anyway; those who would contribute if those already contributing are sufficient to provide a return; and those who will contribute if the majority does. Furthermore, individual thresholds of activation may be unevenly distributed and their actual distribution is one element in determining the overall extent of activation (Granovetter 1977). Where certain structural conditions of networks of interaction and communication are present, the emergence of participation can be explained as a matter of chain reactions of social influence (Gonzales-Bailon et al. 2011), more than in terms of the structure of incentives or individual motivations. Recent research on online campaigns provides strong empirical evidence for this class of threshold / critical mass models (Bogdan and Lada 2015).

It is fundamental to observe that what is often defined as ‘level of participation’ would be more

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<sup>18</sup> Provided that the relation between returns and number participants is positive and exponential.

appropriately conceived of in terms of *perceptions* and *expectations* (Klandermans 1984). Communication should, then, be granted the status of a defining element of interaction patterns and, subsequently, of the emergence of mobilization. In fact, digital media quite obviously restructure the scope of visibility of an individual in regard to her contacts: as a user who is continuously exposed to the online activities of other users. The context in which a counterintuitive phenomenon like the ‘majority illusion’ effect in social networks (Lerman, Yan and Wu 2015) is generated is strongly affected, with potential implications for the emergence and intensity of such a phenomenon.

Collective action models differ from collective behavior perspectives due to their concern with the elements of intentionality and rationality that characterize movements; thus, they unveil the strategic level that always lies behind contentious activity. Moreover, and more interestingly here, they explicitly open up the black box of the transition between so-called micro and macro levels.

The role that strategic and intentional action should be granted within a theory of social phenomena has been a subject of debate (Baerts 1998, 125-54). Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that there are examples of rather heterodox models of collective action that, while still exploiting individual rationality as a heuristic tool, place themselves at a safe distance from the debatable assumptions of neoclassical economics (e.g. Elster 1989; Hirschman 1981; Pizzorno 1977; 1986).

Rational choice theory, despite the multiple demanding assumptions and the many limitations it entails, has – at least in certain circumstances – an important instrumental role, when combined with a ‘system-wise’ orientation: it can be a powerful tool for addressing the emergence of sometimes counterintuitive properties that occur in the transition between so-called ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ levels (Boudon 1981; Coleman 1990; Elster 1989). Thus, despite the fact that it cannot account for the proper *interrelatedness* of reality, rational choice theory sometimes puts the emphasis on interaction and *interdependence*. This can be sufficient in order to take into consideration fundamental aspects of systems dynamics, such as feedback loops and non-linear behaviors (Bateson 1972; Von Bertalanffy 1969), which are neglected by linear models of causality. In particular, synchronization effects among individual interacting agents are an important aspect of an inquiry into the relation between digital media and social movements. Synchronized bursts of activity on digital media seem to have important effects on local activation processes (González-Bailón et al. 2011). Thus, the acceleration of communication on digital platforms can have a substantial impact on the overall process, as sometimes ‘faster is different’ (Tufekci 2011). Consequently, it is important to take into consideration the way digital platforms act as environments that can sustain novel system dynamics, such as hundreds of Occupy mobilizations popping up in a few weeks all over the world.

### *2.2.3 - Resource mobilization and political opportunities*

Whereas earlier perspectives tended to infer the rise of a social movement from socio-psychological situations of discontent or friction, collective action models, as shown, concentrate on the structural conditions that allow a group to mobilize effectively. Analogously, an important corpus of literature that arose in the 1970s explicitly emphasized the strategic dimension of social movements and the structural conditions of mobilization, linking the field of social movements much more with economic theory, organization studies and political science.

Resource mobilization theory is an approach to social movements that conceives of them as rational and strategic organizations, collaborating and competing in the political arena alongside institutional actors (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Social movements are to be explained as efforts of ‘movement entrepreneurs’ to collect resources, in order to sustain activity and to meet the demand and preferences of their constituency. They collaborate and compete in a ‘social movement sector’, that results from the overall population of social movement organizations in a given context, and sometimes are aggregated in issue-specific ‘social movement industries’.

Other interpretations put the emphasis on the role played by organizational forms in determining patterns of mobilization (Jenkins 1983) and explicitly investigate how organizational arrangements and strategies condition movements' failure and success (Gamson 1975).

Starting from the recognition of the influence of broader political aspects on the rise and destiny of a mobilization (Tilly 1978), a derivation of this approach is known as political opportunity structure – or political process – theory. As the name suggests, according to this branch of literature, the key explaining factor of contentious activity is the structure of political opportunities that manifests in a given movement. This consists of the range of potential allies available in a social movement sector or in the political arena, institutional arrangements that encourage or discourage people from taking action, path-dependent and historical processes that support or attenuate political confrontation, etc. (Kitschelt 1986). Political opportunities have a processual dimension that expressed by the rise and fall of the relative power of a certain contentious group (McAdam 1986), thus the fluctuating trajectories of political process exert an influence in terms of originating and softening wider cycles of protest (Tarrow 1994).

Whereas earlier political opportunity research focused on ‘hard’ structural conditions only, more recently attention has also been given to so-called ‘discursive opportunity structure’ (Koopmans and Statham 1999). Structural opportunities have to be perceived as such by activists, in order to affect activists’ behavior: thus discursive elements decisively mediate the mobilizing potential of structures. In order for this to happen, not only must the political discourse address and legitimize a certain issue



– this issue also needs to resonate with the beliefs and feelings of potential activists (Bröer and Duyvendak 2009).

Resource mobilization theory helps to unveil the strategic and organizational elements of what was previously conceived as irrational and spontaneous phenomena, while political opportunity theory adds a reference to more general structural aspects and to the processual dimension of the political field. Attention has been given to psychological and cultural elements as well (e.g. Bröer and Duyvendak 2009; Klandermans 1984; Koopmans and Statham 1999; McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996), so as to temper the rationalist and structuralist attitude of these frameworks. An important aspect of these structural approaches is also that movements are considered as definite empirical objects, and their goals and claims are not directly questioned – rather they are derived from historical structural conflicts, exogenous preferences, or even activists’ attempts to strategically formulate them as appealing to their potential constituency.

Despite arguments that call into question the persistent utility of these approaches for digitally-enabled activism (Earl and Kimport 2011), there are many elements of this perspective that can contribute to a theory of mobilization in the age of digital communication. In general, it is self-evident that new communication tools influence the work of coordination – at the least because they significantly lower the transaction costs associated with the process (Aday et al. 2010; Garrett 2006). Movements can indeed exploit social media platforms for resource-seeking purposes – a claim for which empirical evidence has been found (Conover et al. 2011). Public attention, in particular, is as fundamental a resource as it is a scarce one. Activists may be seen as competing for this resource in and through online environments.

Scholars in this field have partially moved on from this approach, and are now focusing on the processuality and relationality of movement diffusion (Tarrow, McAdam and Tilly 2003). Indeed, while resource mobilization theory mainly refers to the contentious field populated by so-called ‘social movement organizations’, the boundaries of which are basically taken for granted, it is now largely acknowledged that movements are better depicted in terms of networks, given their unboundedness and fluidity (Diani 2003). It goes without saying that this is even more true for movement networks that are highly interwoven with digital ones. Moreover, recent trends that move toward an integration of the focus on political opportunities with the focus on discursive and affective elements (Bröer and Duyvendak 2009; Koopmans and Statham 1999) are a good starting point for bridging sometimes conflicting perspectives, merging the importance of exogenous, structural factors of activation with endogenous, cultural elements of meaning-making.

#### *2.2.4 - Movements and framing processes*

Another family of theories that has gained popularity in the last decade explicitly focuses on sense-making processes related to social movement activity. Like any other actor, social movements are involved in the ‘politics of signification’ (Hall 1980) and this is even more true for recent struggles related to the cultural realm (Castells 1997; Melucci 1996; Touraine 1971). Following a consistent corpus of literature and empirical research, nowadays social movements' framing processes represent an ever-present object of social movement studies (Benford and Snow 2000).

The notions of ‘frame’ and ‘framing’ have their roots in the work of Gregory Bateson, who explored ecological and cybernetic approaches to cognition and communication (Bateson 1972). According to this perspective, communication is always based on meta-communication processes that set its ‘environment’ – or that, in other words, frame it. Frame analysis went on to be popularized in sociological discourse, starting with the famous work of Erving Goffman (Goffman 1974). Frames are defined as schemata of interpretation that act as ways of organizing experience, providing reality with meanings and structuring individual perceptions and experiences of society.

This perspective does not see movements as mere carriers of ideas that directly derive from structural aspects or pre-existent ideologies; rather, movements are seen as signifying agents, which actively produce and circulate meanings (Snow and Benford 1988). While it could be given a more psychological connotation, from a properly sociological perspective, framing is understood by reference to its negotiated, shared and processual nature (Gamson 1992).

‘Collective action frames’ are a special class of frames that serve the purpose of mobilizing people around a cause, gaining wider support and discouraging opposition (Snow and Benford 1988). They are characterized by various dimensions, undergo different stages and serve diverse purposes (Benford and Snow 2000). In particular, collective action frames have a diagnostic (what's wrong?), a prognostic (what to do?) and a motivational (why do it?) component.

The articulation between different frames held by different people is realized through various forms of ‘frame alignment’ (Snow et al. 1986). This represents one of the key processes which accounts for the mobilizing effect of framing and the diffusion of mobilizations in general. There are various mechanisms through which frame alignment is realized: frame bridging – linking pre-existing congruent but disconnected frames; frame amplification – emphasizing associated values and beliefs; frame extension – including pre-existing frames within a wider frame; and frame transformation – modifying the frame so as to let it resonate with a group. The success of a specific frame does not only depend on factors which are endogenous to discourse and meanings, but also on the opportunities made available by the political process (Koopmans and Duyvendak 1995), and the resonance that

frames encounter in people's perceptions and emotions (Bröer and Duyvendak 2009).

Frames can be more or less inclusive and more or less specified. One special class of frame, indeed, is so-called 'master frames'. These are generic and underspecified frames, from which other more specific frames are derived and under which they are collected (Snow and Benford 1992). For example, a recurrent master frame is the very general class of 'injustice frames' (Gamson 1992), which depict a situation as unjust and which play a central role in fostering mobilization as a reaction to perceived injustice. Within the movement against neoliberal globalization, the critique of the non-democratic nature of these processes acted as a loose, shared master frame, despite the many different, even conflicting frames mobilized by its heterogeneous souls (Della Porta 2007).

Frames are, of course, interrelated one with another, and they sometimes come together in 'packages' summarized by 'condensing symbols' (Gamson and Modigliani 1989), which provide a shortcut to their cognitive component and aggregate more or less homogeneous frames.

Transformations related to the exploitation of digital media by recent contentious networks likely affect framing and frame alignment processes. This is clearly evident, as frames have much to do with signification and communication processes at large, which are evidently being transformed by new media. In particular, the digital networking ecology allows the production and circulation of easy-to-individualize and easy-to-combine 'personal action frames' (Bennett 2012; Bennett and Segerberg 2012; 2013). This transformation allows an individual to join a mobilization while bringing her own reason for contending with the status quo, with the result that the overall mobilization may be highly heterogeneous in terms of claims and ideologies. The growing complexity of internet-supported transnational mobilizations suggests the rise of processes of 'reflexive framing' (Chesters and Welsh 2005; 2006), forged by the iterative negotiation of, and creative synthesis among, a plurality of meanings. It is also important to stress that the most shared material within social networking platforms is often visual accounts of police brutality (Thorson et al. 2013), which are capable of spreading effective injustice frames with high mobilizing potential.

The framing perspective has explicitly introduced the cognitive and cultural dimension as a central feature in the study of contentious activity. Recent development of the 'frame' construct has been criticized because it tends to make that construct broader and broader, failing to differentiate 'frames' from related, but distinct, concepts, such as 'ideology' (Oliver and Johnston 2000). Nonetheless, as sense-making, signification and communication processes are to be understood as crucial aspects of social phenomena in general, and of movements in particular,<sup>19</sup> frame theories are crucial to the

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<sup>19</sup> Especially in this work, as there are many points of overlap between branding and framing.

understanding of social movements.

The study of framing processes is not necessarily embedded in a strictly constructivist framework, as frames are often considered to be resources that strategic actors handle, among other resources (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996). Moreover, the framing approach largely ignores the materiality and properly semiotic aspect of meaning-production, relying on a mainly cognitive assumption that underestimates the role of affective processes, the articulation of meanings in larger discourses and their relation with a distinctive media ecology. For these reasons, despite the fact that both framing and semiotics relate to signification processes, the latter contributes to the former as it is better suited to informing a theory in respect of novel forms of mobilization, like the cases of Occupy and Anonymous, which are characterized by a stunning ‘semantic heterogeneity’ and by a level of abstraction of frames that even the general category of master frames can hardly denote. Furthermore, despite focusing on cultural elements, such as the production and circulation of meanings, the framing perspective does not necessarily investigate the origins of the claims, goals and values around which social movements coalesce. An assessment of these origins lies at the core of the so-called ‘new social movements’ school.

#### *2.2.5 - New social movements of the previous century*

The approaches presented up to now do not aim to explaining *why* certain movements mobilize for certain purposes: their intended concern is with *how* mobilization occurs.

Starting from the 1960s, became increasingly clear that the new protest waves shaking Western countries did not fit the classical capital / labor cleavage, which had been able to explain the nature of previous social movements. The rise of ‘new social movements’ is thus often linked to the shift observed in Western societies to post-industrial arrangements and post-material values (Inglehart 1997), which opened up new areas of contention.

Alain Touraine famously challenged structural-Marxist hegemony in European sociology. According to his view, the rise of a post-industrial society brings about the prevalence of symbolic over material production. This process also changes the key line of conflict, which now involves the domain of culture and the control of the ‘self-production’ of society (Touraine 1971). The notion of social movement provided by Touraine's analysis is a strongly historical one, considering social movement –no less than in Marxist fashion – to be the real ‘engine’ of society. Movements are defined in terms of three principles: totality, opposition and identity (Touraine 1965). The principle of identity, in particular, conveys the idea that, to a social movement, what is central is its consciousness of itself

and its role – which is not a mere systemic derivation, rather it is actively produced, in relation with the forces it has to contrast and the project of society it advances.

The notion of collective identity was further developed by Alberto Melucci, who puts this notion at the center of his theory of social movements (Melucci 1996). In Melucci's view, the existence of a collective identity is not to be taken for granted, insofar as its production is conceived as the main issue which must be accounted for. Identification, furthermore, is not intended as a stable attribute of a movement: rather, it is a relational process that results in the production of shared meanings and the recognition of boundaries (Melucci 1995). The centrality of this process accounts for the novelty of 'new' social movements, as in contemporary societies the fight for the control over the production of information is the key struggle and to challenge domination primarily means to challenge dominant cultural codes (Melucci 1996, 176-97).

Analogously, Manuel Castells observes that many urban movements, while mobilizing to resist commodification and bureaucratization, vindicate a specific cultural identity (Castells 1983). In the context of his theory of the network society (Castells 1996), identities are the consequential reaction to the unrecognizable nature of informational flows manifested by domination, sometimes in the form of 'resistential identities', at other times in the form of 'projectual identities' (Touraine 1971; Castells 1997).

While the newness of 'new social movements' has been debated (Calhoun 1993), the merit of this school of thought is not limited to registering the transition from class-based mobilization to new forms of cultural conflict. The main innovation introduced has to do with the construction of the object of social movement theory: the active, relational and processual production of shared meanings, and its relation with systemic processes, as the principal unit of analysis. This is an epistemological assumption that assigns the study of social movements a privileged position within a theory of social change.

'Newer' new movements, anyway, introduce elements that can potentially challenge some of the assumptions of this approach. In particular, we observe that contemporary movements are characterized by a markedly increased heterogeneity across different dimensions. This has not only to do with socio-demographic variables or biographic backgrounds, but also – and more radically – with the range of issues promoted in a single mobilization (Bennett 2005). Scholars have thus disputed the role that strongly conceived collective identities play in this more recent wave of mobilization. New forms of identities, indeed, are tolerant and flexible enough to encompass different stances at once (Della Porta 2007). The resulting fluidity would seem to signal the decline of the notion of collective identity itself, emphasizing instead the relation between the individual self and

public experience (McDonald 2002). Moreover, certain dynamics of some contemporary ‘digital assemblies’ explicitly assume non-representational forms of collectivity (Wiedemann 2014).

A common criticism often addressed toward recent mobilization waves is indeed the lack of unified and clear demands (Deseriis and Dean 2012; Pickerill and Krinsky 2012; Van Gelder 2011). Indeed, activists have sometimes explicitly claimed that these movements do not fit the classical requirement of taking a coherent position on certain issues and of addressing political systems with predefined demands. Despite the fact that the notion of identity does not necessarily equate to that of homogeneity and coherence (Melucci 1995), still, the degree of articulation observed today raises some questions – at least in terms of the material and semiotic processes that successfully hold a specific self-recognized and etero-recognized (id)entity together, despite the diverse or even conflictual meanings involved. Although the idea that the concept of collective identity does not fit contemporary forms of contention at all is questionable, this concept does undergo a reconfiguration in the context of digitally-mediated movements (Gerbaudo and Treré 2015).

The relation between collective identity and branding is critical and crucial for the present work. One of the goals of the empirical section is to show how Occupy and Anonymous *explicitly* challenge the idea that what we sometimes call ‘one movement’ is characterized by shared coherent and homogeneous traits. As the discussion will argue in detail, though, it is more appropriate not to frame this issue in terms of substitution, but rather in terms of complementarity: branding makes room for collective identification, despite the fact that the material-semiotic dimension of the process is being reassessed due to the preeminence of what will be referred to as ‘contentious branding’.

### *2.2.6 - Contemporary trends*

In addition to the classical families of theories reviewed above, many recent developments in social movement theory have introduced innovated their conceptual repertoire and have registered increasingly challenging empirical cases. The focus on emotions, the importance of geographical scale and the popularity of network approaches are among the more important trajectories, together with the role of new media technology, which will be discussed individually in the following section.

#### Emotions and affection

Until recently, even fundamental aspects of social life, such as emotions, were not sufficiently taken into account in the literature on social movements (Goodwin 1997). This was not true for earlier perspectives, in which mobilizations were seen in terms of crowd and disruptive episodes; but with the growing interest in rational and cultural aspects of movements, pre-cognitive, affective processes

had not been taken into adequate account by social movement theory. This gap has been widely filled in last decades, with a growing body of literature interested in accounting for the role of emotions in social movement dynamics (Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005; Goodwin and Jasper 2001). Through the lens of feelings and emotions, already established categories can gain new significance, rendering their motivational potential more evident (Jasper 1998): injustice frames foster mobilization because of the outrage and anger they instill; recruitment through social networks operates thanks to friendship ties between participants; collective identities are also defined in terms of feelings of solidarity toward a community; etc.

This trend can be loosely linked to the recent ‘affective turn’ in social science (Clough and Halley 2008). The notion of affection, as employed here, is not a synonym of emotion; it is, instead, a less sharply defined pre-individual, but fully social, capacity ‘to affect and to be affected’ – that is to say, to elicit or experience a change of state (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Both affects and emotions, nonetheless, underline the importance of pre-cognitive embodied conditions and implications for action. Certain elements of contemporary movements can be usefully analyzed through this non-representational perspective, especially as it allows us to more properly approach the relation between human and technological elements (Wiedemann 2014). Indeed, the circulation of information on digital networks seems to augment the affective dimension of the process (Papacharissi and De Fatima Oliveira 2012).

### Geography and scale

Movements are mutually interacting entities that influence each other and the broader context, sometimes giving rise to trans-local ‘spillovers’ (Meyer and Whittier 1994). ‘Repertoires of contention’ (Tilly 1986) – the set of actions, tools and strategies available for activists to mobilize – often present a distinctive character of modularity (Tarrow 1994), allowing for certain practices to spread in different local contexts. This fact has encouraged the application of diffusionist approaches to the spatial dimension of contentious politics (McAdam and Rucht 1993). Moreover, new forms of activism involving coordinating at the super-national level pose a vast array of challenges for classical social movement theory (Della Porta and Tarrow 2005).

We can trace an analytical divide between ‘globalist’ and ‘transnational’ perspectives (Montagna 2007) in regard to this issue: the former claiming the rise of a new theoretical model of movement, the latter conceptualizing the empirical processes behind the spread of certain forms of mobilization. While the adjective ‘global’ allows us to emphasize the discontinuity between these new forms and previous nation-centered organizations and identities (McDonald 2006), it can also misleadingly give the idea of global mobilizations as universal and decontextualized phenomena (Tarrow and McAdam

2003). The ‘dynamics of contention’ research program explicitly focuses on the generative mechanisms that allow local contention to spread on a transnational scale (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2003; Tarrow and McAdam 2005). This perspective identifies three main mechanisms of this ‘scale shift’: relational diffusion (through pre-existing social ties); non-relational diffusion (through pre-existing medial channels); and brokerage (through newly-established social ties). Classical diffusionist perspectives, nonetheless, present important theoretical limitations (Chabot and Duyvendak 2002) – in particular, as the various mechanisms and processes described are conceptualized as rather fixed, linear and unidirectional.

When it comes to theorizing the role of space in shaping networks of domination and contention, again, different theoretical positions are possible. In the early stages of the internet’s development, considering its global communicative potential it was quite natural to ask whether we could expect contentious activity to be consistently detached from the geographical context (Diani 2000). Propelled by the preeminence of new communication technologies, indeed, we are witnessing the rising importance of flows and mobility, with respect to territories and locally circumscribed interaction (Castells 1996; Urry 2004). Nonetheless, recent evidence shows a persistent tendency toward a geographical clustering of movement networks, despite facilitated inter-local interaction (Borge-Holthoefer et al. 2011; Conover et al. 2013). On the other side, proximity still has an important role in forging movement networks and in influencing their trajectories (Uitermark and Nicholls 2012) – something that can relate both to the importance of the urban dimension for social movement processes (Castells 1983) and the specific properties of recent social media entangled with mobile technology (Takhteyev, Gruzd and Wellman 2012). Thus, it is consequently helpful to consider both the importance of place, as such, as well as the emergent nature of flows and connections between sites (Nicholls 2009).

#### Social networks, informational networks, heterogeneous networks

Network perspectives on social movement studies have a long history (Snow, Zurcher and Ekland-Olson 1980). However, relational approaches to collective action have only recently emerged (Diani and McAdam 2003), along with a renewed interest in the technique of social network analysis and a theoretical relevance accorded to networks by contemporary sociology (Castells 1996; Granovetter 1983; Rainie and Wellman 2012).

First of all, the notion of networks has an important epistemological role. The category of networks, in fact, better fits the inherent porosity of social movement definitions, and fruitfully overcomes the limitations associated with the classical metaphor of the ‘movement-person’ (Diani 2003). From an analytic point of view, social networks play a decisive role in different stages of mobilization, as they



have an influence on socialization to contentious politics, on the spread of information and on participation persuasion (Passy 2003). Social networks are often conceived of in a structural connotation: sometimes as entities with distinctive causal effects, and sometimes as channels for processes of diffusion. However, it is important to stress that networks have an important cultural layer, being at least in part the product of communicative interaction (Mische 2003).

The rise of internet technologies and their wide adoption by contentious networks has further encouraged this tendency (Petit 2004; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2002). In particular, the abundance of social movement data in a natively relational format, available through mining contemporary ‘social media’, has established social movement activity as a standard object of inquiry for complex network studies (e.g. Chen and Pirolli 2012; Conover et al. 2013; González-Bailón and Wang 2016).

Employed with a different connotation, the term network is also crucial in Castells' theory of ‘informational movements’ (Castells 1997; 2009). In this framework, networks are conceived of as socio-technical arrangements, where internet technology plays a decisive role. According to this view, domination, as well as counter-power, are no longer organized around centers and hierarchies: rather, they are articulated around networks and flows (Castells 1996; 2000). The adaptive capacity of the network morphology empowered by new communication technologies confers on these ‘informational networks’ an incomparable advantage in the highly unpredictable contemporary environment. Network power holds an inclusion / exclusion binary logic, in the sense that informational networks can either subsume under their protocol what contributes to their program, or easily ignore what does not. Consequently, social movements are faced with a choice: either to barricade themselves inside cultural communes, or to construct their own informational networks (Castells 2000).

It is clear that the heuristic of networks has a crucial role in this work too, both for theoretical and methodological reasons. Though the material-semiotic framework upon which this thesis seeks to build suggests an emphasis on the heterogeneity of these networks (Law 1992; Latour 2005), social movement networks are not to be conceived of as composed of activists or organizations only, but rather of the whole range of ‘materials’ – social, technical, semiotic, etc. – that assemble them concretely.

### *2.2.7 - New media, new movements?*

The role of technology in contentious politics has received considerable attention in the last decade, due to a number of relatively autonomous debates: the alleged, and debated, empowerment effect of new media on mobilizations (e.g. Gladwell 2010; Morozov 2011; Rheingold 2002; Shirky 2008); the

popularity of online network analysis techniques applied to social movements (e.g. Bennett, Segerberg and Walker 2014; Borge-Holthoefer et al. 2011; Conover et al. 2013; González-Bailón and Wang 2016); the reassessment of collective action dynamics in digitally-mediated contentious politics (e.g. Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl 2005; Chesters and Welsh 2006; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2002); and the struggle around the control of the production and circulation of information in mediated societies (e.g. Castells 2009; Lovink and Rasch 2013; Melucci 1996; Milan and Hintz 2013).

The study of the relation between social movements and new(er) communication technologies suffers from the lack of a unified theoretical framework, as well as from contradictory empirical results (Garrett 2006). Furthermore, it is susceptible of anecdotal and partisan views, that either enthusiastically evoke the revolutionary power associated with new media, or that skeptically claim the lack of an effective influence on protest activity (Aday et al. 2010).

We can easily identify novel organizational forms that may empower protest activity. Social movements often take to the streets in the form of ‘smart mobs’ (Rheingold 2002), where groups of people synchronize their activities in distributed ways, without the need for central coordination, thanks to interconnected mobile technologies (Ems 2009). Internet platforms, due to their flexibility, can take on the role of formal institutions in allowing complex group dynamics, such as the convergence of communication and action, in cases where the balance between benefits and costs would render this work of organizing unviable for organizations (Shirky 2008). Certainly internet communication lowers the ‘transaction costs’ associated with mobilizations, facilitating the coordination and recruitment efforts of activists. However, this does not necessarily lead to an increased rate of participation, nor is it legitimate to assign to internet communication a causal role (Aday et al. 2010; Garrett 2006).

On the other side, there are also highly skeptical accounts of the role that new media play in relation to mobilizing and emancipating movements. Activists are not the only groups that can gain power by exploiting new technologies: those they are fighting can also do so, by capitalizing on new media’s propaganda potential as well as the possibility of tracking and thus shutting down networks of activists (Morozov 2011). Empirical research has shown no causal relation between the diffusion of internet and mobile technology and protest activity (Meier 2009). Sometimes, counter-intuitively, it is instead internet blackouts, more than the internet itself, that triggers massive outrage (Hassanpour 2011).

A more general skeptical attitude suggests that online activism often takes the form of ‘clicktivism’ or ‘slacktivism’: easy-to-perform actions that have no impact in the ‘real world’, except for the

individual satisfaction of those who engage in them (Morozov 2009). Just as ‘the revolution will not be televised’, a widely cited *New Yorker* article argues, so too ‘the revolution will not be tweeted’ (Gladwell 2010). For sure, the ‘strength of weak ties’ (Granovetter 1983) in online platforms facilitates processes of diffusion and people can more easily contribute to a cause; however, this may only be true for very modest goals, whereas high-risk activism still relies on strong ties of friendship and loyalty, as has been demonstrated (McAdam 1986). The ‘clicktivism’ argument, though, relies on the assumption of a ‘substitution effect’ between online and offline participation, for which there is little or no evidence (Christiansen 2011). Moreover, it reproduces the so-called ‘digital dualism’ (Jurgenson 2012), an essentialist divide between online/offline activities, which denies the objective entanglement between ‘the tweets and the streets’ (Gerbaudo 2014).

It is, at any rate, epistemologically questionable whether the correct approach to this issue should be to determine whether new media either facilitate or obstruct the emergence and effectiveness of mobilizations. A recent stream of complex network research (e.g. Borge-Holthoefer et al. 2011; Conover et al. 2013; González-Bailón and Wang 2016) tries to set itself apart from any techno-deterministic standpoint, following a rigorous empirical approach and contributing to testing important models of information diffusion and contagion; but it does so, basically, by avoiding engaging with a proper sociological theorization of the ‘media-movements’ relation.

It is quite clear that the introduction of internet technologies has widely reshaped media-movement dynamics. In particular, social movements deal with novel forms of communication that combine the broadcasting potential of ‘one-to-many’ models with the ‘user-generated content’ typical of peer-to-peer technologies: these models of ‘mass-self communication’ (Castells 2007; 2009) have sustained recent grassroots movements while expressing their anger and reinventing forms of solidarity in the context of economic and political crisis: in the Arab Spring, the Spanish Indignados and the worldwide Occupy protest wave (Castells 2012). Moreover, the extensive adoption of new tools of communication has affected both the organizational structure and self-representations of recent movements, as the network model is in some way intrinsic to their organizing logic (Kavada 2006; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2002). Starting from the ‘movement of movements’ against neoliberal globalization, almost every mobilization and movement organization nowadays discursively frames itself as a network or part of a network; this has probably much to do with the ‘networking logic’ that internet communication facilitates (Juris 2005), despite the fact that contemporary digital media have moved mobilizations, like in the case of Occupy, toward a more crowd-based ‘logic of aggregation’ (Juris 2012).

The diffusion of digital media and the novel organizational forms developed have also created

challenges to the well-established theoretical categories in the theory of social movements. Thanks to the decisive role of internet communication tools, transnational coalitions of activism can lead to the emergence of complex ‘ecologies of action’, characterized by fractal geometries and processes of reflexive framing (Chesters and Welsh 2005; 2006), which allow for the synthesis of heterogeneous souls across the local and the global level. Accordingly, collective identities based on strong solidarity are said to be replaced by shifting bonds of ‘fluidarity’, where belonging to groups turns into a more fluid ‘public expression of the self’ (McDonald 2002). As already stressed, though, this does not necessarily mean that a sense of solidarity and belonging is declining, despite the changing material-semiotic dimension introduced by digital environments (Milan 2015a). The shift in the material bases of digitally-mediated movements constitutes the resulting collectivities as publics,<sup>20</sup> assembled mainly by means of ‘circular chains of affection’, rather than by explicit forms of identity (Wiedemann 2014). Again, this is not to say that the emergence of ‘the collective’ is no longer possible, just that it is less a matter of stable, well-defined representations and more a matter of pre-cognitive, affective processes. It suffices to note that cases such as Occupy and Anonymous present a strong sense of ‘we-ness’, in spite of the many contradictions they present (Gerbaudo 2015; Kavada 2015).

The broader ‘logic of collective action’ (Olson 1965) has also been critically reassessed. The boundaries between private and public domains are increasingly blurred, while purely discrete and strongly voluntaristic participation turns into mostly incremental and sometimes unintentional contributions. This may account for the solution of the free-riding dilemma, without the need for selective incentives and formal institutions (Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl 2005). More recent cases of mobilizations, relying on so-called ‘social media’, suggest the rise of a brand new logic of ‘connective action’ (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; 2013): where traditional collective action requires organizations to provide incentives for participation, directives for coordination and frames for identification, digitally-enabled connective action spontaneously emerges from self-organizing networks of individuals. Certain digital media, Twitter in particular, work as a ‘stitching mechanism’ that make it possible for diverse crowds to organize through distributed processes (Bennett, Segerberg and Walker 2014). While it is certainly true that new media make it possible, in part, to do away with centralized and vertical coordination (Castells 1996), the utopia of a ‘leaderless’ movement runs counter to the evidence that implicit hierarchies are still fundamental (Gerbaudo 2012), even in radically anti-leader

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<sup>20</sup> That is to say: technologically mediated assemblies of bodies, held together by an affective bond, without the specific need of direct interaction (Tarde [1901] 1989).

mobilizations like Anonymous (Uitermark 2016). It is, then, interesting that participants in Occupy sometimes refer to it as a ‘leaderful’ movement.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, it is also arguable that the higher heterogeneity of motives, frames and ideologies that sometimes today mobilizes people in a common event presents a lower ‘connective’ potential than traditional forms of collective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). From the perspective of this work, it would be more appropriate to recognize that contemporary, less centralized, more self-organized forms of mobilization should be understood as novel historical forms of a general process of collective action (Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl 2005). It is fundamental to stress at this point that media and informational systems do not only engage with social movements as ‘independent variables’ – either tools that can be strategically exploited or environments that reassess logics of action. Since the rise of informational societies (Castells 1996), the control over the means of production and circulation of information has become the *locus* of crucial struggles in the symbolic realm (Melucci 1996; Touraine 1971). Power and counter-power increasingly do battle for the ‘hearts and minds’ of people, and communication is the primary battlefield of this clash (Castells 2007; 2009). The transition of the internet from being an open field of experimentation to a ‘walled garden’, solidly monopolized by corporations and pervasively monitored by governments, has opened the stage for struggles over the ‘politics of data’ (Lovink and Rasch 2013). Consequently, hacker groups involved in cyber-conflict in informational networks are increasingly important political actors in the geopolitical arena (Coleman 2013), while media engage with the development of technical fixes to perceived threats and of alternative communication infrastructures (Milan and Hintz 2013).

Despite the general vocabulary adopted above, it is important to keep in mind that, when talking about ‘digital media’, we are not dealing with a single medium or a range of functional equivalents. Each communication tool comes with its own affordances (Gibson 1977) and peculiarities, and a number of technologies, practices and cultures are interrelated in complex ‘media ecologies’ (Treré and Mattoni 2016). This fact should encourage cross-platform approaches (Thorson et al. 2013). Moreover, different media practices and different implications of media adoption are brought together in a specific context: thus the medial aspect of communication should be better understood in terms of the specific ‘media culture’ that characterizes a social movement (Costanza-Chock 2012). Furthermore, as is widely acknowledged by media studies, the social context of use exerts a great influence on the effect of media adoption (Couldry 2012). Analogously, activists may use the same medium with fairly different purposes and outcomes (Ems 2009; Gaffney 2010).

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<sup>21</sup> See [http://www.alternet.org/story/153223/occupy\\_wall\\_street%3A\\_a\\_leader-full\\_movement\\_in\\_a\\_leaderless\\_time](http://www.alternet.org/story/153223/occupy_wall_street%3A_a_leader-full_movement_in_a_leaderless_time).

The ‘new media, new movements?’ debate is still quite often presented in terms of ‘techno-enthusiasm’ or ‘techno-skepticism’. The reasons for this ideological polarization of the debate are probably rooted in the ever-present fascination that technological development exercises in the human imagination, but also in the specific construction of the analytical object of media studies (Bourdon 2000; Chandler 1995). Nonetheless, it is crucially important to adopt an epistemological framework capable of preventing this tendency, maintaining a ‘symmetrical attitude’ between the social and the technical dimensions of reality (Latour 2005; Law 1992).

### 2.2.8 – *The means and the meanings*

As described above, the study of social movements encompasses a number of approaches, characterized by different, sometimes incompatible epistemological assumptions, theoretical frameworks and analytical goals. This does not only relate to the complexity of the object that is being inquired into, which can be tackled from various angles and levels, but is also rooted in a classical philosophical divide between the European and the American tradition (Melucci 1996, 16). There are, indeed, two main streams of literature in the field of social movement studies (Cohen 1985): one that is interested in the organizational and/ or strategic aspect of movements, in which boundaries and motivations are not problematized as such; and another one that is interested in the cultural and identitary elements of mobilizations, which actively questions the intimate nature, objectives and broader relations of a movement.

Overlapping developments, syncretic efforts and contaminations are not missing in the literature (e.g. Cohen 1985; Koopmans and Duyvendak 1995; McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996) but, nonetheless, they often take the form of the incorporation of certain processes within specific frameworks. It is thus useful to trace an ideal-typical separating line between approaches concerned with the ‘*means of contention*’, i.e. the resources available, organizational forms, morphological patterns, etc., and approaches concerned with the ‘*meanings of contention*’, i.e. goals and claims, identification processes, discursive representations, etc.

This multi-faceted composition of the field results in the availability of a multi-dimensional conceptual toolkit, which is at the disposal of researchers and with which they can underline various aspects of contentious processes. Using this toolkit, we can distinguish the following categories of processes: organizational processes (e.g. McCarthy and Zald 1977; Oliver and Marwell 2001; Tarrow 1994); network processes (e.g. Castells 1996; Diani and McAdam 2003; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2003); framing processes (e.g. Benford and Snow 2000; Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Gamson and Modigliani 1989); and identification processes (e.g. McDonald 2002; Melucci 1995; Polletta and

Jasper 2001). Each of these dimensions has to be critically reviewed in any discussion, along with the many definitions of the notion of ‘social movement’ (Diani 1992).<sup>22</sup>

The distinction between the ‘means’ and ‘ends’ of a mobilization has already been analytically challenged: repertoires are sometimes not simply tools that are strategically adopted when seeking certain effects, but they can also be the bases for emotively-charged experiences that provide the concrete motivations to protest (Dekker and Duyvendak 2013; Jasper 2011). New social movements, in particular, adhere to the model of ‘prefigurative politics’ (Boggs 1977), according to which they put into practice the social change they seek, bringing their ultimate goals and ideals of society into their practices and organizational models. Digitally-mediated movements increasingly tend to embed organizational metaphors, such as networking, horizontality, fluidity, etc., within their identity representations (Bennett 2005; Kavada 2006; Juris 2005), creating an empirical short-circuit between the two dimensions. This is not new, as is clear if we think about the emphasis on non-hierarchical models and claims for horizontality characteristics of 1970s/1980s anti-authoritarian and cultural movements. Nowadays, nonetheless, the difficulties we encounter in *explaining the reasons ‘why’ some mobilizations occur can be traced back to the counter-intuitive fact that they somehow lie in the practices related to ‘how’ protest activity is arranged* (Tufekci 2013): the relation between the ‘means’ and the ‘meanings’, the discussion will argue, is more and more evidently counterintuitive.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, the need to overcome the above-mentioned cleavage between means and meanings is primarily a matter of epistemological arguments, but it is also, at the same time, related to a specific empirical transformation:<sup>24</sup> it is increasingly difficult to trace a boundary between the means movements employ and the meanings they produce. This is especially true because, whereas the former are generally clear and standardized, the latter are increasingly underspecified and fragmented: what ‘Anonymous’ means, as the rest of the work will show, is primarily a matter of ‘syntactic’ forms of action, rather than a matter of the ‘semantic’ content of struggles.

This line of reasoning suggests a need to critically approach one of the most fundamental dichotomies of (western) thought: that between the form and the substance.<sup>25</sup> Such a radical epistemological enterprise, the next section will argue, would greatly benefit from incorporating into social movement theory insights from semiotics.

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<sup>22</sup> See Chapter 6, Section 1.1 (‘Contentious branding and social movement processes’).

<sup>23</sup> See Chapter 6, Section 3.2 (‘The means are the meanings’).

<sup>24</sup> See Chapter 3, Section 3 (‘The demand is a process’).

<sup>25</sup> The problematization of this dichotomy is introduced here in order to hint at the argument of contentious branding, but there is no ambition, and no space, to approach the issue from a proper philosophical perspective (see Eco 1971).

## 2.3 - Semiotics, communication and power

Despite the importance of semiotic processes for the realm of human, social and behavioral sciences, as well as for philosophy and the humanities, the related vocabulary is rather fragmented across schools. This probably also has to do with the distinctive reflexive task that is required in order to inquire into the form and nature of symbols and meanings through means of, out of necessity, other symbols and meanings. For the purpose of the present work, a systematic discussion of the various competing schools, fine-grained distinctions and fierce debates in the semiotic and philosophical literature is not necessary. The strategy is thus to introduce a pragmatic, working vocabulary, that necessarily betrays, to a certain extent, the variegated and sophisticated reflections produced by a number of fields, such as linguistics, semiotics, philosophy of language, logic, epistemology and sociology of communication. This ‘betrayal’ is also performatively emblematic of the point being made.

The aims of this section are the following. First, it will introduce the basic semiotic definitions and processes relevant for the rest of the work; in particular, the distinction between the signifier and the signified, the recursive character of signification and the idea of infinite semiotic chains, that together constitute sign systems as topologically recursive. Second, merging insights from semiotics with ecological communication theory, the section will introduce the idea of a ‘bending effect’ that media produce on sign systems. Finally, the relation between semiotics and politics will be discussed, highlighting both the inherent political character of signification processes and the symbolic dimension of power/counter-power dynamics.

### *2.3.1 - Sign systems as recursive networks*

Whereas the origin and uniqueness of symbolic competences in humans are debated aspects (Henshilwood and D’Errico 2011), there is common agreement that the symbolic represents a constitutive dimension of our species. What distinguishes humans from other animals is, to a great extent, their lack of instinctual repertoire, which creates a space between stimulus and response, which is occupied by the ‘second nature’ of culture (Gehlen [1950] 1988). Contemporary conceptualizations of culture, both in the anthropological and sociological literature, precisely underline its symbolic dimension (Geertz 1973, 5; Swidler 1986). Symbols are the key elements for the co-evolution of the self through meaningful micro-interaction (Mead 1934), as well as the tools



through which subjective contingency is transcended into inter-subjective social worlds (Schutz [1932] 1967).

These are just some of the reasons why language and communication often occupy a central place in social theory. Whereas a number of fierce epistemological controversies are precisely articulated around the debated relation between language and reality, socio-constructivists (e.g. Berger and Luckman 1967) and factual-realists (e.g. Searle 1995) converge on the common denominator that social reality is – to a large extent – a matter of symbolic construction. It is thus not a coincidence that linguistics and semiotics have had so much influence on the social sciences, spurring both structuralism (e.g. De Saussure [1916] 1960) and post-structuralism (e.g. Derrida [1967] 1997), unveiling the political (e.g. Hall 1980), economic (e.g. Baudrillard 1972) and psychoanalytical (e.g. Lacan 1977) aspects of signification processes.

The most general and fundamental unit of semiotics is the sign, defined as an entity that stands for something other than itself (Chandler 1994). This ‘something other than itself’ is what we generally call the referent of a sign and can stand for real as well as imaginary entities, true as well as false statements, objects of the ‘world out there’ as well as other signs. Meaning is the effect of this relation of signification. This movement of ‘delegation’, this chain of mediation between the sign and its referent, contributes to the very paradoxical foundation of meaning-making processes. Since the sign is not what it pretends to be, communication is ultimately based, no matter which universal truth is being conveyed, on a sort of ontological lie: the ‘lie’ that the sign *is* its referent.<sup>26</sup>

The starting point for approaching semiotics is the classical distinction provided by structuralist linguistics between the two constitutive elements that compose a sign in any sign system, whether it be in verbal language or music notation: the ‘signified’ – the meaning being carried – and the ‘signifier’ – the carrier of the meaning (De Saussure [1916] 1960). The need to distinguish between these components flows, in Saussurian terms, from the inherently arbitrary nature of their bond: there is no necessary element in the ‘world out there’ that requires a sign to be constituted in a certain way. The three-letter word ‘dog’ is the signifier, while the animal is the signified: the relation between the two, of course, is based on an arbitrary fact; or, better still, on a social convention (Baert 1998, 22). The relation between the signifier and the signified depends on the existence of a ‘map’ that works as a framework of signification processes; this is what semioticians call a ‘code’: the rules of associations that have to be shared in some way for meaningful communication to occur (Hall 1980;

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<sup>26</sup> Grasping this ‘fundamental paradox of signification’ is crucial in order to understand the role accorded to semiotics in this work: the sign pretends to be something other than itself, but this non-correspondence is normally put into brackets in the act of concrete communication (see Eco 1976).

Jakobson 1971). This map consists of the relative positions of both the signifier and the signified in a web of relations, which themselves are arbitrary. The identity of a sign derives by contrast, and thus by *difference*: from the opposition to the ‘absent totality’ of the other signs – ‘dog’ works as a signifier because it differs from ‘dig’, ‘god’, ‘do’, etc., while the dog as an animal is a meaningful referent in so far as it is distinguished from wolves, foxes, cats, etc. Whereas in structural linguistics this system of difference works synchronously (De Saussure [1916] 1960), in post-structural thinking it is a matter of both synchronic and diachronic relations of opposition (Derrida 1978). From both perspectives, meaning does not emerge out of atomistic entities, nor merely dyadic relations, but rather – more appropriately – from the relation of a relation with other relations, in a complex network of inter-relations.

The relationship between the signifier and the signified<sup>27</sup> assumes a variable degree of arbitrariness if, following the Peircian tradition, we distinguish between icons, indexes and symbols (Peirce [1902] 1955). Icons are signs that physically resemble their referent – e.g. the picture of a tree; indexes are signs that directly point to the presence of their referent – e.g. a green LED on an electronic device; symbols are signs that do not directly have to do with their referent, both in the sense that they do not resemble it and that they appear regardless of its presence – e.g. the three-letter word ‘dog’. The Saussurian arbitrariness of signs and the delegation between the signified and the signifier are most evident in symbolic signs, where the relation between the sign and the referent is purely conventional and the sign appears *instead of* the signified. Nonetheless, even iconic signs do hold somewhat arbitrary and sometimes ideological (Barthes [1957] 1972; Hall 1980) relations, since they are embedded in ‘webs of significance’ (Geertz 1973, 5) with other signs.

The translation of a sign into its meaning, indeed, is not a unique, immediate process. We must distinguish between ‘denotation’ – the identification of the ‘literal’ meaning, the immediate association held by the signifier – and ‘connotation’ – the identification of the ‘extended’ meaning, broader associations in a semantic network. Interestingly, a third level related to *Weltanschauungen* – ‘mythological’ meanings, deeper semantic connections – is added by Barthes, as a result of a further process of signification, in which the previously appointed signified takes on the role of a signifier, carrying its own ‘deeper’ meanings (Barthes [1957] 1972). In any act of semiosis, we can thus distinguish between *several nested ‘orders of signification’*.

While this work will draw on the Saussurian terminology, the Peircian tradition presents intriguing aspects, which are worth mentioning (Peirce [1902] 1955). Its triadic model of sign is composed not

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<sup>27</sup> According to Peirce, this distinction relates to the properties of the ‘semiotic object’, which only partially overlaps with the signified.

only of the ‘representamen’ (analogous to the signifier) and the ‘semiotic object’ (analogous to the signified), but also by the ‘interpretant’, which is the effect that the sign has on the receiver. This last element highlights a crucial aspect of signification processes: that a sign only exists insofar as it is somehow interpreted. Interestingly, the interpretant is not the receiver her/himself, but the *effect* that a sign produces; indeed, the interpretant is the process by which a sign points to further signs, becoming in turn their interpretant and creating a *recursive, infinite semiotic chain*.

This aspect is also reflected by the post-structural notion of ‘différance’ (Derrida 1978),<sup>28</sup> which combines the Saussurian idea of ‘meaning out of difference’ with the Peircian idea of ‘infinite semiosis’. According to this proposition, meaning is produced within systems of synchronic and diachronic oppositions, but is never fully carried or realized by a single signifier in a single signification event. Rather, meaning is the effect of an endless chain of signifiers, involved in a ‘free play’, and thus the realization of meaning is continuously *differed* to other *differences*.

To sum up, it is crucial to grasp and keep in mind some key points of this selective introduction to semiotics in order to understand the importance of focusing on branding processes in social movements. The unit of meaning-making is the sign, which is a conventional relation between a signifier and a signified. Meanings emerge from systems of signs, which are networks of differential relations between signs. The process of signification does not involve an isolated sign, but rather takes the form of a chain of signification. Since this ‘semiotic chain’ is composed of virtually endless nested signs, sign systems are to be understood as networks characterized by a complex, layered and recursive topology. Introducing such a semiotic sensibility into the conceptualization of social movements proves crucial in order to account for certain peculiar aspects of the empirical cases analyzed: Occupy and Anonymous are understood as signifiers, whose contingent meaning is often shifting, and as entities whose definitions can be extrapolated at different degrees of abstraction. This conceptualization is useful in order to make sense of the stunning diversity of meanings mobilized by means of the same semiotic tools, as will be extensively presented in the empirical chapters.

### 2.3.2 - Semiotic and communication processes

Up to now the discussion has treated sign systems as rather ethereal entities, disembodied from the materiality of the process through which they effectively actualize: communication. This assumption is not tenable in this work, since it deals with the specificities of signification in digitally-mediated

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<sup>28</sup> Significantly, the neologism ‘différance’ is a signifier that was deliberately developed to signify the double nature of ‘difference’ and ‘deferment’, exploiting the phonetical similarities of their French signifiers.

movements, whose properties necessarily co-evolve with the material layer of communication technology (Milan 2015b). This section presents an overview of the intersection between communication and sign systems, arguing that different media present distinctive ‘bending effects’ on signification processes, insofar as the material properties of technology constrain the semiotic relation between signifiers and signifieds.

Any communicative exchange contains – at least – the following components: a message, a source, a destination and a channel.<sup>29</sup> All of these elements are in some way related to a sign system. The message is itself a sign that is encoded, i.e. converted into a transportable signifier from the source according to the rules of the code, and decoded, i.e. translated into a meaningful signified using the destination’s own code. The source and the destination may or may not share the same code: this makes the difference between whether the message is going to be correctly received or not. The channel, or the medium, consists of the technology that allows the message to flow from the source to the destination: it can be rather independent from the specific sign systems that exploit it and can be misunderstood as being the most neutral element of communication. In practice, media are largely entangled with sign systems, as well as with the power relations they embed.

Classical information theory (Shannon 1948), which greatly contributed to many engineering achievements, provides a linear and deterministic picture of the process by which a message is transmitted from a source to its destination; any sort of mismatch between the two is basically attributed to the unwanted effects of external noise. Classical information theory has been problematized by first-order cybernetics (Wiener 1948), according to which communication flows are patterned by feedback loops and are intertwined with the environment in which they take place. This derivation indicates the transition from linear to non-linear models of communication, where the relationship between the source and the destination is not unidirectional, but rather ‘circuitual’, and where exogenous elements are not seen as residual noise, but rather as an integral part of an ‘ecology’ or communication. Whereas information theory conceives of communication as a single, single level process, systemic-ecological approaches take account of its inherently multi-layered character. No communicative exchange is a self-contained transmission, insofar as it has to rely, to a certain degree, on meta-communication levels, upon which the meaning effectively expressed depends (Bateson

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<sup>29</sup> This list is an adaptation from the information theory model that more precisely includes: a source, a transmitter, a channel, a receiver and a destination (Shannon 1948). The transmitter and the receiver are the devices that physically encode and decode the message, but for the purposes of this argument they can be equated to the source and the destination.

1955).<sup>30</sup> Communication thus takes the form of nested (meta-)processes that recursively frame the underlying levels at various degrees of abstraction. This theoretical evidence also has rather fundamental implications for the construction of social situations and interaction (Watzlawick 1967). In mass communication theory the elder linear models are reflected by the so-called ‘hypodermic needle theory’ (Lasswell 1927), according to which mass media have unmediated and uniform effects on isolated and passive audiences. This proposition is undermined by robust empirical evidence, which has shown that the effects of media are not deterministic, insofar as they are mediated by social relations in a two-step – or more – flow of communication (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1966). More radically, cultural studies have contributed to showing how communication is the structured articulation of a number of relatively autonomous moments: production, circulation, consumption and reproduction (Hall 1980). Each of these phases constrains but never fully determines the next one. In this model, the code operates through two independent – yet related – processes: encoding and decoding. One wraps the content of communication into a message form by applying a code, while the other translates and disseminates the message into a system of practices through the receiver’s own code. Since the degree of equivalence between encoding and decoding is variable, *any communication exchange ranges somewhere in between the two ideal-types of perfectly transparent and systematically distorted communication.*<sup>31</sup>

‘To understand each other’ (in a sense, to convert a signifier into its signified) means to ignore this fundamental paradox of communication, to which the above-mentioned paradox of semiosis relates. Here the intersection between sign systems and media becomes apparent. Whereas classical semiotics considers the signifier and the signified as two faces of the same coin post-structuralist theories of signs (e.g. Baudrillard 1980; Derrida [1967] 1997; Lacan 1977) objectively give preeminence to signifiers. This also explains the reason why the former is less suited to integrating a theory of the sign with a theory of media: contrary to the signified, the signifier is inseparable from its material form (Chandler 1994). Just as the ‘master-signifier’ constrains the ‘slippage of the signified under the signifier’ (Lacan 1977), thus actively shaping a certain symbolic order, the medium provides specific affordances (Gibson 1977) that constrain the ‘free play of signifiers’ (Derrida 1978). The ‘putting into shape’ of a meaning is not a neutral, mechanical transmission of a predefined semantic content into a univocal message form over a uniform channel; on the contrary, the expressible signifieds depend on

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<sup>30</sup> In the essay *Theories of Fantasy and Play*, Gregory Bateson develops this argument, starting from the observation that frequently, among animals, the signs that would denote ‘let’s fight’ and those that would denote ‘let’s play’ are exactly the same. Moreover, paradoxes in logic are an evident example of the way in which signification has to be understood as a multi-levelled and recursive process (see Bateson 1955).

<sup>31</sup> This is entangled with the differential, politicized modality of decoding that will be mentioned in the next section.

the communicable signifiers, which in turn depend on the specific materiality of a media system (De Rosa and Farr 1996). Whereas common wisdom would state that in a communicative act the chosen signified dictates the more appropriate signifier, the production of a text, especially in the written form, can be not a matter of primarily semantic processes, but rather a matter of signifiers inducing other signifiers based on purely ‘syntactic’, rather than ‘semantic’, connections (Chandler 1994).

When the specific medium of communication enters the argument, the relation between the signifier and the signified cannot be treated as an historical invariant. In strictly semiotic terms, this relation already varies between icons and symbols, as in the first the two are much more closely related (Peirce [1902] 1955). Despite the fact that there also exist non-visual iconic signs,<sup>32</sup> it goes without saying that the material characteristics of oral speech renders it much more suitable for the emission of symbolic signs when compared to other media – such as scratching sharpened stones on the wall of a cave before the invention of the alphabet. Indeed, it is very likely that human symbolic language originated as an evolution of a previous language based on iconic signs (Bickerton 2009), thus through a historical process of distancing and detachment between the signifier and the signified.

When it comes to the relationship between oral speech and writing, the temptation would be to conceive of the inscription of signifiers into tangible forms, such as written texts, as a further distancing of the signifier from the signified. This argument lies at the core of Derrida’s critique of De Saussure’s and Western culture’s ‘logocentrism’ (Derrida [1967] 1997), the idea that writing is a mere derivation of speech, which in turn would be more closely related to an essentialist conception of thought. Without entering into this fierce controversy within philosophy of language, it suffices to notice that in speech the relation between the signifier and the signified appears more intimate, providing at least the illusion of a greater semantic transparency of signifiers. The inscription of language in writing, instead, remind of the relative distance between the two. Since written words present a much higher degree of ‘ontological persistence’ – *verba volant, scripta manent* – the materiality of the written word is involved in a process of fixation of the signifier that provides the specular illusion of increased autonomy from the signified.

Following the growing mediatization of society the relation between the signifier and the signified has been stretched and even torn. The Baudrillardian theory of ‘simulacra and simulation’ (Baudrillard 1980) relates the disjuncture between reality and its representation to the proliferation of mass media. Contemporary societies, in particular, are so much congested with medial symbols that the boundaries between reality and its representation, the signified and the signifier, have vanished.

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<sup>32</sup> Such as the vocal imitation of a sound: so-called ‘ideophones’.

Reality takes the form of a ‘hyper-reality’, where symbols no longer merely exist at an increasing distance from their referent, but actually drop any reference: they become simulacra of reality, representations of something that does not exist. This ‘precession of simulacra’ constitutes a sign system where signs point to nothing else but other signs, losing their constitutive relation to a referent; in a sense, the signifier substitutes and erases the signified. Whereas this work does not embrace such pessimistic emphasis on the ‘implosion of meaning’ (Baudrillard 1980), these insights are useful in highlighting the effects of the remediation of signification related to communication technologies.

The rise of internet technology is associated in the theory of the network society (Castells 1996; 2000) to an analogous paradoxical movement of displacement and collapse between the ‘real’ – what really exists – and the ‘virtual’ – what exists as a possibility. Whereas reality has always been virtual, insofar as it is mediated by symbols, the hypertext created by internet technology marks the rise of a ‘real virtuality’, a system where symbols are detached from experience and, because of this, symbols are all that can be experienced. Again, in semiotic terms, the effect is to drain the essential meaning of messages, relaxing and subverting the relationship between the signifier and the signified, a line of reasoning that points to the argument of digitally-mediated contentious branding.

The advent of contemporary digital media – from the revolution of ‘web 2.0’ to the pervasiveness of so-called ‘social media’ – marks another relevant turn. The most characteristic communicative practice of this new media ecology is not that of discussing, submitting, reading or broadcasting, but that of sharing: the ‘death of the author’ (Barthes [1967] 2001)<sup>33</sup> is not anymore a matter of semiological sensibility, but of empirical evidence. ‘Memes’ cease to be postulated units of meaning within a sociobiological theory of culture (Dawkins 1989) and become entities of the material world that exemplify a number of quintessential traits of digital culture (Chen 2012):<sup>34</sup> the indefinability of the boundaries between seriousness and play, real and fake, original and copy, etc. Processes that are already associated, in the ‘old’ postmodern tradition, with the project of the deconstruction of dichotomies (Derrida [1967] 1997) and the decline of grand narratives (Lyotard 1984), but that now become *explicit* parts of the everyday life of the ‘man on the (digital) street’. Getting back to the semiotics of the process, memes evolve out of chains of ‘symbolic reconfiguration’ (Poell, De Kloet and Zeng 2014, 7-8), the purposeful re-semanticization of signs: the same signifier continuously floats,

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<sup>33</sup> In the homonymous essay Barthes argues against the tradition of literary criticism of including in the analysis the original intentions of the author.

<sup>34</sup> Whereas the term ‘meme’ was coined by the biologist Richard Dawkins to denote the basic unit of a culture analogous to what genes are for living nature (both spreading through mechanisms of replication and mutation), in the digital culture ‘internet memes’ are content of any kind – often in the form of pictures or modes of expression – that circulate ‘virally’ among users and across different contexts, often presenting slight variation in their form and content.

or even jumps, as a consequence of incremental variations in its encoding and/or decoding, according to its memetic, easy to reinterpret character (Gerbaudo 2015): a process that is common to any historical configuration of sign systems and that is probably the basis of any sort of cultural evolution (Dawkins 1989), but with the notable difference that what used to be a matter of hundreds of years of transmission and communicative segregation between subcultures becomes a matter of a few hours and radical communicative integration. Without assigning from this a deterministic element to digital media effects on signification, it is necessary to stress the implications that the affordances of the former have on the mediation of meaning-making processes (Langlois 2014; Milan 2015b). The specific ‘ontological persistence’ of digitally-inscribed signifiers, which can perpetuate themselves in time and, most of all, across social networks much more than written texts, is probably associated with this trajectory.

The cases of Occupy and Anonymous are emblematic of this point: the main argument of this work is that, from a semiotic point of view, they represent a radical stretch and subversion of the relation between the signifier and the signified – the format, the package and the syntax of contention detach and substitute the substance, the content and the semantic of contention. In other words, as the next section will introduce, they render explicit the importance of branding in contentious politics.

Assigning such an important role to specific media in shaping a fundamental aspect of social reality, such as sign systems and signification processes, can be easily mistaken as having fallen into the trap of techno-determinism (Chandler 1995). It is worth noticing though that semiologists themselves are often aware of the distinctive cultural significance of specific media (Eco 1976). There is a strong epistemological difference indeed between claiming that, on the one hand, media have an overarching power over passive audiences (Lasswell 1927), and that, on the other hand, a media logic (Altheide and Snow 1979) affects the representation of reality according to the properties of specific media.

One of the most fascinating and controversial contributions to a theory of the effects of media and communication is provided by Marshall McLuhan and is synthesized in the evocative expression ‘the medium is the message’ (McLuhan, Fiore and Agel 1967). The medium through which communication flows is conceived not only as a carrier of an independent message, but as the reproducer of a logic that is a message in itself. In a sense, the medium is not only a signifier, but also a signified. Whereas this position is frequently accused of providing a techno-deterministic account of the relation between media and society, it is useful to mention it as it points to a further level of subversion of the relation between the signifier and the signified: it breaks through the very same distinction between media and messages, in a chain of recursive nestedness where the boundaries between the form and the substance, the means and the meanings, are a matter of one’s theoretical



standpoint.

This section has intertwined semiotic and media theories to make a specific point: signification, sometimes understood in an idealistic fashion, presents a technological dimension which interacts with its deployment. The very same distinction between the semiotic and the material levels, adopted so far with the goal of marking their entanglements, is refused by approaches such as assemblage theory (e.g. DeLanda 2006; Deleuze and Guattari 1987) and actor-network theory (Latour 2005; Law 1992; Mol 2002), which constitute the epistemological inspiration of this work. According to this material-semiotic sensibility, reality is to be understood as an assemblage, the effect of a heterogeneous and recursive network of associations: the actors of this network can be humans, things and ideas, and are themselves the effect of a heterogeneous and recursive network of associations.

### *2.3.3 - The politics of symbolism and the symbolism of politics*

This work is not about digital media and signification processes in general: more specifically, it is about digital media and signification processes in contentious politics; it is thus essential to highlight the strong entanglement between semiotic and political processes. The political nature of symbols and the symbolic nature of politics have to do with two complementary levels assessed in the following pages: the inherent power dimension of sign systems, mainly uncovered by the post-structuralist literature, and the strategic use of symbolism in politics and political communication, mostly analyzed by political and communication science. The most important contributions of these paragraphs is to introduce the notion of ‘floating signifiers’, special classes of signifiers that signify a shifting range of signifieds, and to suggest that symbols sometimes have not only an instrumental role, but even a constitutive one, within the realm of politics.

In the anthropological literature, the study of symbolism is often associated with the study of myths and rituals (e.g. Lévi-Strauss 1978; Mauss 1925; Van Gennep 1960), which are understood as symbolic systems that transmit and reinforce institutionalized organizations of experience and social order. Power, indeed, does not solely manifest itself through unmediated violence, it does so also, and more effectively, through the disciplinary effects of discourses (Foucault 1971) and hegemonic struggles (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). This is also realized through the reification of knowledge and the naturalization of social order (Berger and Luckman 1967), a process in which symbolism has an overarching role, often associated with the mythological levels of signification (Barthes [1957] 1972). As noted before, whereas structural linguistics and structuralism in general are mostly based on synchronic models, in which the meaning of signs depends on the ongoing systems of relations in a

sign system, post-structuralist perspectives and cultural studies include diachronic relationships among continuously evolving systems (e.g. Derrida 1978; Foucault 1971; Hall 1980). The former, furthermore, largely ignore the dimension of power relations which every sign system embeds, whereas the latter consider it a constitutive element of signification and communication processes. The aspect of synchronicity and that of the awareness of power relations are entangled, because it is precisely by unveiling the historical construction of knowledge systems that power relations become visible (Bourdieu 2000; Foucault 1971).

The historical articulation of sign systems, indeed, is to be understood as a crucial field of power/counter-power dynamics. Signifiers, the vehicles of meaning, are not equal in terms of their relevance in discourses, and they are indeed at stake in 'hegemonic struggles' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). The main battlefield is that of 'floating' or 'empty' signifiers – such as, in contemporary Western societies, 'freedom', 'democracy', 'communism' – which constitute a special class of signifiers which signifieds are synchronically highly heterogeneous and diachronically always shifting. Whereas the idealistic picture of the process of translation of a signifier into a signified is that of a transparent, univocal conversion, the existence of various orders of connotations constitutes it as a necessarily ideological operation (Barthes [1957] 1972). With respect to the dominant ideology, there are at least three different modalities of unwrapping the 'package' of a message, or 'decoding' it: dominant decoding, negotiated decoding and subversive decoding (Hall 1980). The possibility of rejecting the intended meaning of a sign, to reassess its position in a semiotic chain, is made available by the inherently polysemy of signs (Ricoeur 1976).

The relation between the signifier and the signified is somewhat arbitrary not only in historical terms but also in the sense that it is always *more or less* fluid; some signifiers, though, signify a much more variegated range of signifieds. The term 'floating signifier' originates from Lévi-Strauss' account of certain indigenous terms that are apparently 'void of meaning' (Lévi-Strauss [1950] 1987) and has a key role in Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse, mentioned above, which expands on the Foucauldian definition of discourse by emphasizing the active role of signs in its articulation (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Discourses are forged through the creation of 'nodal points': special junctures that fix the relation between other signifiers in a 'chain of equivalence'. For example, the signifier 'democracy' acts as a nodal point in the sense that a whole hegemonic discourse is often built around it in many political systems, through chains of equivalence between other signifiers, such as 'free

market', 'elections', 'the nation'.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the Lacanian theory of unconscious as a system of signs identifies the 'master-signifier' as the signifier that, instead of referencing other signs, references itself, halting the continuous 'slippage of the signified under the signifier' and thus fixing a symbolic order (Lacan 1977). Insofar as discourses are open to challenges and permeated by struggles, social movements actively intervene in rearticulating floating signifiers within novel chains of equivalence, thus sometimes integrating heterogeneous instances in the same struggle (Colleoni 2013; Van Bommel and Spicer 2011).

To sum up, discursive power and counter-power is not only the reflection of a field of forces belonging to other domains, but also the result of balancing and oscillations within a 'politics of signification' (Hall 1980). This is particularly true in the contemporary 'informational capitalism' (Castells 1996), where consumption is entangled with signification processes (Baudrillard 1972) and production is organized around flows of signs and symbols (Lash and Urry 1994).

The relevance of the symbolic dimension for politics, though, is not only related to the inherent political character of sign systems, but also to the strategic or implicit role that symbols play in representing and communicating power and counter-power. Rituals and symbolism, indeed, are the privileged medium of power (Kertzer 1988). The political order does not only present an 'efficient part', related to administration, regulation and policy making, but also a 'theatrical part', represented by traditions, ideals and bonds of solidarity (Bagehot 1963). Symbols are manipulated by the elites, in order to appeal to and comply with the wishes and unconscious needs of the masses, so as to legitimize their position and to influence them (Lasswell 1950). Symbols that contribute to political quiescence can be classified in 'referential symbols', when used to support rational arguments, and 'condensed symbols', when their role is to appeal to emotions (Edelman 1983). The 'political use of symbols' thus ranges from higher-level and general purposes, like providing the social glue for a polity to function, to low-level and specific issues (Elder and Cobb 1983).

Since the early stages of civilization, dominant groups have supplied their privileged position with symbolic tokens of their power, as well as markers of their identity. Kings adopted shiny thrones, scepters and crowns, to testify to their superior status. Clerics started to wear ostentatious hats, dresses and jewelry to represent the magnificence of God. Knights had their shields, armor and weapons decorated for the very practical purpose of quickly recognizing each other on the battlefield. Noble families developed emblems to objectify their unity and seals to certify their documents. Coats of

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<sup>35</sup> The floating nature of the signifier 'democracy' becomes apparent if we confront this chain of equivalence with that of democracy in other discourses, such as in the radical democracy movements or in the Democratic Popular Republic of Korea.

arms, in particular, have, since the Middle Ages, constituted articulated systems of recognition<sup>36</sup> for aristocrats, and they continue to exist (Pimbley 1908). Originating from the practical necessity to identify fully-covered fighters in ritualistic duels, their progressive differentiation and application to aristocrat families and even territorial entities required the institution of a specific notable figure and a specific discipline, for recognition and certification purposes. Where the initial, pragmatic emblem would only consist of a colored shield, the components of a coat of arms began to incorporate animals, banners and decorations of all sorts. The inclusion of certain elements were related to specific achievements that testified to a family's status.

In the modern age, the rise of mass parties, regimes and ideologies has been accompanied by the articulation of a strongly connoted symbolism. With the advent of electoral competition between parties in liberal regimes, the use of symbols became a strategic matter of 'political branding' (Smith and French 2009), which tries to capture electors' attention and provide a shortcut to the related political stands. Despite party symbols may be mistaken as mere 'packaging', promoting much more substantial issues, it is worth noting that it is sometimes easier to modify the ideology of a party than its name or its logo, since emotive and identification aspects can lead to much more resistance than rational arguments and political values (De Rosa and Farr 1996).

Totalitarian regimes, particularly, have relied on a vivid aesthetics and a specific symbolism to exert their fascination over, and manipulation of, the masses. The fascist project of Mussolini's Italy intimately developed around the rediscovery of symbols associated with the Roman imperial domination, like the Roman salute and the Fascio Littorio icon (Falasca-Zamponi 1997). Analogously, Hitler and his infamous propaganda apparatus manipulated symbols and imaginary to build the myth of Nazi Germany, anticipating many aspects of contemporary political marketing (O'Shaughnessy 2009). The many phases in the evolution of the Soviet Union were reflected and supported by analogous changes in its symbolism and rituals, which provided the shifting political directions with meta-narratives for the purposes of legitimation (Gill 2011).

Symbolism has also played a critical role in a large variety of social movements, from classical mass movements to so-called 'new social movements', where the symbolic dimension became a constitutive element (Melucci 1996). The most exemplary mass movement, the workers' movements, developed a number of semiotic elements to symbolize their struggle: the red flag, representing the blood of the comrades who died in the fight; the sickle and the hammer, suggesting the alliance between factory workers and peasants; and the five-pointed star, denoting the five continents and thus

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<sup>36</sup> Which constitutes them as 'brands', something that is central to this work.

internationalism. The raised fist became a universal – mostly left-wing – symbol of solidarity and support of struggles, extensively adopted by communist, feminist and black power movements. Some of these signs also have a peculiar polysemic character, such as the rainbow flag, symbolizing both LGBT and peace movements, and the ‘V’ finger sign, both a symbol of peace and a symbol of victory. Protest symbolism is essential for activists and supporters, as it works as the vehicle of framing processes (Benford and Snow 2000; Gamson and Modigliani 1989), materializing the solidarity that lies at the core of social movements (Melucci 1996) and allowing for recognition processes that should be granted the status of constitutive variables in a theory of collective action (Pizzorno 1986). The diffusion of digital media signals a transition toward a repertoire of communication that is densely populated by symbols of all sort, shared across social networks following highly distributed and sometimes ‘viral’ dynamics, thanks to the properties of mass-self-communication (Castells 2009). Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and YouTube allow for users who are sympathetic toward a certain mobilization to creatively or mimetically engage in the production or circulation of content, which is routed in unpredictable flows of information and can easily undergo processes of symbolic reconfiguration (Poell, De Kloet and Zeng 2014, 7-8), assuming the replicative potential of internet memes (Gerbaudo 2015). To give an example, the hashtag #OccupyWallStreet circulated and mutated, turning a protest event in front of the New York Stock Exchange into a worldwide wave of protest and, ultimately, becoming a universal ‘marker of protest’. Analogously the symbolism associated with Anonymous – its logo, its mask, its signature – is used by uncountable autonomous and sometimes highly contradictory mobilizations.<sup>37</sup>

This review of the relation between signs and politics aims to highlights two points. First, if we look at signs as a ‘dependent variable’, semiotics is a fundamental approach to amending the limits of that very general object of study called ‘political culture’ (Dittmer 1977), because it overcomes purely psychological or techno-deterministic frameworks, focusing instead on the distinctive role of symbols and their inherent political character. This is the reason why this work calls for developing, along with other approaches that already focus on meanings in social movements, a proper (material-)semiotics of contention. Second, if we frame signs as an ‘independent variable’, it must be noticed that signs have always largely contributed to power and counter-power processes: their visibility does not merely reflect deeper, more serious constitutive variables; instead it reinforces, and sometimes is entangled with, their very ontology. This argument points to the importance of the ‘conditions of recognizability’ of an entity or, in other words, its branding.

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<sup>37</sup> See Chapters 3 and 4 (‘Occupy What?’ and ‘Unfolding Anonymus’).

## 2.4 - The proliferation of branding

This section seeks to legitimize the translation of the process known as ‘branding’ to the field of social movements and contentious politics. Whereas, in commonsense terms, a brand is just the term or the logo that identifies a company or a product, the marketing and sociological literature conceives of brands as complex entities, characterized by a variety of dimensions and related to a vast array of elements that are central to the functioning of corporate capitalism but that overflow the domain of economic markets.

Brands originated in the rise of mass production and have become crucial institutions in the context of global informational capitalism. While they can be denotatively defined as semiotic elements that allow for the recognition of something, their connotative definition is more controversial, because they are both the outcome of ‘top-down’ strategic devices of management and ‘bottom-up’ emergent cultural expressions of publics. Whereas branding is classically associated with products and companies, nowadays ‘place branding’, ‘political branding’ and ‘personal branding’ have become established fields of research: everything can be an object of recognition, thus everything can be branded. Given their peculiar ontological heterogeneity, openness and modularity, brands can be paradigmatically depicted as assemblages that capture and articulate diverse meanings. While the proposal to juxtapose branding and social movements may sound provocative, so-called ‘movement marketing’ already conceptualizes social mobilizations as driving forces for market innovations and brands' success, while, more relevantly, theories of social movements have already started to transgress this semantic boundary.

### 2.4.1 - Brands: Origin and definitions

In the last decades the notion of brand and branding-related concepts have been multiplying and their connotations have been stretched. Indeed, the marketing literature often laments the lack of clear definitions and understandings (De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley 1998; Jevons 2005; Wood 2000). This can be in part traced back to the specific logic of the marketing literature – where theorization often reflects the variable pragmatic needs of professionals in the field – and the high level of abstraction of the process that the term attempts to signify.

The word ‘brand’ derives from the Germanic term *brandr*, which means ‘to burn’, referring to the old practice of using a hot iron to burn marks onto products so that producers could recognize them

(Jevons 2005). Brands evolved then into proper institutions fundamental to the functioning of modern capitalism, despite that elements of branding can be retrospectively recognized in much older civilizations (Moore and Reid 2008). Their proper function, in fact, is embedded in the logic of mass production, in which the need to distinguish similar goods one from each other arose, in parallel with the concentration of production in factories and that of distribution in stores. In the early stages, then, a brand would only consist of a 'mark' attached to a product, with the aim of rendering it recognizable. Later on, it became a proper 'cultural resource' of everyday life (Holt 2002), thanks to a number of convergent factors: the inventiveness of forward-looking entrepreneurs (Koehn 2001), the performative effects of marketing (Callon 1998) and, more generally, due to the 'informational turn' of global capitalism (Arvidsson 2006; Lury 2004).

Despite commonsense understandings, the concept of brand cannot be reduced simply to the 'mark' or the 'logo' through which a good or a company can be linguistically or visually recognized. As already expressed, providing a concise definition of branding is not an easy task. A systematic content analysis of the literature in marketing lists a dozen classes of definitions (De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley 1998), including: brands as logos for the identification of a product; brands as legal tools to protect ownerships titles against competitors; brands as extensions of a company's personality; brands as heuristics in consumers' minds that simplify choice-making processes; etc.

The American Marketing Association defines a brand, classically, as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design which is intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors" (American Marketing Association 1960). It is fundamental to notice that the dimension of identification and recognition has a constitutive role in characterizing the definition of brand. While this 'authentic interpretation' is still in vogue among many scholars and professionals, a slightly updated one is nowadays more common, which simply adds that not only can a name, term, sign, symbol or design serve this identification purpose, but so can any other feature (Bennett 1988). This adjustment allows for more abstract, conceptual entities (not only inscribed, visual or verbal, ones) to render the object being branded recognizable. Thus, the element that is supposed to supply the referent of a branding process with a recognizable form can be located throughout the whole spectrum of semiotic tools.

This classical definition has been criticized also for its firm-oriented focus (Wood 2000), as parallel importance should be placed on the role played by consumer-related aspects. Indeed, the brand can also be understood as the sum of costumers' perceptions, bonds of affection and processes of identification that are established in relation to the element being branded (Feldwick 2002). The evolution of marketing strategies in recent decades particularly reflects this bottom-up understanding

of brands, according to which companies primarily capitalize on the spontaneous cultural and social activity of consumer publics (Arvidsson 2006; Holt 2002). The study of brands is also rooted in this dual definition, where some perspectives focus on the analysis of top-down brand management strategies, whilst others emphasize bottom-up processes of consumer recognition (Smith and French 2009). The dualism is analytically summarized at best by the contrast between the notions of ‘brand identity’ and ‘brand image’: one is the desired self-definition that a company plans for the brands it manages; the other is the actual picture depicted in consumers' minds. Branding is thus the result of a dialectic between managerial attempts to intercept consumers’ perceptions and consumers’ own unpredictable, even contentious appropriations (Mumby 2016).

This epistemological shift is of great importance here, insofar as *it makes it possible to talk of branding processes also in situations in which there is no single center of action and no coherent definition*. Branding does not necessarily have to do with the purposeful decision to ‘vertically’ assign a label, an icon or a quality to something in particular; instead, branding can also be conceived of as an ‘horizontal’ process emerging from the bottom-up – assembling the more or less spontaneous and contested practices of a distributed public around a recognizable semiotic repertoire.

#### *2.4.2 - The branding of everything*

Even within corporate capitalism – the paradigmatic domain of branding – there are different types of brands, according to what is the actual object of branding. It is mandatory to distinguish, in particular, between ‘product branding’, which is centered on a single product or product line, and ‘corporate branding’, in which branding serves to provide the entire organization with a strongly perceived ‘personality’ and to manage the internal processes of a company (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005). It is important to remember that, despite its original relation with product markets, brands do not pertain to firms alone: political parties, regimes, local territories, music bands, NGOs and even individuals all contribute to the proliferation of this institution (Scammel 2007).

Places are increasingly subjected to and subjects of branding strategies and, more generally, are legitimately described as possessing a branding dimension (Anholt 2007; Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005; Lucarelli and Berg 2011). This process applies at different scales and relates to diverse dimensions of the spatial entity. City administrations are increasingly and purposefully developing branding strategies, which are conceived of as tools to publicize and capitalize on their competitive advantages (Zhang and Zhao 2009); this effort sometimes spurs the formation of contentious coalitions, which attempt to bring along their own counter-branding definitions (Pasotti 2013). Nation



branding and nation brands are other well acknowledged categories (Dinnie 2008), built on the most recognizable or desirable traits associated with a country; these can be extremely variable in their nature, ranging from typical commercial products, well-known cultural elements, perceived collocation in the geopolitical theater, the state of development of the economy, etc. (Fan 2010). It is worth stressing that the application of the notion of brand to places, despite its established legitimacy, already requires a consistent semantic shift compared to the original definition (Fan 2010; Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005). Indeed, the peculiarity of ‘products’ like geographical entities differentiates the purpose of their branding strategies from that of commercial goods; the aim of branding cities and nations is not only to enhance their performance in the competition over economic resources – such as tourism or investment – but also, for example, to promote their status in the geopolitical arena or to foster identification and civicness among citizens (Varga 2013).

The domain of politics, indeed, is also largely marked by the proliferation of branding (Jevons 2005), and political parties are sometimes analyzed by the literature as brands. From a consumer bottom-up perspective, parties can be seen as brands insofar as consumer-citizens recognize their names, symbols and attached meanings (Smith and French 2009). In this way they act as heuristics in the process of electoral decision-making, as the perceived image of a party facilitates its recognition by voters, who benefit from an augmented predictability of the political offer (Singer 2002). A study of political branding, for example, has analyzed the branding strategy adopted by the Labour Party in order to reframe the public perception of Tony Blair, after the growing grievances generated by the contested UK involvement in the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Scammel 2007). The political dimension of branding is not limited to analogies between parties or leaders competing for votes and companies or products competing for sales: national branding, for example, can be understood as a cultural-political measure devoted to enforcing and shaping citizens’ identification with the state (Varga 2013).

The pervasiveness of the institution of branding is so large that even individuals are nowadays encouraged to present themselves as, and are studied in terms of, brands. In the context of reduced job security and increased workforce competition, freelance workers or the unemployed are encouraged to ‘market themselves’ – transforming their job identity and, more in general, their personality into an easy-to-communicate brand (Montoya and Vandehey 2002; Peters 1999). The rise of social media has further encouraged this tendency, by allowing ordinary people to strategically manage their communication in order to build consistent personal brands around their image (Labrecque, Markos and Milne 2011). Personal branding is sometimes linked to processes of self-promotion that do not necessarily aim to achieve economic gain, but relate to general micro-celebrity dynamics, in which one crucial asset is the ability to present one’s self as ‘authentic’ (Marwick 2011).

### 2.4.3 - Brands as assemblages

As already noted, there is a consensus around the necessarily variegated and complex nature of the category of brands. Depending on the point of observation that is assumed, brands appear as either the result of a purposeful communication and management strategy of a company, or as the spontaneous realization of distributed consumer-driven processes (Feldwik 2002; Wood 2000). They serve a variety of functions within the economic, organizational, juridical, cultural and psychological realms (De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley 1998; Lury 2004). Moreover, branding has migrated from the context of corporate capitalism to a number of other domains (Scammel 2007).

Given the variety of materials that forge brands, their intrinsic relational ontology and the number of domains to which they relate, it becomes especially useful to look at brands as assemblages (Lury 2009). To observe brands through the lens of assemblage theory means both to recognize that they are the intersection of a set of heterogeneous and historical processes (Callon 1998) and that they are assembling devices that create unanticipated connections in the process of culture (Lury 2009).

That consumption is a practice with profound social and cultural valence is a famous proposition that goes back to classical masterpieces of sociology (e.g. Bourdieu 1979; Veblen, 1899). The perspective of branding marks a further point, because brands precisely register and emphasize the augmented importance of intangible elements attached to commodities (Arvidsson 2006). A brand can indeed be understood as a separate, intangible entity relating to a product (or whatever referent), rather than merely as an 'extension' or 'attachment' to it. It entails an array of heterogeneous –material, social, psychological – associations with the product (Simoes and Dibb 2001), which reinforce broad cultural values (Smith and French 2009), become vehicles of self-narration (Caliandro 2011), provide resources for subcultural distinction (Arvidsson 2006), etc. Thus, the role branding has in relation to identification and cultural processes within consumerist societies becomes evident, along with its obvious organizational and managerial function on behalf of corporations.<sup>38</sup>

Brands have an explicitly heterogeneous and multi-leveled ontology (Lury 2009), within which the product – or whatever referent – is just one node of the complex networks of associations between various materials: meanings, identities, communities, technologies, legal devices, etc. The concatenation of processes that result in the engagement of people with a brand is itself highly heterogeneous, including a number of non-economic relations: the adherence to a shared evocative imaginary, the provision of a sense of belonging, a group of peers to identify with, suggested patterns of behavior, etc. (Arvidsson 2006; Lury 2004). These items are all mobilized through a set of

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<sup>38</sup> It is important here to grasp the dual organizational and identitary dimension of branding, which relates to the divide between 'means' and 'meanings' in the literature of social movements.

recognizable linguistic, iconic or conceptual elements that serve the intrinsic recognition purpose of brands. Furthermore, the emergence of the notion of brands itself relates to an articulated historical process, in which the strategic decisions of entrepreneurs, the technological and economic transformations of mass capitalism, the diffusion of scientific tools, such as calculative methods and research practices, all converged to reform the performative discipline of marketing (Callon 1998). The relational and open character of brands is also expressed by their distinctive capacity of being re-appropriated by, and of attaching to, potentially diverse and evolving meanings (Mumby 2016).<sup>39</sup> As already noted, brands are not only – or necessarily – the consequence of centers of action (sellers) that add a specific layer (a logo) to their product. They should also be understood as the autonomous realization of an assembly of distributed actors – generally consumers – in the form of a ‘public’ (Arvidsson 2013). This analytical category crosscuts the classical dichotomies traditionally employed for characterizing social collectives,<sup>40</sup> as it consists in a set of individuals loosely associated through an affective bond, due to their mutual orientation toward a certain issue (Tarde [1901] 1989). It is evident that, for a public to emerge, a technological infrastructure is required; the printing press was, famously, the first device that allowed this kind of social arrangement and, thus, is associated with the rise of modern public opinion (Habermas 1989). Indeed, the era of digital communication provides publics – and consumer publics in particular – with augmented autonomous productive capacity, usually, though not always, funneled into the circuit of the valorization of capital (Arvidsson 2013).

#### *2.4.4 - Critical theories of branding*

The process just mentioned is related to a shift in branding practices from an elder, ‘modern’ paradigm to a contemporary, ‘postmodern’ one (Holt 2002). The former is based on the authority of marketers in forging consumers’ behavior, by imposing on them their preferred and predefined imaginary; the latter is characterized by brands that, still orienting and shaping behaviors and imaginary, accomplish this task mainly by capitalizing on the pre-existing cultural activity of consumers. Contemporary brand management does not seek to discipline consumers’ conduct through external directives; it rather aims to anticipate and subsume their own ‘spontaneous’ behaviors, desires and cultural codes (Arvidsson 2006).

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<sup>39</sup> A point that is particularly crucial for the argument that Occupy and Anonymous are contentious brands.

<sup>40</sup> Such as community versus society, group versus network, crowd versus mass, etc.

Brands represent crucial players in contemporary capitalism, primarily because they organize and mediate global flows of production (Lury 2004). Furthermore, if the notion of labor is to be extended to encompass the immaterial labor of consumers, who more and more directly participate in the valorization of capital (Lazzarato 1996), brands can be conceived of as peculiar devices that subsume consumers' cognitive and affective labor, thus reinventing the forms of capitalistic exploitation in the information age (Arvidsson 2005). Just as the factory is a socio-technical arrangement that puts physical and intellectual labor force to work – by aggregating and sorting workmen in and through the assembly line – analogously the brand can be seen as a socio-technical arrangement that collects and incorporates the cognitive and affective activity related to consumer practices – such as anchoring lifestyles to certain branded commodities, participating in brand-based communities of practice and subcultures, intentionally or unintentionally providing data to a R&D department and to market researcher.

The discourse on brands has proliferated outside the field of marketing and critical sociology research. With the preeminence of this institution for corporate capitalism, an explicitly critical cluster of writings has emerged, also outside the academic circuit. This is most notoriously exemplified by the anti-consumerist book *No Logo* (Klein 2000), in which the author points the finger at giant corporations and their branding strategies, which are accused of invading spaces, colonizing lifestyles, impoverishing production and destabilizing labor markets. Indeed, this book accounted for and inspired a global 'anti-brand' movement that considers brands responsible for the main drawbacks of the global economic system. A challenge of the present work, nonetheless, is to show how the institution of branding, or at least an analogous social form of branding, has interwoven its trajectory with that of contentious networks, no matter how paradoxical this argument may sound.

#### *2.4.5 - Social movements for brands?*

As was just stressed, the idea of juxtaposing social movements and brands may sound rather counterintuitive, considering that brands and corporations are among the most recurrent targets of grievances held by such movements. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that a contamination between the two categories is already at play, despite moving from the opposite direction. This observation further justifies the scope of the present work.

First of all, there is already a tendency to adopt theories developed for contentious politics to study the economic field. Various aspects of social movement theory have been exploited to explain the rise, establishment or decline of certain organizational forms in business (Swaminathan and Wade

1999). Moreover, this literature can be a useful tool with which to highlight the ‘contentious’ dimension of markets, which is an inherent character of economic life (King and Pearce 2010). Analogously, radical innovation in markets is sometimes attributed to the capacity of activists to spur mobilizations around a cause, explicitly paralleling path-breaking economic behavior with proper contentious politics (Rao 2008).

Consumption is understood by consumer culture theory as a site of agency and, sometimes, even as a form of activism expressed through commodities, in which a purchase can assume the function of resistance within the neoliberal order (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012). One empirical trend in the practice of marketing offers an interesting analogy with the argument of the branding of contention, representing in some sense the reverse process: so-called ‘movement marketing’ is a marketing strategy that aims to connect existing cultural and political mobilizations with corporate goals, sometimes with the (self-proclaimed) aim of actively sponsoring social change (Bell, Boland and Carter 2013; Goodson 2012). This process can be interpreted as a further radicalization of the ‘postmodern’ marketing model described above. The notion of movement, of course, is employed here in a broad sense, not necessarily fitting a definition that emphasizes its conflictual character. Some recent examples show the effects of these strategies in the alliance between certain brands and popular causes, such as environmentalism or gay rights. These initiatives are understood by some as aligning corporate interests with the public good. However, they are sometimes contested as attempts by corporations to co-opt and simply profit from detected changes in the values of society (‘greenwashing’ or ‘pinkwashing’ strategies), normalizing the conflictual character of mobilizations that would thus ‘go mainstream’.<sup>41</sup> The parallelism between ‘movement marketing’ and ‘contentious branding’ on a purely analytical level, however, sounds vivid. This provides legitimacy to the theoretical statement of the rise of contentious branding, as the semantic barrier between the domains of brands and movements, indeed, has already been taken down.

When we are to understand both movements and brands in terms of assemblages (Lury 2004), an interesting epistemological point can be made: the notion of assemblage entails a radically symmetrical attitude toward the attribution of directionality within chains of cause and effect.<sup>42</sup> In all virtual phenomena no dimension *necessarily* precedes another, as chains of affectivity are potentially bidirectional: if movements might channel energies into brands, things could also go the other way around.

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<sup>41</sup> For a specific example, consider the participation of brands such as Google, Amazon and VitaSnella in the Gay Pride 2016 event in Milan.

<sup>42</sup> To be more precise, the very notion of cause is put into question, understanding reality in terms of effects only.

#### 2.4.6 - Brands for social movements?

This selective review has already pointed out the main argument of this work: that the signifier ‘brand’ has floated across the marketing and academic community sufficiently to legitimize its translation into the field of social movements. This claim may sound rather provocative for activists; earlier uses of the term ‘brand’ to address, for example, the Occupy protest wave (Yardley 2011) were sometimes endorsed and sometimes rejected by activists as representing a reductive understanding of the movement itself. As a side point, it is worth noticing that the first well-established mainstream sociological theory of movements widely borrowed its vocabulary from economics and organization theory: the resource mobilization approach is based on notions such as ‘social movement entrepreneurs’, ‘social movement industries’ and ‘social movement sectors’ (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Moreover, what is being proposed here is not to apply the marketing definition of branding to the field of social movements; nor to apply techniques for the analysis of brands to contentious politics. As will be clear, there is no trace of ‘marketing imperialism’ in this work. Rather, the proposal is to *translate* the term ‘branding’, in its critical understanding, so as to name a dimension which is sometimes clearly distinguishable from the related social movement processes, as the discussion<sup>43</sup> will argue.

When dealing with social movements and brands together, though, we have to cope with an evident oxymoron: the latter are entities mainly (but not solely) embedded in the logic of neoliberal capitalism; while the former are often (but not solely) rising up against it. It is worth noticing that analogous paradoxes already exist in the practice of social movements: ‘cultural jamming’ practices such as ‘subvertising’,<sup>44</sup> for example, are well-established repertoires of anti-consumerism movements (Dery 1993), and are probably related to the genesis of things like ‘anti-brands brands’. An interesting example is represented by San Precario, the parodistic Patron Saint of precarious workers, developed by an Italian movement against labor precariousness with the explicit intention of attraction flows of identification and solidarity in the context of the individualization and fragmentation of struggles (Chainworkers 2006; Mattoni 2008).

At this point, there are two possibilities for approaching this line of reasoning. In the first case, we may simply recognize how reality resists our attempts to semanticize it once and for all: the category of brand may thus fit phenomena that are not only alien, but even oppositional to the context of its genesis. Considering the emphasis on the post-structuralist understanding of signs put forward by this

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<sup>43</sup> See Chapter 6, Section 1.1 (‘Contentious branding and social movement processes’).

<sup>44</sup> The ‘subversive recoding’ of advertising material.

work (Baudrillard 1980; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Laclau and Mouffe 1985), an interesting observation in this sense is that this semantic translation resonates with some of the points touched on by the argumentation: ‘branding’ is itself a floating signifier and a label adopted to differentiate and put it into shape an intensive property. In the second case, much more bravely, we may even hypothesize that this process represents a re-instantiation of Marx's famous intuition that “what the bourgeoisie produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers” (Marx and Engels [1848] 1969, 120).<sup>45</sup> This is a strong claim that deserves proper theoretical elaboration and does not constitute the argument of the present thesis, but is simply introduced as a possible direction for reflection. More cautiously, the goal of the following chapters is to show that certain digitally-mediated entities can be usefully analyzed through the analytical lens of contentious branding, and that branding processes represent an overlooked aspect in theories of social movements.

## **2.5 – The syntax, the semantic and the ethic of contention**

This chapter has presented the key perspectives on the study of social movements, stressing the existence of a divide between means-oriented approaches (focusing on the form of mobilizations) and meanings-oriented approaches (focusing on the content of mobilizations). Post-structuralist semiotic theories and ecological approaches to communication have thus been suggested as insightful perspectives in order to overcome this dichotomy, highlighting the entanglements between signification processes, media ecologies and power/counter-power dynamics. The third section then discussed definitions and theories of branding, both in the marketing and sociological literature, and suggested translating the notion of brands into the vocabulary of social movement theory.

As the empirical chapter will show, it is not accurate to refer to the overall assemblage of people,

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<sup>45</sup> We may even follow this provocation by noticing that, just as “the last capitalist is the one who will sell the rope with which to hang him” (quote misattributed to Lenin), it is a matter of fact that intrusive proprietary social networking platforms and status-symbol devices commercialized by multinational corporations played a crucial role – along with other technologies and conditions – in recent uprisings against – among other targets – the overarching power of greedy multinational corporations and massive surveillance empowered by complacent proprietary platforms (Terranova and Donovan 2013).

targets, goals and symbols named ‘Occupy’ and ‘Anonymous’ as one social movement. Before digging through the many overlapping layers that constitute these two as distinctive and counterintuitive cases, an intermediate, pragmatic notion needs to be adopted. Both ‘Occupy’ and ‘Anonymous’, indeed, appear at first glance as collections of labels, symbols, practices, and imaginaries open to be appropriated, to a varying extent, by a number of more or less distant, mobilizations. In other words, they are floating signifiers strategically or spontaneously re-semanticized across heterogeneous locales. This is the first apparent reason for primarily qualifying them as ‘contentious brands’.

This argument relies on a semiotic assumption that problematizes the differentiation between the form and the substance. The sketch of a ‘material-semiotic of contention’ starts by introducing a distinction between three ‘orders of signification’, related to the ‘depth’ of each level:<sup>46</sup>

- a ‘syntax of contention’, i.e. specific labels, images, slogans, practices;
- a ‘semantic of contention’, i.e. defined claims, issues, goals, targets
- an ‘ethic of contention’, i.e. broad orientations, imaginaries, attitudes, visions of the world.

The distinctiveness of the digitally-mediated mobilizations presented is that *a standardized syntax of contention articulates a fragmented and contradictory semantic of contention, thus giving expression to a loose ethic of contention*. In other words, contention relies on the affective potential of signifiers. The discussion will go further by recognizing that this perspective, suggested by the radical traits of Occupy and Anonymous, can stimulate reflections regarding other, also pre-digital, social movements: symbols have always had an important role in fostering and orienting mobilizations, while the associated meanings have always been somewhat contested and shifting. The cases presented bring to the surface, and thus render visible, a process that has always contributed, in different modalities and to different degrees, to forging *one* social movement. The contribution of the thesis is thus mainly theoretical: providing a point of observation regarding social movement processes that has not been embraced before. Nonetheless, the very same conditions that cause us to recognize the relevance of branding within these cases of digitally-mediated movements contributes to partially detaching contentious branding itself from other well acknowledged processes. Whereas branding processes largely used, in previous mobilizations, to overlap with others – such as identity definition and organizational boundaries, etc. – the radical openness of digital communication seems to turn branding into a more autonomous mediator of social movement processes.

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<sup>46</sup> Of course, the idea of nested orders of signification does not limit these levels to three; this choice, as well as the metaphor of ‘depth’, is indeed largely instrumental. Nonetheless, it recalls Barthes’ own distinction between the denotative, the connotative and the mythological orders of signification (Barthes [1957] 1972).



## 3 - Occupy What?

### From Occupy Wall Street to Occupy Everything

*A thing has as many senses as there are forces capable of taking possession of it.*

(Gilles Deleuze, 'Nietzsche and Philosophy', 1983)

*Our demand? We want everything and nothing. Our perspective? We are all a little bit right, and we are all a little bit wrong. What matters is that we are doing something.*

(Kate Khatib, Introduction to 'We Are Many', 2012)

### 3.1 - Introduction

#### 3.1.1 - Overview

This chapter will try to analytically isolate the Occupy 'contentious brand' from the Occupy 'social movement', through the means of empirical data and examples. It will argue that the peculiar relation between the means and the meanings characterizing this empirical case suggests this epistemological move, useful in order to have a better grip on the challenging fluidity of the movement's semantic, spatial and temporal boundaries. The research questions leading the analysis can be formulated as: *Occupy what?*

The first section follows the contentious brand 'Occupy' through its semantic, spatial and temporal dimensions, underlying the growing range of items with which it is associated: looking at the many re-semantization processes it has gone through, the complex multi-layered geography within which it is located, and its reiteration in time through countless subsequent mobilisations. Following Occupy along these three dimensions visibly illustrates the disjunction between two interacting process: the social movement/s and contentious branding. The floating and memetic signifier 'Occupy' has merged with a variety of signifieds: issues, places, people, ideologies. In other words, Occupy has branded diverse mobilisations, providing a standardised repertoire of action and of identification.

The second section presents the distinctive features of the movement/s: the 'memetic' origin of the project; the prefigurative role of the occupations; the strong reliance on digital media; the heterogeneity and ambivalence of the 99% of the population; and the ambiguous and shifting goals

of the movement/s. Altogether, these elements suggest a need to reconsider the distinction between the means and the meanings of this phenomenon: Occupy was developed as a container of contentious action and identification before it was filled with content of various kinds.

This chapter aims to contribute to the debate on contemporary social movements by suggesting the relevance of the dimension of branding to understanding the peculiarities of the ‘Occupy entity’ as a whole, as well as for tackling the challenges related to the analytical delimitation of the boundaries of the movement/s. The conclusion contends that Occupy manifests a rearticulation of the relationship between the means and the meanings of protest. Local mobilizations from all over the world have seized the opportunity to harness flows of solidarity and visibility, replicating the same protest tactic directly denoted by the label ‘Occupy’, purposefully developed as an open container for yet-to-be-specified grievances.

### *3.1.2 - The Occupy movement/s and the Occupy brand*

The origins of Occupy are more complex than the literature has so far often assumed (Gerbaudo 2012). The literature has commonly linked Occupy to a campaign promoted by the anti-consumerist magazine AdBuster. More accurately, however, this node successfully *branded* a latent or ongoing mobilization, critically contributing to its integration and escalation (Yardley 2011). The protest has been explicitly influenced by the Arab Springs uprisings (Kerton 2012), taking up the repertoire of occupying the public space for a sustained period and extensively exploiting social media communication channels. The occupations do not only act as means to ensure certain demands are met, but also as an end in themselves (Dekker and Duyvendak 2013), meant to explore a ‘urban communitarian’ way of life, based on principles of horizontality and radical democracy. Occupy thus falls under the category of prefigurative movements (Smucker 2013), the class of mobilizations that directly practice the change they seek. These aspirations, though, are to a certain extent violated by the existence of ‘choreographers’ (Gerbaudo 2012), which *de facto* take up the initiative to lead the broader public of supporters in the rituals of the movement/s.

Occupy is often mentioned as a paradigmatic example of a ‘digitally-mediated’ social movement, due to the importance of digital technology in its ‘media culture’ (Costanza-Chock 2012). New technologies have often been praised for their empowering and/or democratizing effect on protest networks (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Castells 2012), though they also introduce a concentration of power in the hands of those controlling the information flows of the movement/s (Kavada 2015). Moreover, in order not to overstate the role of technological mediation, it is necessary to stress that,

in the material form of the organization and identitary processes of Occupy, the ‘tweets and the streets’ are mutually constitutive dimensions (Gerbaudo 2012; Juris 2012).

The most representative slogan of the mobilization is ‘we are the 99%’. This represents a loosely-defined project of identity, whose catchall character allows for it to work as a floating signifier instantiating a number of cleavages (Gerbaudo 2012), as well as an individual action frame, connecting together heterogeneous personal motivations to struggle against the status quo (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Some scholars have argued that the contradiction between the different ideological perspectives of the participants in part explains the failure to turn the ‘moment’ into a sustainable movement (Gitlin 2013).

The 99% slogan also points to the core issue around which the movement/s originated: the fight against the privileges accorded by politics to economic elites, who were responsible for the financial crisis of 2008. Whereas some contributions understand Occupy as an anti-capitalist movement (Fuchs 2014) or emphasize its participatory democracy ambitions (Hardt and Negri 2011), the range of grievances and issues involved continued to expand with the evolution of the mobilization (Calhoun 2013). Having started as a mobilization to ensure the ‘one demand’ of ending ‘corporatocracy’ was met, Occupy began to address a number of grievances, which it is difficult to crystalize into a definite set of demands. Never able to speak with a single, coherent voice, the movement/s progressively admitted and reclaimed the need to reject the principle of having definite goals (Pickerill and Krinsky 2012).

Overall, the arguments that are to be presented in this chapter contribute to the epistemological claim that the relation between the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ in Occupy is a rather counterintuitive one (Tufekci 2013). ‘To occupy’ is a verb that tactically suggests a specific framing and that is capable of merging easily with a number of direct objects (Pickerill and Krinsky 2012). Starting with Wall Street, a countless number of other institutions, locations, events, issues and items became the suffix of this meta-hashtag.

This was accompanied by an unprecedented process of social movement diffusion that has affected hundreds of cities all over the world. While part of the literature has dealt with Occupy as a whole, sometimes conceiving of it as a US national movement (e.g. Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Gitlin 2013), and other times as a transnational or global movement (e.g. Calhoun 2013; Juris 2012), some scholars have put their focus on international occupations (e.g. Fuchs 2014; Uitermark and Nicholls 2012). To shed more light on the geographic dimension of this case is thus important, in order to grasp the appropriate scale of the movement/s.

Occupy is a challenging case for social movement theory, for a number of reasons (Pickerill and Krinsky 2012). Well-established notions like network do not completely cover its distinctive character (Halvorsen 2012). Indeed, Occupy indicates a transition from the centrality of organizational networking to a quite different logic of aggregation (Juris 2012), which marks the rise of a crowd-based movement (Bennett, Segerberg and Walker 2014) where bystander publics acquire a crucial role (Han and Strolovitch 2015). The boundaries between the inside and the outside of the movement are explicitly underdetermined, meeting its aspiration to be open and inclusive (Kavada 2015).

Each of the following section aims to answer one specific research question:

- *what are the objects to which the signifier Occupy relates?*
- *what is the relation between the ‘means’ and the ‘meanings’ of the Occupy brand?*

The first section focuses on the semantic, spatial and temporal dimension of the many re-instantiations of the signifier Occupy, highlighting its transition to being a ‘universal marker of protest’. The second section starts with the origins of Occupy Wall Street and shows that Occupy was conceived from the beginning as a contentious brand, a strategic container for yet-to-come mobilizations.

### *3.1.3 Follow #Occupy*

Tracing the boundaries of a social movement is always an analytical act (Melucci 1996, 21); however, Occupy’s boundaries present a distinctive ambivalence: on the one hand, they are more and more ambiguous (Kavada 2015); on the other hand, they are more and more inscribed in a digital form. A branding perspective on digital media, in this case, helps in delimitating an object of analysis the boundaries of which would otherwise remain largely ambiguous. Moreover, it emphasizes the (apparent) paradox of greater semantic diversity and greater syntactic convergence within the ‘Occupy’ phenomenon. To account for this paradox is key to the present work and could be easily overlooked by a perspective that focuses on isolating a deeper core.

Inspired by actor-network theory (Latour 2005) and digital methods (Rogers 2013), the methodological rationale of the analysis is to ‘follow the hashtag’, letting the empirical association unfolding in the data draw the boundaries of the object of investigation. This chapter reconstructs the trajectory of the ‘Occupy’ brand, tracing its evolution from a specific protest hashtag, developed to launch the Occupy Wall Street campaign in September 2011 in New York, to a general ‘marker of protest’, adopted by a variety of local networks to attract solidarity around their specific concerns. In order to do this, documented episodes, secondary sources and original data collected on social media

are presented. Focusing on Occupy as a contentious brand makes it possible to capture the wider assemblage built around this signifier, whereas trying to negotiate the boundaries of ‘the Occupy movement’ would lead to linguistic and conceptual ambiguity.

The analysis is mainly built on different corpora of Twitter data, collected via the publically available Twitter Streaming APIs: a dataset of 879,994 tweets containing the keyword ‘#occupy’, from 7 to 20 October 2011; a dataset of 708,176 tweets containing the keyword ‘#occupywallstreet’, from 1 to 30 September 2011; and a dataset of 147,671 tweets containing a list of Occupy-related hashtags, from 13 February 2013 to 12 March 2013. Geographic information has been retrieved from users’ self-reported location fields, instead of referring to the georeferenced meta-data.<sup>47</sup> It must be stressed that the dataset represents neither a full or representative coverage of the population of Occupy-related tweets, nor an unbiased perspective on Occupy as a whole. However, given the exploratory and interpretative scope of the analysis, these limitations do not represent substantial methodological concerns. Next to Twitter data, Facebook’s Graph API has been exploited to retrieve a list of 500 Facebook pages related to the keyword Occupy, and Google Data API provided information on the Interest Index of Google queries on the same keyword. Secondary sources, such as online news articles and blog posts, have assisted the exploration. The open repository of data maintained by Occupy Research (<http://www.occupyresearch.net>) has also provided useful survey data, related to the Occupy Research General Demographic and Political Participation Survey (ORGS).<sup>48</sup> Data have been analyzed from a network and text analysis perspective. Besides this computational strategy, a representative sample of 3,000 tweets was selected, explored and classified to get deeper, qualitative insights on the phenomenon.

A note on terminology is necessary here. Except for cases where grammar constraints would make it unfeasible, the hybrid expression ‘Occupy movement/s’ will be preferred to either the singular or plural form, to mark the considerable ambiguity associated with the ontological multiplicity of this entity. This expression, though, will be reserved to the network of protest events and groups engaged with the occupation of physical space and digital space, in the name of the 99%, for themes more or less related to the issue of economic injustice, while the expression ‘Occupy brand’ points at its further semantic stretching.

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<sup>47</sup> This operative choice leads to less granular and less reliable results (location fields are entirely self-defined), but far greater coverage of the sample than a geolocation-based approach. It resulted in 70.7% coverage at the national level (23,369 users) and 53.6% coverage at the city level (17,711 users). Entries have been manually checked, as well as filtering out unreliable entries, resolving ambiguities and ensuring the coverage of the most central users.

<sup>48</sup> To explore the dataset, see <http://occupyresearch.net/orgs/>. For a presentation of the results, see <http://occupyresearch.net/2012/03/23/preliminary-findings-occupy-research-demographic-and-political-participation-survey/>.

### 3.2 - The brand beyond the movement/s

This section presents a phenomenological assessment of the associations of the Occupy brand, following three dimensions: semantic (Occupy what?), spatial (Occupy where?) and temporal (Occupy when?). First, it reconstructs the overall variations of the #Occupy meta-hashtag, showing that a marker related to a specific target and event undergoes countless processes of re-semanticization, following a number of dimensions. Then, it looks in-depth at the spatial properties of the movement/s, proposing various analyses of the complex geography behind and between the digital and the physical presence of Occupy. Finally, the section enlarges the temporal span in order to show the persistence of the contentious brand beyond the momentum of the specific movement, presenting some of the initiatives that have reiterated a reference to Occupy in recent years. The overall aim is to provide empirical evidence for the need to conceive of an abstract entity, ‘contentious brands’, that are analytically autonomous from what is commonly referred to as ‘social movements’.

#### 3.2.1 - *Occupy whatever*

The appeal from which the Occupy epidemics began called for people to converge in lower Manhattan and directly confront the most vivid representation of financial markets: the New York Stock Exchange. The proposal to occupy Wall Street, though, quickly evolved into the concrete occupation of a number of parks and squares all over the world, as well as into a metaphorical way of expressing the concerns of a movement in regard to any target, or in regard to any issue.

The following visualization (Figure 1) presents the overall array of the most successful #Occupy[Something] hashtags, showing up in tweets that include the ‘occupy’ keyword, in the very first weeks of the epidemic, between 7 and 20 October 2011.



Fig. 1 – Most recurrent mutations of the #Occupy hashtag; 7–20 October 2011. This word-cloud shows the top-50 memetic variations of the #Occupy meta-hashtag, testifying to how, in a few weeks, hundreds of local contexts engaged with the Occupy brand. Labels are scaled according to occurrence in the dataset (logarithmic scale).

Within this dataset, the array of mutations of the #Occupy hashtag includes 8,356 items, with 122 of them exceeding the substantial survival rate of more than 500 occurrences. This variegated family of hashtags encompasses a number of geographical variations, across both cities in the United States (e.g. #OccupyBoston, #OccupyLA, #OccupySeattle) and abroad (e.g. #OccupyVancouver, #OccupyLSX,<sup>49</sup> #OccupyMelbourne), as well as more general hashtags that aim to generalize the protest (e.g. #OccupyTogether, #OccupyEverywhere, #OccupyEverything). The first group of hashtags represents corresponding local initiatives, which in most cases consist of enduring physical occupations of squares or parks by a dozen people, or sometimes several hundred people.

The memetic reproduction and variation of the hashtag continued in the following weeks, months and years. The ‘Occupy-’ prefix quickly turned into a general ‘marker’ of protest, to address targets, locations, issues and aspirations of all sort, as the word-cloud in Figure 2 testifies.

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<sup>49</sup> Abbreviation of #OccupyLondonStockExchange.



Fig. 2 - Most recurrent variations of the #Occupy meta-hashtag; 13 February–12 March, 2013. This word cloud shows the most popular variations of the #Occupy meta-hashtag, demonstrating that, a few years later, the Occupy brand was still in vogue and was being applied to heterogeneous items. Labels are scaled according to occurrence in the dataset (logarithmic scale).

A quick inspection of this visualization shows that the memetic reproduction of the hashtag does not only involve a process of re-localization, as many descendants express a broader, more abstract process of re-semanticization. Indeed, the Occupy brand was not only used in occupations of parks, squares or buildings, it was also used by groups and projects representing various kinds of aspirations. Along with the diversification of the targets and goals of the Occupy movement/s, a myriad of directly descending working groups and more indirectly related offshoots took up the Occupy prefix and merged it with the item of concern (e.g. Occupy Congress, targeting the political center of the United States; Occupy the Fed, revolving around the grievances against the central banking system; Occupy the Banks, exploring forms of alternative banking; Occupy Your Homes, demonstrating and reacting against home foreclosures; Occupy the Pipeline, involved with the theme of fossil pollution; Occupy Drone Warfare, protesting against US drone strikes in the Middle East; Occupy Monsanto, fighting against GMOs or Occupy Walmart, denouncing working conditions in the retail corporation). Following a closer inspection of the list of #Occupy hashtag mutations, the classification presented in Table 1 proposes a heuristic description and exemplification of the many dimensions of re-semanticization followed by the floating signifier ‘Occupy’.



Type	Description	Examples
<b>local</b>	The most common pattern of variation ‘Occupy+city/region/institution’, which refers to localized occupations or projects	#OccupyLA, #OccupyHongKong, #OccupyItaly
<b>global</b>	Denotes the intent to extend the struggle all over the world, against various targets, and to unite the different branches under one brand	#OccupyEverywhere, #OccupyEverything, #OccupyTogether,
<b>target</b>	Directly draws from the original form in expressing specific economic or political institutions as the target of an occupation	#OccupyWallStreet, #OccupyTheFED, #OccupyBankOfAmerica
<b>event</b>	Used to focus the action of specific occasions, especially in order to boost participation after the loss of momentum of the wave	#OccupySuperBowl, #OccupyMayDay, #OccupyChicagoNATO
<b>issue</b>	Expresses campaigns related to narrower areas of concern, including a vast array of issues, especially in the post-eviction phase	#OccupyStudentDebts, #OccupyDroneWarefare, #OccupyHomes
<b>pragmatic</b>	Used to accomplish a variety of concrete tactical and organizational purposes, to spread advice and to coordinate action	#OccupyMedia, #OccupyArrests, #OccupyAdvice
<b>identity</b>	To encourage or vindicate the participation of certain categories that were under-represented or under-recognized at the beginning	#OccupyWomen, #OccupyTheHood, #OccupyJudaism
<b>reflexive</b>	Relates to various projects of self-narration, self-inquiry or self-expression related to the movement	#OccupyResearch, #OccupyLove, #OccupyYourMinds
<b>parody</b>	Hijacks the Occupy brand to mock it, for merely ironic reasons or to strategically exploit its visibility	#OccupyAJob, #OccupySesameStreet, #OccupyTheGym

Tab. 1 - Dimensions of re-semantization of the #Occupy meta-hashtag. The table proposes a heuristic classifications of the many variations of the #Occupy meta-hashtag.

From a purely linguistic point of view, this re-semantization process is reflected in the combination of the verb ‘to occupy’ and literally any kind of direct object – occupy what? – that comes to mind. The array of direct objects is not restricted to enemy institutions, geographical locations or issues of concern, but includes more expressive or pragmatic items. Overall, this distinctive process signals the

rise of a ‘universal marker of protest’, a signifier that is open to being adopted by more or less (un)related contentious networks to express a concern of any kind.

### 3.2.2 - *Occupy wherever*

In the few days between the end of September and the beginning of October 2011, digital and physical spin-offs of the original Occupy Wall Street protest popped up in many other cities in the United States and in other countries, emulating the repertoires of the original protest and labeling themselves as local instances of the Occupy movement.

The widespread claim is that the mobilization gained such global momentum that it reached 951 cities in 82 countries, as reported by several tweets, such as the following, frequently retweeted, one:

#OccupyWallStreet Inspires Worldwide Protests in 951 cities and 82 countries <http://t.co/320hTIMH>  
(tweet id: 125340509483958272, created at: Sat Oct 15 22:41:20 +0000 2011)

A dataset compiled by the OccupyResearch network<sup>50</sup> counts 1,355 distinct initiatives associating themselves with the Occupy movement, distributed across 856 cities in 86 nations. It is interesting to note that the large majority of these spillovers relate to a specific city, embracing the local modularity suggested by the Occupy meme; indeed, only 13 of them present no specific location but instead address the whole world. References to the global reach of the phenomenon, though, are extremely recurrent, with 72,128 tweets mentioning the words ‘world’, ‘earth’, ‘planet’, ‘globe’, ‘everywhere’ in the early-stage dataset (7–20 October 2011).

The diffusion of the Occupy network took place at the intersection between the physical and the digital, spurring a number of concrete occupations and social media initiatives, more or less corresponding with each other. In order to show the ‘real-world’ extent of the contagion and to get an idea of the ‘scale’ of the phenomenon, Table 2 presents the distribution of Occupy initiatives that lasted more than one day in 2011, aggregated by country.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> OccupyResearch is “an open, shared space for distributed research focused around the Occupy Movement”, according to their website (<http://www.occupyresearch.net>). Being driven not only by merely research interests, but also by the aim of contributing to self-reflexive evolution of the movement, the initiative represents in itself an interesting case of ‘memetic reproduction’ of Occupy.

<sup>51</sup> The data come from a wiki-page hosted by the online version of the *Guardian*. All the entries come with links to newspaper articles mentioning the protest.

<b>United States</b>	367	<b>Ireland</b>	5	<b>Serbia</b>	2	<b>Norway</b>	1
<b>Canada</b>	55	<b>Sweden</b>	5	<b>Antarctica</b>	1	<b>Pakistan</b>	1
<b>UK</b>	24	<b>Brazil</b>	4	<b>Bangladesh</b>	1	<b>Poland</b>	1
<b>Netherlands</b>	11	<b>Israel</b>	3	<b>Belgium</b>	1	<b>Portugal</b>	1
<b>New Zealand</b>	10	<b>Mexico</b>	3	<b>Brazil</b>	1	<b>Slovakia</b>	1
<b>Australia</b>	8	<b>Puerto Rico</b>	3	<b>Colombia</b>	1	<b>Taiwan</b>	1
<b>Germany</b>	8	<b>Slovenia</b>	3	<b>Cyprus</b>	1	<b>Tunisia</b>	1
<b>Spain</b>	8	<b>Switzerland</b>	3	<b>Iran</b>	1	<b>Turkey</b>	1
<b>France</b>	6	<b>Denmark</b>	2	<b>Italy</b>	1	<b>Uruguay</b>	1
<b>South Africa</b>	6	<b>Finland</b>	2	<b>Japan</b>	1	<b>Total</b>	558

Tab. 2 - Occupy initiatives lasting more than one day. This table counts the number of enduring Occupy-related protest events per country. Despite the large prevalence of the United States, the global diffusion of the phenomenon is evident.

(Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/oct/17/occupy-protests-world-list-map>)

Looking at the distribution of enduring occupations per country, it is undeniable that, despite the fact that the large majority of mobilizations are based in the United States, Occupy also encompasses an important share of instances from a vast array of other countries; these non-United States occupations number 191, which corresponds to more than one-third of the total.

Looking at Table 2, it may appear strange to find Antarctica presented in the list; indeed, this represents a peculiar case that is worth zooming in on, since it highlights the pervasive potential of the Occupy brand, as well as the remediation of protest diffusion it entails.

The idea of an Occupy movement in Antarctica most likely started as a self-ironic proposition, following enthusiasm for the global escalation of the mobilization.

#OccupyTogether Meetups now in 1,112 cities on 6 continents. We have 2get Antarctica on board!  
<http://t.co/niuwcen0> #occupywallstreet #ows

(tweet id: 123147458099417088, created at: Sun Oct 09 21:26:56 +0000 2011)

#Occupy Antarctica! Who's with me??

(tweet id: 123278681232773121, created at: Mon Oct 10 06:08:22 +0000 2011)

This 'appeal' was, though, reinforced by the awareness that the protest had spread to all of the properly inhabited continents, and that Antarctica was the only continent missing in order to complete the worldwide diffusion.

ABC reports the #Occupy movement now in every continent but Antarctica! #OccupyWallStreet Protestors Settle In... <http://t.co/x1UgHn3b> #ows

(tweet id: 123379881429049344, created at: Mon Oct 10 12:50:30 +0000 2011)

Occupy Wall Street Protest Now On Every Continent Except Antarctica! <http://t.co/O4rga8HA>

(tweet id: 123440569786703873, created at: Mon Oct 10 16:51:39 +0000 2011)

#OccupyAntarctica needed! #OccupyWallStreet #protest #revolution #OccupyEVERYWHERE #ows <http://t.co/NjL5Qbna>

(tweet id: 123577873750695938, created at: Tue Oct 11 01:57:15 +0000 2011)

As a response, a user hooked up to this thread with evident mocking tones.

"#Occupy Wall St Mvmnt spread to 1000 countries and all continents except Antarctica" -Diane Sawyer... Why are Antarcticans such loafers??"

(tweet id: 123784329942929408, created at: Tue Oct 11 15:37:38 +0000 2011)

DATELINE Antartica- Reporting in At Occupy Antarctica so far its 6 penquins and your humble correspondant back to you Tawny #OWS

(tweet id: 124695412681605121, created at: Fri Oct 14 03:57:57 +0000 2011)

Besides an army of Emperor Penguins, who will stand behind my Occupy Antarctica movement? #OccupyAntarctica

(tweet id: 124990145794539520, created at: Fri Oct 14 23:29:07 +0000 2011)

A supporter connected to Occupy Nashville and Occupy San Anton, though, came up with a serious consideration: researchers based in the South Pole are interested in the themes of the protest too; thus, they should join in, with their own occupation.

@OccupyNashville @OccupySanAnton The scientists down there r part of the 99%. They should #OccupyAntarctica #ows #WeAre99

(tweet id: 124344179034828800, created at: Thu Oct 13 04:42:17 +0000 2011)

Finally, a cheerful tweet announced that what started as a joke, and could still be mistaken as an internet hoax, had indeed happened.

Occupy (No, we are NOT kidding) ANTARCTICA! <http://t.co/8r7DmEaX> #OWS #OccupyAMERICA #OccupyWallStreet #revolution #OccupyEVERYWHERE

(tweet id: 125638932477116416, created at: Sun Oct 16 18:27:10 +0000 2011)

The tweet linked to the following picture (Figure 3), depicting some Antarctica-based researchers manifesting their solidarity with Occupy Wall Street.



Fig. 3 - Antarctica-based researchers ‘joining’ the Occupy movement. The proliferation of Occupy on literally every continent of the world is indicative of the communicative potential of digital technology and of the great appeal of the Occupy brand.  
(Source: <http://imgur.com/r/pics/t10qf>)

Days later, a @OccupyMcMurdo Twitter account was created, related to the McMurdo research station located in the South Pole, in order to “support #OccupyWallStreet” and “organize to defeat corporate greed”, according to its profile description.<sup>52</sup>

This focus on the fringe case of Occupy Antarctica intends to highlight some important points that are characteristic of the class of digitally-mediated mobilizations and of contentious branding. First, this case is emblematic of the unprecedented potential for pervasiveness related to social movement diffusion processes; in a few days, a protest spread to hundreds of locations in *literally* all the continents of the world. Second, it clearly shows that the process of diffusion of Occupy did not necessarily have to rely either on pre-existent, or on newly established, social ties: the mobilization scaled up mainly through growing global visibility of its brand within the social media environment.

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<sup>52</sup> Source: <https://twitter.com/occupymcmurdo>.

It is important to keep the capillarity of this process of diffusion in mind when evaluating the scale of this phenomenon and characterizing its process of diffusion. In a few days, hundreds of local networks from at least 39 different countries, without acknowledged organizational ties, converged on a shared repertoire of action and communication, labeling themselves as, alternatively, local initiatives raised in solidarity with Occupy Wall Street or part of the global Occupy movement. Moreover, it is necessary to not take for granted the relation between a hashtag in the #Occupy[city] form and a concrete occupation related to that city. Thus, it is quite natural to ask to what extent the communication flows captured by a local hashtag are embedded in the location specified by the hashtag itself.

The following table (Table 3) presents the degree of local embeddedness, which is associated with the adoption of a set of the most recurrent hashtags referring to a specific location. The geographic provenance of a tweet is inferred by a user's location field in their Twitter profile. Data are computed by both including and excluding retweets, so as to distinguish between the effects of the production of original content and the mere circulation of other users messages. The hashtags are sorted by their overall occurrence in the dataset.

#OCCUPYWALLSTREET	20,2	50,8	#OCCUPYAMSTERDAM	30,5	55,7	#OCCUPYTUCSON	52,9	49,4
#OCCUPYBOSTON	20,6	19,7	#OCCUPYOAKLAND	20,2	32,6	#OCCUPYSTL	41,7	68,8
#OCCUPYLSX	31,9	40,8	#OCCUPYSYDNEY	53,8	74,4	#OCCUPYRALEIGH	42,7	53,8
#OCCUPYSF	43,5	38,4	#OCCUPYAUSTIN	46,5	61,9	#OCCUPYBUFFALO	35,0	70,4
#OCCUPYLA	45,6	48,9	#OCCUPYMELBOURNE	39,4	49,1	#OCCUPYMIAMI	40,6	70,3
#OCCUPYSEATTLE	40,5	50,8	#OCCUPYHOUSTON	52,5	49,5	#OCCUPYNOLA	54,9	80,6
#OCCUPYDC	25,6	36,7	#OCCUPYMADISON	41,0	52,2	#OCCUPYPITTSBURGH	47,8	63,1
#OCCUPYDENVER	30,5	52,2	#OCCUPYORLANDO	59,4	43,4	#OCCUPYINDY	51,5	61,1
#OCCUPYCHICAGO	52,5	56,7	#OCCUPYDETROIT	48,9	80,1	#OCCUPYBALTIMORE	45,0	24,7
#OCCUPYPORTLAND	61,2	74,5	#OCCUPYCINCY	33,9	61,6	#OCCUPYYEG	74,0	87,6
#OCCUPYTORONTO	61,4	34,1	#OCCUPYLASVEGAS	63,0	54,4	#OCCUPYDSM	25,3	83,0
#OCCUPYDALLAS	31,5	50,5	#OCCUPYTOKYO	53,5	67,8	#OCCUPYKC	54,6	72,7
#OCCUPYATLANTA	40,0	45,1	#OCCUPYDENHAAG	27,0	36,6	#OCCUPYNS	71,9	91,9
#OCCUPYVANCOUVER	60,9	75,4	#OCCUPYFRANKFURT	19,5	22,9	#OCCUPYMILWAUKEE	33,1	43,4
#OCCUPYSD	45,7	70,4	#OCCUPYSACRAMENTO	27,1	71,0	#OCCUPYBURQUE	52,6	49,5
#OCCUPYPHILLY	47,3	53,3	#OCCUPYOTTAWA	56,7	69,0	#OCCUPYSLC	64,3	77,6
#OCCUPYPHOENIX	46,7	42,1	#OCCUPYMONTREAL	66,8	75,6	#OCCUPYCALGARY	62,1	78,6
#OCCUPYBERLIN	41,0	71,7	#OCCUPYCLEVELAND	30,7	43,3	#OCCUPYVICTORIA	67,7	79,8
#OCCUPYMN	38,9	58,1	#OCCUPYTAMPA	27,5	61,4	#OCCUPYLOUISVILLE	78,4	82,9
#OCCUPYDAMESTREET	49,6	44,1	#OCCUPYCLT	68,2	83,0	<b>AVERAGE</b>	45,7	58,5

Tab. 3 – Local embeddedness of geographic #Occupy-related hashtags, with / without retweets, 7–20 October 2011. The table shows the share of users tweeting from the location referenced by a hashtag. This percentage is quite variable and the average shows that more or less half of the local hashtags adopted are not consistent with the user's location.

The degree of geographic embeddedness of the hashtags is quite variable across local instances, ranging between 19.5% and 78.4% when including retweets, and between 19.7% and 87.6% when excluding retweets. Thus, for some hashtags the large majority of adopters are effectively based in the city to which the hashtag refers, while for other occupations the tweet flow is mainly due to external supporters. On average, 45.7% of users do not report as their location the city referred to in a hashtag they have adopted, but this percentage increases to 58.5% when only original content is considered.

Thus, some local hashtags seem to behave as communicative spaces for mainly local activism (and this is particularly true for smaller occupations), while others (especially the most successful) largely allow for the convergence of global communication flows. Moreover, the emission of original tweets associated with a local hashtag is effectively mainly local; though, when considering the overall flow of communication, including the practice of retweeting content produced by others, hashtag adoption is much more delocalized.

Thus, what these data suggest is the existence of shifting, intersecting layers of spatiality associated with the communication flows of Occupy: certain digital instances are largely embedded in their specific geographic space, while others go much more global; the relation between real-world occupations and their digital presence is more biunique when original content is concerned, while it becomes more disjointed when it comes to reinforcing the voice of other occupations. These intersecting layers of spatiality suggest the existence of analytically distinct dimensions: that of local movements and that of global branding

The following visualization (Figure 4) can help to shed a light on the reasons for this complex relation between users' provenance and the locality referenced by hashtags. In this network, a link between two local hashtags is drawn whenever they co-occur in the text of the same tweet.





Fig. 4 - Main Occupy[city] hashtags co-occurrence network; 7–20 October 2011. This co-hashtag network shows the most important local hashtags as nodes, linked whenever they co-occur in the same tweet. Label size is scaled according to the hashtag’s frequency (log scale) and the links’ thickness is proportional to co-occurrence frequency. Since the network is rather dense, different local hashtags are often included in the same tweet.

As is immediately evident from the density of the graph (=0,495), co-occurrence of different local hashtags in the same tweet is widespread. Sometimes this entails neighbouring occupations, signaling the existence of a latent ‘regional’ clustering of the mobilizations, at other times tweets contain hashtags referring to basically unrelated locations, indicating attempts to bridge communication flows on a global scale, as shown by these examples:

Anti-Wall St. protesters arrested in California | CBS <http://t.co/er30yx84> #OccupySF #OWS #OccupyLA #OccupySacramento #OccupyOakland

(tweet id: 122406928512065537; created at: Fri Oct 07 20:24:20 +0000 2011)

#Occupybeijing #occupy #occupymoscow #occupyOccupybeijing #occupyashington #occupytokyo #occupyberlin #occupylondon #occupyparis

(tweet id: 122652446928535552 , created at: Sat Oct 08 12:39:56 +0000 2011)

The communication flows of the various Occupy local instances are extensively bridged due to the practice of including multiple local hashtags within the text of tweets. This evidence further shows the meaningful attempts to project local, disconnected movements on a global, integrated scale, by intertwining communication flows with the alignment of branding strategies.



Another point of view on the geographical properties of Occupy, though, is that related to the interactions between users based in a specific location. For this purpose, the graphs below (Figure 5) show the variation across time of the proportion of retweet interactions, linking users belonging to different cities – on the left – and to different countries – on the right.

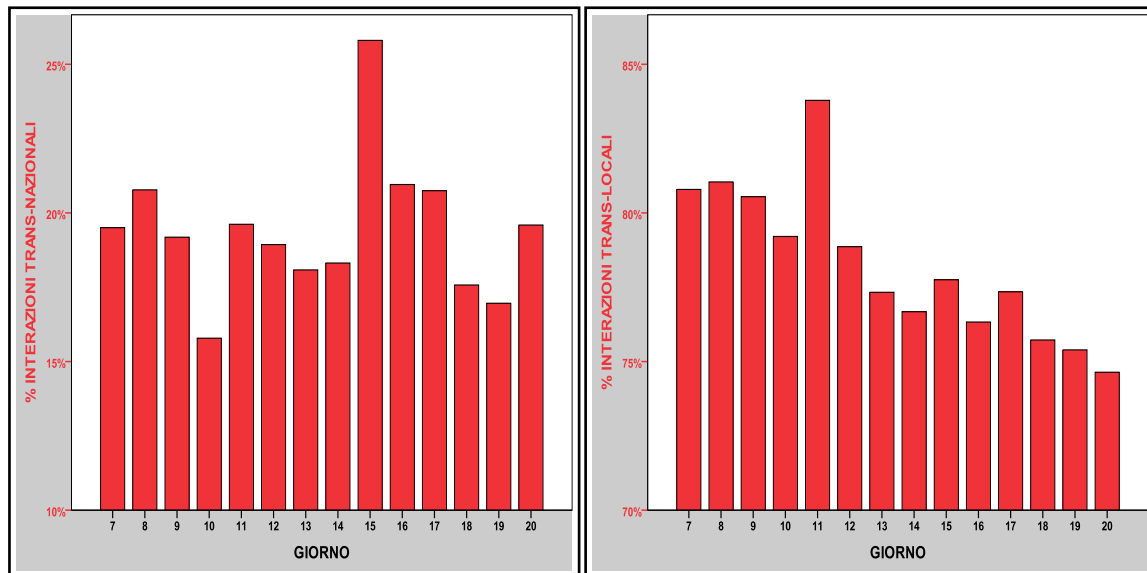


Fig. 5 - Percentage of trans-local and transnational retweet interactions per day; 7–20 October 2011. Users considered are restricted to those who emitted four or more tweets. The graphs display the proportion of retweets occurring between users located in different countries and different cities. 15 October is a peak day for transnational communication, while 11 October is a peak day for trans-local communication.

The data indicate that the geographical structure of the interaction between users is quite unstable: the share of cross-country links oscillates between 15.6% and 26.1%, while the proportion of cross-city ties ranges from 74.7% up to 83.8%. More interestingly, this rearrangement of the local embeddedness of interaction follows the evolution of real-world events. The peak in transnational retweets is observed on 15 October, the ‘United for #GlobalChange’ day, launched by the Spanish Indignados movement and extensively rebranded as the ‘Global Occupy’ day of action; during this day, interaction patterns reflect a widespread awareness of global unity. The highest share of trans-local retweets occurs on 11 October, the most tense day in the date range considered, when Occupy Boston faced a harsh attempted eviction by the police; this signals the convergence of solidarity flows from dispersed occupations to a localized episode. Local and global episodes, thus, have an effect on the geographic structure of the interaction network, something that further characterizes the ‘scale of the movement’ as structurally complex and ever shifting.

In order to give an insight into the global reach of Occupy's information flows on Twitter, Figure 6 presents the network of retweets between users on one very important day: 15 October, when Occupy-branded marches took place in hundreds of cities all around the world.



Fig. 6 - Geospatial retweet network for #OCCUPY tweets; 15 October 2011. Users considered are restricted to those who emitted four or more tweets. This network visualization corresponds to the flows of retweets across localities on Occupy's 'Global day' of action. Nodes are aggregated geographical areas (size proportional to number of retweets) and links are retweets (thickness proportional to weight). Although Occupy is largely a Western and Northern phenomena, the transnational level of this synchronized mobilization is stunning.

It must be acknowledged that the most visually apparent fact is the concentration of the phenomenon in the Western / Northern area of the world. Nonetheless, the geographical reach of this single protest event is stunning: with its communication flows Occupy flooded a great part of North American and European countries – though with a preference for Anglo Saxon and Germanic countries – but also found its way to South America, Africa and Asia.

Supporters frequently tweeted their excitement about something that was almost without precedent in history: people from every continent in the world marching in their streets, in the same moment, united by a common anger and – this is the point to be stressed – a common way to express it.

Has something like this ever happened before? A world wide mass protest for a common cause or are we writing history? #ows

(tweet id: 125244828400361472, created at: Sat Oct 15 16:21:08 +0000 2011)

### 3.2.3 - *Occupy whenever*

The other dimension to follow in order to distill the Occupy brand from the Occupy movement is, quite evidently, time. Following the commencement on 17 September 2011, a countless number of initiatives, groups and projects, with a varying degree of proximity with the original Occupy Wall Street event, (re-)branded themselves by adopting a derivation of the Occupy label.

The expression ‘the Occupy movement’ usually denotes a network of mobilizations, already composite and complex, as shown, which arose in late 2011, sharing the practice of occupying squares or parks, in the name of the loose master-frame and the project of identity condensed in the ‘we are the 99%’ slogan. The unsustainability in the long term of the encampments and the failure,<sup>53</sup> or refusal, to turn the experience into a classical, more institutionalized social movement organization, led to the decline of the protest wave. By the beginning of 2012, a large part of the occupations had either been raided or evicted by the police, or spontaneously dismantled by the protesters. Nonetheless, spot occupations and events, as well as direct spin-offs of the movements, continued to pop up here and there. All around the world, a countless number of other projects, of different natures, systematically embraced, for whatever reason, the Occupy contentious brand.

In order to give an idea of this persistence, the graph in Figure 7 shows the evolution over time of the interest in the keyword ‘occupy’, expressed by queries using Google’s search engine.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> One crucial element of which was the coming winter.

<sup>54</sup> The index is a relative measure of the share of queries containing the keyword, compared to the total volume of queries using Google’s search engine. The system performs a semantic search filtering out other utilizations of the keyword ‘occupy’.

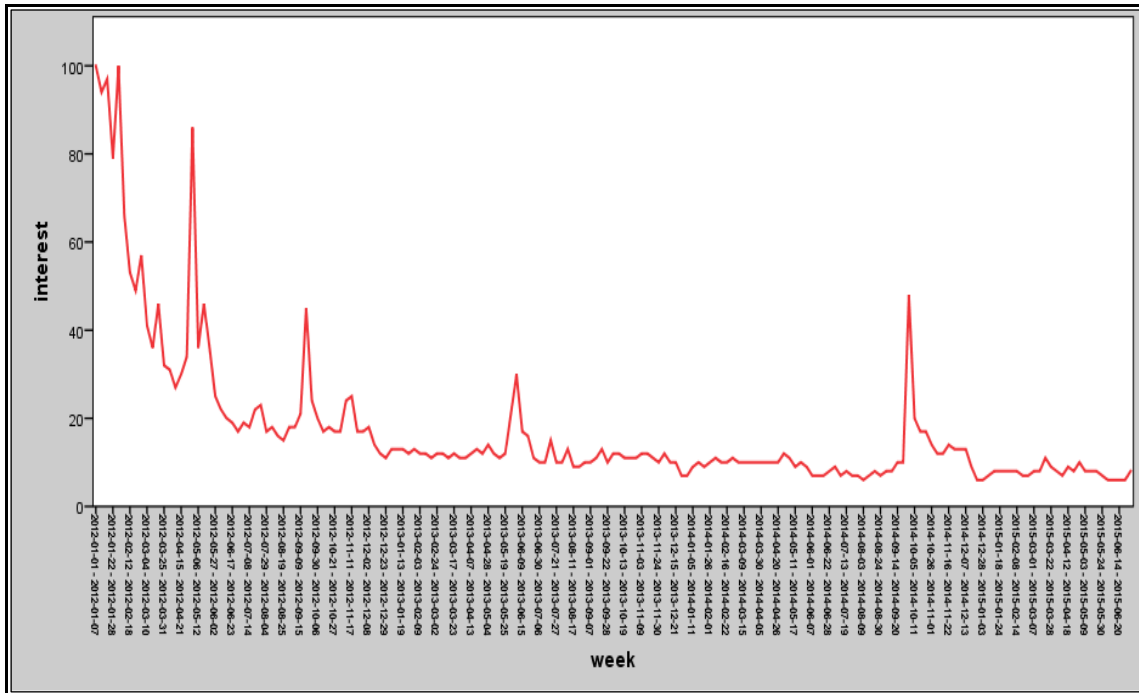


Fig. 7 - Google Trends' Interest Index for the keyword 'occupy' over time; January 2012 – June 2015. As the evolution of this index, related to the number of queries containing the word 'occupy', shows, interest around the Occupy brand persists long after Occupy Wall Street and presents peaks related to specific new mobilizations.

In the time-span of three years and a half from January 2012 – approximately the month when the Occupy movement/s definitively lost its momentum – to July 2015, a number of significant peaks in the interest in the keyword 'occupy' took place. This trend of persistent revitalization of the attention that internet users gave to the issue provides a first indication of how the brand Occupy survived the mobilization that originated it.

As this last empirical section shows, some of these reiterations have more or less clear connections with the original Occupy Wall Street event, while many of them represent more distant or even unrelated mobilizations. Table 4 presents and briefly describes a small sample of high-resonance cases among the supposedly thousands, more or less relevant and very heterogeneous initiatives that, in recent years, have reiterated the contentious brand Occupy.

### #OccupyNigeria

On 1 January 2012, the Nigerian federal government decided to remove a subsidy on petroleum products, spurring a drastic increase in the fuel price. The next day, protests took place all across the country, with thousands of people flooding the streets, shutting down petrol stations and blocking the traffic. Solidarity events took place in other countries as well. This episode signaled

the emergence of an enduring national movement, involved in protesting a wider range of local concerns, like corruption and poverty. This movement came to be known as Occupy Nigeria.

<http://eie.ng/occupynigeria>; <https://twitter.com/occupynigeria>;  
<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Occupy-Nigeria>;  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy\\_Nigeria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_Nigeria)

### **#OccupyTheFarm**

On Earth Day 2012, the annual environmentalist event on 22 April, a group of activists broke into agricultural land owned by University of California with the intention of setting up a farm. The action was meant to develop concrete practices and an awareness campaign relating to the cause of sustainable agriculture, as well as to prevent development projects in the area. The occupiers were evicted by police intervention on 14 May, and subsequent attempts to reoccupy the area failed. Since then, the Occupy the Farm movement has continued to be active in promoting community-based urban agriculture projects.

<http://occupythefarm.org>; <https://twitter.com/occupyfarm>; <https://www.facebook.com/Occupy-the-Farm>; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy\\_the\\_Farm](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_the_Farm)

### **#OccupySandy**

At the end of October 2012, the massive Hurricane Sandy hit the Atlantic coast of the United States, spreading death and destruction in many areas, especially New Jersey and New York. In the aftermath of the disaster, former Occupy Wall Street members and newly recruited volunteers set up an extended disaster-relief network. Occupy Sandy organized distribution sites, fundraising and neighborhood empowerment projects, and made a contribution to the recovery that was comparable to that of much more resourceful charity organizations.

<http://occupysandy.net>; <https://twitter.com/OccupySandy>;  
<https://www.facebook.com/OccupySandyReliefNyc>;  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy\\_Sandy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_Sandy)

### **#OccupyPD**

During the Italian presidential elections, in April 2013, the Democratic Party (PD) experienced harsh internal turbulence, due to the way the majority of the party dealt with the process of proposing a candidate. The latent tension within the party, between the ruling class and the left-wing area, exploded in a series of protests and parallel party initiatives, which labeled themselves 'OccupyPD'. The mobilization turned into the establishment of an internal lobby, pressuring the party to change its plans for an alliance with the right-wing and taking a more clearly left-wing position.

<http://www.occupypd.it>; <https://www.facebook.com/OccupyPd>; <https://twitter.com/OccupyPD>

<b>#OccupyGezi</b>
<p>On 28 May 2013 a small group of environmentalist activists camped in Gezi Park, Istanbul, in order to prevent the destruction of one of the few green public spaces in the city, which was planned in order to construct a shopping mall. The violent reaction by the police spurred a massive solidarity wave that, in a few days, turned into a generalized protest against the Erdogan government across the whole of Turkey. A number of ideologically highly heterogeneous protesters occupied with tents the adjacent Taksim Square – and other locations in the country – and demonstrated their anger, violently clashing with the police. Solidarity sit-ins and marches were held all over the world during the following weeks. The movement did not have a uniform name, but along with ‘Gezi protest’ and the ‘Taksim movement’, one of the most common references is to ‘Occupy Gezi’ or ‘Occupy Taksim’.</p>
<p><a href="http://occupygezipics.tumblr.com">http://occupygezipics.tumblr.com</a>; <a href="https://twitter.com/OccupyGezi">https://twitter.com/OccupyGezi</a>;  <a href="https://www.facebook.com/Occupy-gezi-133249730208651">https://www.facebook.com/Occupy-gezi-133249730208651</a>;  <a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gezi_Park_protests">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gezi_Park_protests</a></p>
<b>#OccupyLSE/KCL/Goldsmiths</b>
<p>On 17 March 2015 a group of students and staff occupied an administrative room of the prestigious London School of Economics (LSE), to protest against the neoliberal character of education and working conditions. The example of the LSE activists was followed by a number of actions in other institutions, such as Kings’ College and Goldsmiths College, and the protest groups all took up the ‘Occupy’ name. OccupyLSE, OccupyKCL, and OccupyGoldsmiths, among others, together set up a national movement of Free Universities, establishing direct connections with similar struggles going on in the Netherlands and Quebec.</p>
<p><a href="http://occupylse.tumblr.com">http://occupylse.tumblr.com</a>; <a href="https://twitter.com/GoldOccupation">https://twitter.com/GoldOccupation</a>;  <a href="https://www.facebook.com/OccupyKCL">https://www.facebook.com/OccupyKCL</a></p>

Tab. 4 - Description of movements taking up the Occupy brand between 2012 and 2015. The cases briefly presented testify to how the Occupy brand has been perpetuated by its adoption by rather diverse mobilizations.

As of 2015 – four years after the Occupy uprisings proper – a countless number of entities of all sorts, sometimes rather disconnected with the original protests, still exhibit a reference to the brand Occupy. The following visualization (Figure 8) shows the array of Facebook pages obtained when querying the Facebook API for pages related to the keyword ‘occupy’.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> The data have been collected by exploiting the GET method of Facebook Graph API, which retrieved some 512 pages according to a keyword contained in their screen name. This does not represent an exhaustive population, nor a representative sample.





Fig. 8 - Most popular Facebook pages related to the keyword ‘occupy’; 12 August 2015. This word-cloud presents the Facebook pages that include the keyword Occupy, as collected when querying the Facebook Search API with the keyword ‘occupy’. It demonstrates the stunning mutation of the Occupy brand and its appropriation by radically diverse initiatives.

The most consistent page is ‘Occupy Democrats’, a direct offshoot of the US nation-wide movement/s, pressuring the Democratic Party to take legislative measures in the direction of economic and social equality. Among the top pages, in terms of followers, we also find derivations in completely different directions, like ‘Occupy for Animals’, run by activists fighting for animal liberation, or ‘#OccupyTesla’, a research initiative promoting and experimenting with sustainable technologies. However, several pages located in the long tail have no reference to the field of contention, like ‘Occupy Laughter’, a top-ranked page that posts funny pictures, or ‘Occupy the Disco’, a New York-based event-organizing crew for the gay house scene.

As this section has shown, in some cases a variation of Occupy is used to simply name a direct branch of the original movement/s that is involved with a specific issue. In other cases, though, it is adopted by completely unrelated projects, like major uprisings all over the world, or sometimes even groups that make no reference to protests and movements. This evidence quite explicitly implies the existence of a specifically denoted, more abstract entity, related to attempts to intercept flows of solidarity and visibility: the Occupy contentious brand.

### **3.3 – The demand is a process**

This section presents and analyses the distinctive features of the Occupy movement/s, both in organizational and identitary terms. The expression ‘Occupy’ here refers to the protest wave that, in late 2011, originated in Zuccotti Park, New York, and spread all over the world, bringing together a number of local networks sharing the following elements: the practice of the occupation of public spaces; the intensive adoption of social media; the project of identity (‘we are the 99%’); loose claims of economic justice developing into much more heterogeneous goals. After a presentation of the origins of the Occupy epidemic, each of these elements is covered in a specific paragraph; the argument, though, specifically pertains to the need to understand their inter-relatedness and the resulting subversion of the relation between the ‘form’ and the ‘substance’ of this entity, which is explicitly sought by Occupy activists.

#### *3.3.1 - #Occupy goes viral*

The origins of the Occupy epidemic is conventionally associated with a blog post by the Canadian anti-consumerist, cultural-jamming magazine AdBusters, which on 13 July 2011 proposed to peacefully gather in front of the New York Stock Exchange and occupy the area. The opening banner displayed the allusive logo ‘#OCCUPYWALLSTREET and the significant question ‘Are you ready for a Tahrir moment?’.





Fig. 9 - Banner from Adbusters' Occupy Wall Street launching post, 13 July 2011. One of the first, among many, designs associated with Occupy Wall Street establishes a direct link with the Arab Springs protest wave and their repertoire.

(Source: <https://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/occupywallstreet.html>)

These elements already suggest interesting inferences: the hash mark preceding the logo explicitly states that social media will be the field in which the mobilization should spread; the subtitle establishes a direct link between the planned protest and the recent 'Arab Spring' uprisings.

The post highlights the call for a 'shift in revolutionary tactics': from the model of the anti-globalisation movement based on extemporary gatherings led by established organizations, to long-lasting 'crowd-sourced' occupations, taking their example from Tunisian, Egyptian and Spanish squares, as a quote from the post states:

A worldwide shift in revolutionary tactics is underway right now that bodes well for the future. The spirit of this fresh tactic, a fusion of Tahrir with the acampadas of Spain, is captured in this quote:

*"The antiglobalization movement was the first step on the road. Back then our model was to attack the system like a pack of wolves. There was an alpha male, a wolf who led the pack, and those who followed behind. Now the model has evolved. Today we are one big swarm of people."*

— Raimundo Viejo, Pompeu Fabra University

Barcelona, Spain

Fig. 10 - Citation from AdBusters' Occupy Wall Street launch post, 13 July 2011. The activist quoted describes the shift in protest tactics away from the model of the anti-globalization movement. (Source: <https://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/occupywallstreet.html>)

The goal of the call is to have at least 20,000 people set up tents, kitchens and barricades in lower Manhattan, for as long as it takes for their only demand to be met. The best candidate to cover this role would be that of keeping corporations and finance at a safe distance from the political system.

On September 17, we want to see 20,000 people flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street for a few months. Once there, we shall incessantly repeat one simple demand in a plurality of voices.

Fig. 11 - Citation from AdBusters' Occupy Wall Street launch post, 13 July 2011. The call emphasises the tactical need to converge over 'one simple demand'. (Source: <https://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/occupywallstreet.html>)

As the post declares, this demand should be 'that Barack Obama ordain a Presidential Commission tasked with ending the influence money has over our representatives in Washington'. However, the post ends encouraging readers to submit other potential 'one demands' around which to converge.

Post a comment and help each other zero in on what our one demand will be. And then let's screw up our courage, pack our tents and head to Wall Street with a vengeance September 17.

Fig. 12 - Citation from AdBusters' Occupy Wall Street launch post, 13 July 2011. The call concludes by asking readers to suggest other single 'one demand' candidates. (Source: <https://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/occupywallstreet.html>)

Whereas AdBusters is commonly credited as the originator of the Occupy Wall Street protest event, an accurate reconstruction of the months before shows how it emerged from the convergence of a number of more or less independent channels.<sup>56</sup> Several analogous proposals, coming from other independent groups, started to converge on a single modality of action and a date. The ‘US Day of Rage’, an already established coalition calling for ending ‘corporatocracy’, had been proposing similar actions since March 2011.<sup>57</sup> A campaign related to a branch of the hacktivist galaxy Anonymous, named ‘Operation Empire State Rebellion’, called to occupy parks and squares on 14 June, without much success. A socialist collective named ‘New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts’ set up a protest occupation in Manhattan, called ‘Bloombergville’.<sup>58</sup> In August, a Tumblr blog named ‘werarethe99%’ (<http://wearethe99percent.tumblr.com/>) invited people to submit pictures of themselves holding banners briefly describing their situations of hardship.

A vantage point from which to look at the diffusion of the Occupy hashtag and, consequently, of the Occupy protest is Twitter. Although a number of platforms, as well as physical gatherings, together contributed to the launch and growth of the wave, Twitter played a crucial role in both the origins and escalation of the events. The hashtag #OccupyWallStreet allegedly made its first appearance in a tweet from the AdBusters account, on the US Independence Day:

Dear Americans, this July 4th dream of insurrection against corporate rule <http://bit.ly/kejAUy>  
#occupywallstreet

(tweet id: 88013043438600192; created at: Mon Jul 04 22:35:19 +0000 2011)

A few days later, the magazine issued the above-mentioned post (Figures 9-12) and the call snowballed to its subscribers, getting beyond the control of the original promoters. Noticeably, weeks after the AdBusters blog post, a YouTube video from Anonymous announced its full endorsement.<sup>59</sup> The following network visualization (Figure 13), referring to tweets containing #OccupyWallStreet emitted between 1 and 16 September, shows the cooperation of different groups in promoting the event. Some of the clusters correspond to more or less autonomous initiatives that converged, following AdBusters’ proposal, on a date, place and label for action.

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<sup>56</sup> For an accurate reconstruction of the antecedents of the Occupy Wall Street movement, see for example Schneider (2013).

<sup>57</sup> See <https://georgiebc.wordpress.com/2011/03/10/2011-03-14-usdayofrage-is-on-facebook-usdor/>.

<sup>58</sup> See <http://bloombergvillennow.org/declaration/>.

<sup>59</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-eFxCDx7Yw>.

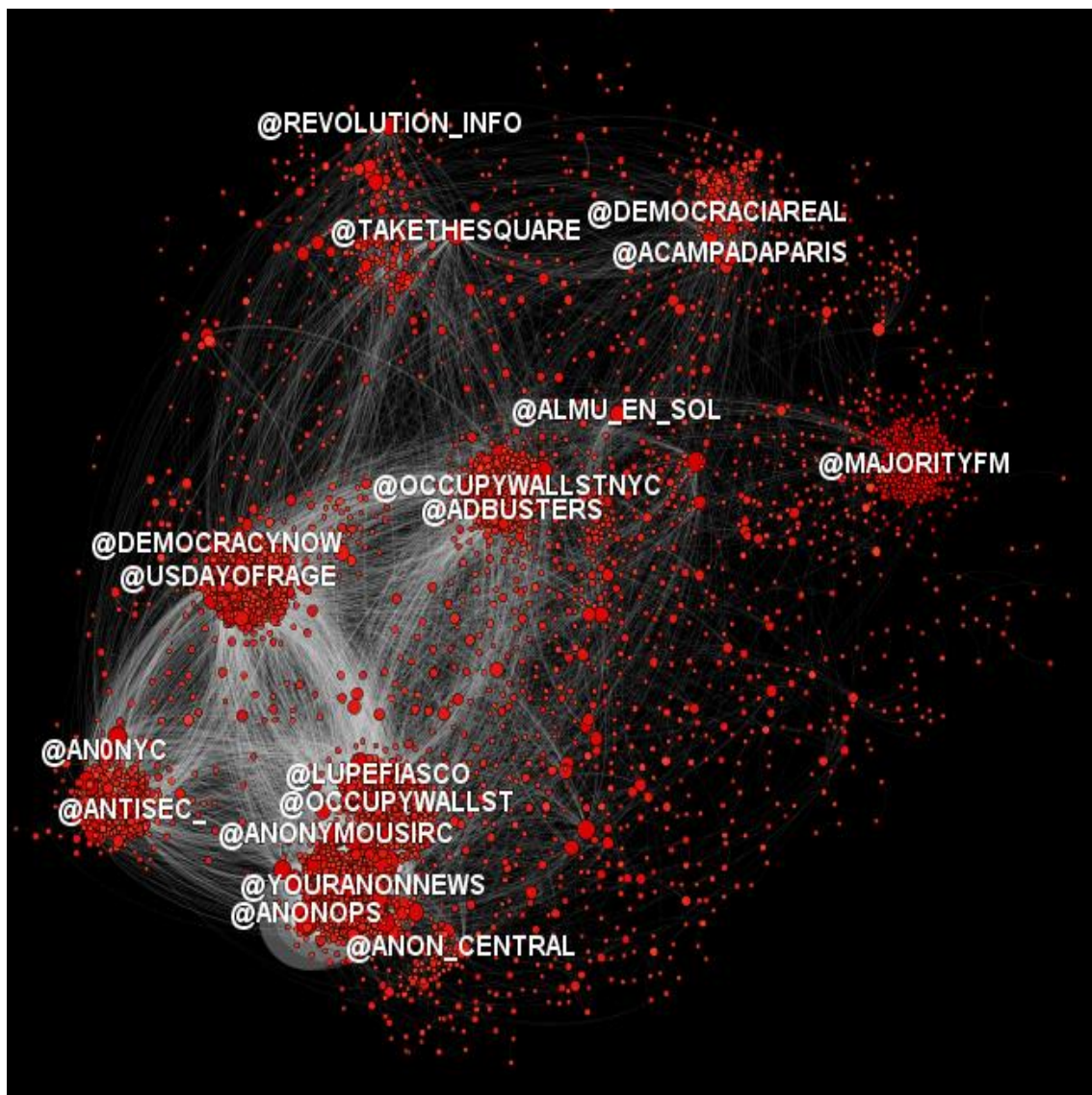


Fig. 13 - Users' interaction network in tweets with hashtag #OccupyWallStreet, 1–16 September 2011. As the network shows, Occupy Wall Street emerged from the convergence of a number of distinct clusters and initiatives.

The network is clustered into quite autonomous and almost equivalently sized modules of activity: the modularity score, measuring the tendency to form tight clusters, scores 0.54; more noticeably, the share of the seven biggest modules ranges between 6.5% and 13.5% of the totality of nodes, indicating the absence of a dominant group of activity. Each of these clusters of users refers to a distinct component of the coalition: the AdBusters' account closely interacts with one of the 'official' Occupy Wall Street accounts; the most populated cluster of users, though, is the one involving the US Day of Rage coalition, in close interaction with the alternative news outlet *Democracy Now*; another module comprises accounts related to the Spanish Indignados movement and their supporters; a separate cluster of users is collected around the progressive radio program *Majority Report*; last but not least,

two big modules includes dozens of accounts related to Anonymous, interacting frequently with another ‘official’ Occupy Wall Street account, as well as with the anti-establishment rapper Lupe Fiasco.

The meet-up date, 17 September, started to circulate on social networking platforms, though it did not reach high rates of diffusion. On the day of action, hundreds people showed up for the protest, and a part of them effectively set up tents in Zuccotti Park. It is worth noting that the turnout was far below the proclaimed target of 20,000 people; moreover, the event, despite some minor emulations, did not gain great attention on mainstream media. However, it evidently did so on social media, as a storm of related messages flooded Twitter in the subsequent hours.

Figure 14 shows the evolution in time, in the month of September, of the volume of tweets including the hashtag #OccupyWallStreet and the related unique users joining the flow.

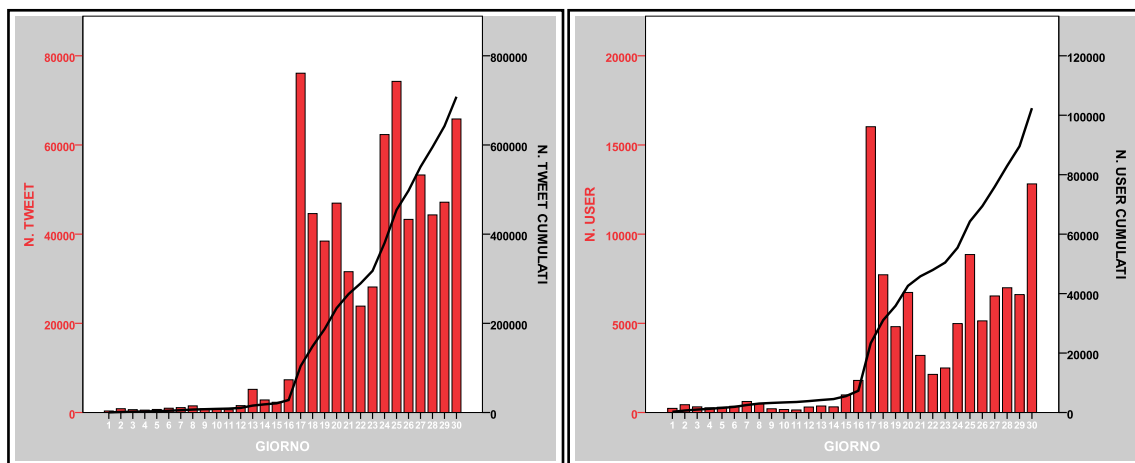


Fig. 14 - Tweets emitted and users joining with hashtag #OCCUPYWALLSTREET, 1–30 September 2011. The graphs show the explosive evolution of Twitter activity and recruitment related to Occupy Wall Street.

As the graphs show, the buzz surrounding the protest exhibited an explosive growth rate, with the large majority of the tweets (680,195, 96% of the total) following the day of action. This conforms to the well-known event-driven model of Twitter communication, but also confirms that the Twittersphere served much less as a space for recruiting and campaigning before the kick-off, than as an echo chamber for escalating the real-world event. After a number of failed analogous attempts by heterogeneous sources, 17 September became the tipping point of a chain reaction, through which the Occupy brand started to spur direct action all over the world.

Despite its pivotal role, #OccupyWallStreet was not the only hashtag that was involved in the diffusion of Occupy; at the same time, the protest staged in lower Manhattan ended up being one node among a more or less fluid network of hundreds of occupations all over the world. From the

very beginning, solidarity events were also planned in other places: emulations of the New York City protest took place in several cities around the world, though without attracting much participation, or significant media attention. It took only a few days of interaction between physical and digital events, anyway, for Occupy to go viral all over world.

The following table (Table 5) presents the timeline of the most successful #Occupy[something] hashtags that showed up for the first time in the #OccupyWallStreet stream during September 2011.

<b>Sept 1</b>	#OCCUPYWALLSTREET	#OCCUPYDC	#OCCUPYWALLST		
<b>Sept 2</b>	#OWS				
<b>Sept 3</b>	#OCCUPYBAYSTREET				
<b>Sept 4</b>					
<b>Sept 5</b>	#OCCUPY				
<b>Sept 6</b>	#OCCUPYTHEWORLD	#OCCUPYWALLSTR			
<b>Sept 7</b>	#OCCUPYTHEFED				
<b>Sept 8</b>	#OCCUPATION				
<b>Sept 9</b>	#OCCUPYLA	#OCCUPYAUSTIN	#OCCUPYSEATTLE		
<b>Sept 10</b>					
<b>Sept 11</b>					
<b>Sept 12</b>					
<b>Sept 13</b>					
<b>Sept 14</b>					
<b>Sept 15</b>					
<b>Sept 16</b>	#OCCUPYEVERYWHERE				
<b>Sept 17</b>	#OCCUPIED	#OCCUPYEVERYTHING	#OCCUPYWALLSTNYC		
<b>Sept 18</b>	#OCCUPYEARTH	#OCCUPYAMERICA	#OCCUPYSACRAMENTO	#OCCUPYUSA	
<b>Sept 19</b>	#OCCUPIERS	#OCCUPYSESAMESTREET			
<b>Sept 20</b>	#OCCUPYBALTIMORE #OCCUPYIOWA #OCCUPYTORONTO #OCCUPYMIAMI	#OCCUPYCHICAGO #OCCUPYLONDON #OCCUPYVICTORIA #OCCUPYMELBOURNE	#OCCUPYATLANTA #OCCUPYMILWAUKEE #OCCUPYCHI	#OCCUPYCANADA #OCCUPYDETROIT #OCCUPYPITTSBURGH	#OCCUPYBOSTON #OCCUPYVANCOUVER #OCCUPYTAMPA
<b>Sept 21</b>	#OCCUPYCLEVELAND	#OCCUPYSF	#OCCUPYMN	#OCCUPYPHOENIX	#OCCUPYHOUSTON
<b>Sept 22</b>	#OCCUPYCONGRESS				
<b>Sept 23</b>	#OCCUPYPDX #OCCUPYWORLD #OCCUPYPORTLAND	#OCCUPYOAKLAND #OCCUPYDENVER #OCCUPYFRANKFURT	#OCCUPYDALLAS #OCCUPYSTL #OCCUPY_BOSTON	#OCCUPYT #OCCUPYACTO #OCCUPYTOGETHER	#OCCUPYORLANDO #OCCUPYSANDIEGO #OCCUPYGERMANY
<b>Sept 24</b>	#OCCUPYPHILLY	#OCCUPYNOLA	#OCCUPYTO	#OCCUPYSYDNEY	#OCCUPYNYC



	#OCCUPYMEDIA	#OCCUPYTIMESQUARE			
<b>Sept 25</b>	#OCCUPYOTTAWA	#OCCUPYKC	#OCCUPYMADISON	#OCCUPYLSX	#OCCUPYSLC
<b>Sept 26</b>	#OCCUPYLASVEGAS	#OCCUPYTHEHOOD	#OCCUPYOZ	#OCCUPYINDY	#OCCUPYNH
	#OCCUPYMONTREAL	#OCCUPYSD	#OCCUPYCINNATI	#OCCUPYDENHAAG	
<b>Sept 27</b>	#OCCUPYKST	#OCCUPYBUFFALO	#OCCUPYLOUISVILLE	#OCCUPYBURQUE	#OCCUPYBERLIN
	#OCCUPYCINCY				
<b>Sept 28</b>	#OCCUPYTUCSON	#OCCUPYAMSTERDAM	#OCCUPYRALEIGH	#OCCUPYNS	#OCCUPYANTARCTICA
<b>Sept 29</b>	#OCCUPYTOKYO	#OCCUPYCALGARY			
<b>Sept 30</b>	#OCCUPYPGH				

Tab. 5 - #Occupy[something] hashtags timeline; #OccupyWallStreet tweets dataset, 1–30 September 2011. The timeline reports the mutations of Occupy hashtags that made their first appearance each day.

Although some hashtag mutations were already present before the occupation of Zuccotti Park the real contagion started in the days right after the commencement of the occupation in New York. Already at the beginning of September, Occupy-branded initiatives were promoted, at least for Washington DC (#OccupyDC) and Toronto, Canada (#OccupyBayStreet). However, it was the week following 17 September which saw the emergence of dozens of variations, most commonly following the replication schema ‘occupy+city’. This testifies to a fact that is important to bear in mind when trying to understand the role of new media in the protest: the importance of the tweet–street interaction. Although the campaign had already been advertised on social media for weeks, it was a ‘real-world’ event, the concrete occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York, which mainly spurred the contagion all over the United States and the rest of the world. Consequently, the resulting global network should not be considered so much as the result of a planned distributed global campaign, but rather as the effect of an almost real-time process of iteration, cross-cutting the boundaries between the digital and the physical reality.

It is important to keep in mind the symbiotic relation that ‘atoms and bits’ had in this phenomenon: whereas the occupations were ‘real-world’ events, physically taking place in parks and squares of major capitals and minor towns, the main environment where the connections between these locales were planted was that of digital communication flows. This was also the environment where the synchronization of contentious branding was more likely to take over.

### 3.3.2 - *The physical square*

The organization of Occupy is based on a symbiotic relation between the physical and the digital axis. It is theoretically interesting to notice that, whereas the debate about new technologies and activism

is sometimes framed in terms of substitution effects between the two, Occupy combines an explicit emphasis on localized, physical occupations of the public space, with a strong reliance on globalized, digital communication in cyber-space.

The tactical and organizational form of action of occupying a square, or a park, to initiate and sustain a mobilization, is a constitutive feature of Occupy, as the name suggests. The practice is explicitly borrowed from the Arab Spring and the Spanish Indignados, other regional protest waves that emerged a few months before Occupy.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, Occupy is sometimes conceived as part of a broader, worldwide wave of an ‘occupation of the squares’ movement, which famously passed through Tahrir square, Puerta del Sol and Zuccotti Park.<sup>61</sup>

Between September and October 2011, following the example of Occupy Wall Street activists in Zuccotti Park, hundreds of variously-sized ‘real-world networks’ established their tents in squares or parks in cities all over the world. Permanent encampments were set up (to name a few examples among hundreds) in: McPerson square in Washington DC; the lawn of city hall in Los Angeles; in front of the Vancouver Art Gallery; outside St. Paul’s Cathedral and in Finsbury Square in London; at Beursplein in Amsterdam; at the City Square in Melbourne; in Hibiya Park in Tokyo, etc.



Fig. 15 - Tents in Occupy Seattle, at Wastlake Park.  
(Source: <http://www.sarahwinterclothworks.com/newsletter/2011/12/02/occupy-willimantic/>)

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<sup>60</sup> In 2011, not by chance, ‘the Protester’ was named *Time*’s ‘Person of the Year’.

<sup>61</sup> Including also, at least, Syntagma Square in Athens and Habima Square in Tel Aviv.



The occupations were typically organized in a community-like style, sometimes creating an encompassing alternative system of daily life. They were indeed not only provided with tents, to ensure the continuity of the occupation, but also with other services of all sorts: kitchens, libraries, media centers and music stages. The community regularly undertook a number of activities, such as marches, workshops, debates and concerts, and engaged in face-to-face interactions to discuss grievances and the actions to be taken, as well as simply to practice alternative forms of socialization.<sup>62</sup> The camps were populated by people with shifting degrees of involvement, ranging from full-time occupiers, to supporters who showed up to specific events and simple bystanders intrigued by what was happening.



Fig. 16 - Media center in Occupy Wall Street, at Zuccotti Park.  
(Source: <https://cryptome.org/info/occupy-wall-st8/occupy-wall-st8.htm>)

The political activity of the occupations was regulated by an open General Assembly, which was inspired by the principle of consensus. Hand gestures and other expedients<sup>63</sup> were used to try to meet the aspiration of a horizontal, non-confrontational and dialogic debate. The assemblies were

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<sup>62</sup> It must also be said that the peaceful and positive enthusiasm of the occupations was sometimes disturbed by episodes of assaults, violence and anti-social behavior. However, the organizations were actively involved in preventing and remedying these incidents (see <http://www.businessinsider.com/truth-about-crime-at-occupy-wall-street-2011-11?IR=T>).

<sup>63</sup> Such as the ‘people’s mic’, the practice of broadcasting a speech, sentence by sentence, through the coordinated voices of concentric rings of the people assembled.

commonly live-streamed and extensively reported online, with the idea of further enlarging their democratic base to include people who could not be physically present and, more generally, to increase the accountability of the decision-making processes.<sup>64</sup>

### 3.3.3 - *The digital square*

Whereas it is not the purpose of this chapter to discuss the transformative role of digital technology within protests, it is an empirical fact that new media of various kinds has played a major role in the Occupy mobilization. Twitter streams and Facebook updates constantly accompanied people marching in the streets or hanging out at the encampments, narrating and reverberating what happened on the ground, thus stretching the protests' affective potential. Video streaming platforms like LiveStream were used to allow a global audience to follow demonstrations and debates. Visual footage of police violence, recorded live with smartphones and uploaded on YouTube, largely contributed to the escalation of the protests.<sup>65</sup> Websites were used as organizational tools to announce events, to describe the movement, and to connect with struggles all over the world.

According to the OccupyResearch database, the presence of the Occupy movement/s on the digital sphere consists in something like 877 Facebook pages, 819 Twitter accounts, 120 YouTube channels, 148 live streaming services, 331 MeetUp events, and 634 websites. Most of these internet accounts follow the geographic modularity schema, representing the voice of a local occupation. Some of them, by contrast, are meant to bridge the different local branches and spur the mobilization everywhere. For example, websites like <http://www.occupytogether.net>, <http://www.occupynetwork.net>, <http://www.interoccupy.net> have the declared purpose of working as hubs or brokers between various Occupy movements.

It is necessary to stress that the distinction between 'offline' and 'online' levels of organization is a purely narrative constraint; in the materiality of Occupy, 'real-world' occupations and 'virtual communication together forms an integrated socio-technical assemblage. The importance of digital networks as organizing tools and metaphors is closely related to the aspiration of radical inclusiveness and horizontality, characteristic of many recent mobilizations. Occupy describes itself as a leaderless, or *leaderful*, movement, and indeed refuses to delegate decision-making and representative roles, relying on the principle of seeking the greatest consensus within open assemblies. However, this ideal

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<sup>64</sup> However, this does not seem to always be the case (see Kavada 2015).

<sup>65</sup> Notoriously, the picture of an officer pepper-spraying peaceful students at the University of California Davis turned into the widely spread post 'Casually Pepper-Spraying Everything Cop'.

of peer-to-peer participation does not entirely correspond to the reality of facts, as informal processes of concentration of power in the hands of a few, highly-committed activists is rather the norm. This does not only relate to the emergence of *de facto* opinion leaders, but also of powerful gatekeepers of communication channels.

Thus, the role of digital media in sustaining the radical democratic project of the occupation is rather ambiguous. On the one hand, they are supposed to reflect openness, decentralization and self-organization; indeed, they contribute to this goal by spurring a participatory inclusiveness toward a broad public, and facilitating large-scale decision-making and its accountability. On the other hand, they crystalize strategic functional roles, such as the management of social media accounts; despite some experimentation in shared and open account management, the very design of these media implies a huge gap in influence between administrators and mere followers.

This apparent contradiction indicates an important theoretical point: the existence of a homological relation between the organizational aspirations of the mobilization and the imaginary associated with internet technologies. Whereas the concrete effects of social media adoption do not always go in the direction of horizontal self-organization, nevertheless their incorporation into the identitary repertoire of Occupy expresses its values and ambitions. Digital media, thus, are not only ‘means’ to achieve certain organizational goals, but are, rather, also part of the ‘meanings’ that Occupy constructs.

Occupy represents a vivid example of a mobilization engaged with ‘prefigurative politics’: its actions are not simply meant to claim some change, but rather also to practice, in the first instance, that change. The occupation of public spaces and the settlement of fully equipped communities is not only meant to interfere with the routine of the city, in order to raise awareness of certain demands or confront the administration; rather, it is also conceived of as the exploration of alternative configurations of the social order.

#### *3.3.4 - Who are the 99%?*

The crowds who gather in parks and squares under the banner of Occupy do not represent a homogeneous block of people expressing a coherent set of demands. This has both to do with the socio-demographic composition of those involved and the political orientation they express, but more interestingly also with the overall issues the mobilization addresses and the demands it advances.

As for socio-demographics, Occupy generally lacks homogeneity in the composition of participants. Despite the inclusive and self-reflexive character of the mobilization, however, there have actually been recurrent complaints about the under-representation of ethnic and gender minorities, as well as

initiatives to increase internal diversity.<sup>66</sup> Nonetheless, the mobilization is certainly heterogeneous in the sense that it does not involve, or fight for, a definite segment of the society in terms of class, ethnicity or gender. The constituency of Occupy is actually directly expressed by the most common slogan: ‘We are the 99%’. The expression probably originates from an article by Joseph Stiglitz, in which the famous economist manifested his concern about the concentration of income among the top 1% of Americans. But who are the 99%?

The Tumblr blog ‘wearethe99percent’, which, during the protests collected thousands of pictures from ordinary people sharing their stories, describes this segment of the society in the following terms:

We are the 99 percent. We are getting kicked out of our homes. We are forced to choose between groceries and rent. We are denied quality medical care. We are suffering from environmental pollution. We are working long hours for little pay and no rights, if we’re working at all. We are getting nothing while the other 1 percent is getting everything. We are the 99 percent.

(Source: <http://wearethe99percent.tumblr.com>)

It is quite clear from this description, as well as from the composite stories collected by the Tumblr blog, that this expression has a catchall character: there are many reasons why someone may be a part of the 99%, the most compelling of which is not being a part of the 1% who benefit from the system. For sure, the ‘We are the 99%’ slogan directly points to the master-frame of economic inequality, but its polysemic character allows for a wide range of cleavages to be instantiated through it. Analogously, it works as an implicit project of identity, with a rather minimalist, though extremely inclusive character: it does not address a specific segment of the society; it addresses – almost – the society as an undifferentiated whole.

A survey conducted by the OccupyResearch<sup>67</sup> initiative on US occupations reports quite a variegated picture in terms of the social conditions of participants, especially for what is often conceived as a fundamentally redistributive movement. Almost one-third (29.6%) of respondents consider themselves as member of the middle class, more than one-third as members of the working or lower-middle class (39.4%), and 11% from the upper class; protesters, moreover, seem to be quite evenly distributed across a number of income ranges.

A closely related element is the absence of a uniform ideology binding together the individual actors. Of course, Occupy generally expresses ‘leftish’ concerns, with the main master-issue being a mixture

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<sup>66</sup> Related to specific projects, represented by hashtags such as #OccupyWomen, #OccupyTheHood, #OccupyElBarrio.

<sup>67</sup> See <http://occupyresearch.net/2012/03/23/preliminary-findings-occupy-research-demographic-and-political-participation-survey/>.

of redistributive instances and a criticism of representative institutions. According to the same survey cited above, more than one-third of the respondents do not identify with any political party or ideological orientation, while a similar proportion support the Democratic Party; 22.6% follow other political causes or minor parties, and a small minority (1.1%) even support the Republican party. The ideological composition of the mobilization mainly includes the combination of a smaller, but highly committed, faction of anarchist or socialist revolutionaries, with a wider support base of progressives and liberals. An interesting example of the ideological heterogeneity and, sometimes, cacophony of the people gathering in the name of Occupy is represented by the case of the offshoot Occupy the Fed, linked to a right-wing libertarian branch.

The expression likely originates for the decision taken by Occupy Dallas to gather in front of the local branch of the Federal Reserve; the term then becomes a more general hashtag, miming the original #OccupyWallStreet one, meant to extend the protest to another much hatred institution.

Protesters Occupy Dallas Federal Reserve Bank: <http://t.co/AdZtSu6z> #EndTheFed #OccupyTheFed  
(tweet id: 122101890560430081, created at: Fri Oct 07 00:12:13 +0000 2011)

The Federal Reserve, though, is not only the target of anti-capitalist or equalitarian grievances; the idea of a central banking system is also opposed by ‘right-wing’ libertarian thought. #OccupyTheFed consequently became a much-contended hashtag, where instances diametrically opposed to the anti-corporation spirit of the mobilization were circulated, in an attempt to ‘hijack’ the potential of the Occupy brand.

#OccupyTheFed is libertarian while #OccupyWallStreet is being steered largely by liberals. I support #endthefed #ows  
(tweet id: 122104586826817537, created at: Fri Oct 07 00:22:56 +0000 2011)

the 99% are more Progressive now, but Occupy the FED is Libertarian <http://t.co/U9QxHC0P>  
#occupythefed  
(tweet id: 122109176221675520, created at: Fri Oct 07 00:41:10 +0000 2011)

#OWS has now become #OccupyTheFED #EndTheFED #anonops #RonPaul We need left,right,middle,sideways..whatever gets the message out  
(tweet id: 122114400386682880, created at: Fri Oct 07 01:01:56 +0000 2011)

This mixture of generally incompatible ideologies encouraged by the Occupy contentious brand is also evident in the relation between Occupy and the Tea Party, the libertarian / conservative

movement that had gained momentum in the US a few years earlier. This relation is not restricted to the many comparisons that commentators have drawn, labelling Occupy as a ‘Democrats’ Tea Party’. The idea of a coordinated effort between the two movements to give rise to a joint, nation-wide grassroots mobilization against corruption has been advanced, and also firmly rejected, by some concerned parties, as the following tweets testify:

Why the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street Should Cooperate <http://t.co/5GukxJwD> #OWS  
(tweet id: 123788401941028864, created at: Tue Oct 11 15:53:49 +0000 2011)

Karl Denninger Founder of the Tea Party backs #OccupyWallstreet <http://t.co/rBtMM0j4>  
<http://t.co/2rI0QIOd>  
(tweet id: 124637957163450370, created at: Fri Oct 14 00:09:39 +0000 2011)

Tea Party founder backs Occupy Wall Street <http://t.co/i0W3kMz7> #OWS  
(tweet id: 124610040173826048, Thu Oct 13 22:18:43 +0000 2011)

### 3.3.5 – *Our one demand is to have no demands*

The absence of a clear set of demands is a recurrent criticism of Occupy that journalists and detractors often underline. The evolution of the ‘what is Occupy fighting for?’ issue is quite indicative of the distinctive character of this protest, and of how the branding of contention should be understood as an autonomous process. The following lines are an extract from the AbBusters’ launch blog post, in which the magazine describes the strategy of the occupation:

The beauty of this new formula, and what makes this novel tactic exciting, is its pragmatic simplicity: we talk to each other in various physical gatherings and virtual people's assemblies ... we zero in on what our one demand will be, a demand that awakens the imagination and, if achieved, would propel us toward the radical democracy of the future ... and then we go out and seize a square of singular symbolic significance and put our asses on the line to make it happen.

Fig. 17 - Citation from AdBusters’ Occupy Wall Street launch post, 13 July 2011. The extract emphasizes the tactic of having one specific demand.  
(Source: <https://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/occupywallstreet.html>).

As the paragraph explicitly states, the call for action to have one demand met *precedes* the definition of the demand itself. In the rest of the post, AdBusters suggests that a good, strategic, ‘one demand’ to fight for would be the institution of a commission to keep money away from American politics.

One of the first ‘official’ documents of Occupy was the ‘Declaration of the Occupation of New York City’, approved by consensus by the NYC General Assembly. The document advances a list of 23 very broad grievances, related to a number of topics – including housing rights, the labor market, privatizations, banks, discrimination, environmental issues, wars and media control. The list concludes with an asterisk, which significantly makes clear that it is not fully exhaustive.<sup>68</sup> It is worth noticing that the list includes a variety of issues that are well beyond the core one related to financial and corporation power. Indeed, the post-eviction phase foresees the proliferation of Occupy’s offshoots involved in a number of specific areas.

Challenged by some internal trends and, above all, by the pressure of the mainstream media, some local assemblies, or specific working groups within them, started a reflexive attempt to converge on a definite list of grievances or demands to be issued. Interestingly, this process was mainly conceived as an expression of the local occupation, or even of independent groups within it, that needed to pass through its only legitimate decision-making body: the General Assembly. No successful coordinated effort has been undertaken in order to provide the global mobilization with a compact, uniform voice. Sometimes, detailed lists of goals have been presented on the various websites that make up the Occupy galaxy, along with the disclosure statement that they do not represent any ‘official voice of the whole movement’. A ‘Demands Working Group’ formed within the NY General Assembly called for holding a national convention around a shared set of demands, but this ‘99% Declaration’ was rejected by the local assemblies and taken up by an independent offshoot.<sup>69</sup> An alternative manifesto, named ‘Liberty Square Blueprint’, opposed this attempt to crystalize and restrict the goals of Occupy, and assembled a wiki-format document with ideas on how to turn Occupy into a permanent process of change, involving very general issues related to the whole system.

The many documents approved by local assemblies or issued by autonomous initiatives have sometimes included very specific requests related to the master-issue of the economic corruption of democracy, such as the following one posted by a user on Occupy Wall Street’s website (along with the above-mentioned disclaimer):

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<sup>68</sup> See: <http://www.nycga.net/resources/documents/declaration>.

<sup>69</sup> See: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/18/occupy-wall-street-planning-convention\\_n\\_1018570.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/18/occupy-wall-street-planning-convention_n_1018570.html).

1. Congress pass HR 1489 reinstating Glass-Steagall act.
2. Congress enact legislation to protect our democracy by reversing the effects of the citizens united Supreme Court decision.
3. Congress pass the Buffett rule on fair taxation so the rich and corporations pay their fair share & close corporate tax loop holes and enact a prohibition on hiding funds off shore.
4. Congress completely revamp the Securities and Exchange Commission.
5. Congress pass specific and effective laws limiting the influence of lobbyists and eliminating the practice of lobbyists writing legislation that ends up on the floor of Congress.
6. Congress passing "revolving door legislation" legislation eliminating the ability of former government regulators going to work for corporations that they once regulated.
7. Eliminate "personhood" status for corporations.
8. Re-establish the public airwaves in the U.S so that political candidates are given equal time for free at reasonable intervals in daily programming during campaign season.

(Source: <http://occupywallst.org/forum/detailed-list-of-demands-overview-of-tactics-for-d/>)

At other times, such lists consist of mostly very general claims and grievances, such as this statement approved by the assembly of the Occupy London Stock Exchange:

1. The current system is unsustainable. It is undemocratic and unjust. We need alternatives; this is where we work towards them.
2. We are of all ethnicities, backgrounds, genders, generations, sexualities, dis/abilities and faiths. We stand together with occupations all over the world.
3. We refuse to pay for the banks' crisis.
4. We do not accept the cuts as either necessary or inevitable. We demand an end to global tax injustice and our democracy representing corporations instead of the people.
5. We want regulators to be genuinely independent of the industries they regulate.
6. We support the strike on 30 November and the student action on 9 November, and actions to defend our health services, welfare, education and employment, and to stop wars and arms dealing.
7. We want structural change towards authentic global equality. The world's resources must go towards caring for people and the planet, not the military, corporate profits or the rich.
8. The present economic system pollutes land, sea and air, is causing massive loss of natural species and environments, and is accelerating humanity towards irreversible climate change. We call for a positive, sustainable economic system that benefits present and future generations.
9. We stand in solidarity with the global oppressed and we call for an end to the actions of our government and others in causing this oppression.

(Source: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/oct/17/occupy-london-stock-exchange-occupylsx>)

In the case of Occupy Vancouver, conversely, a list of 59 demands was presented in an articulated document, classified into macro areas – economic, political, societal and environmental demands.<sup>70</sup> According to a survey commissioned by the *Wall Street Journal*,<sup>71</sup> there is an evident lack of consensus also around the desired outcome of the protests, at least in regard to the United States. One-third of the respondents believe that Occupy should seek to be influencing the Democratic Party, but

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<sup>70</sup> See: <http://www.cbc.ca/bc/news/bc-111104-occupy-vancouver-demands.pdf>.

<sup>71</sup> See <http://blogs.wsj.com/metropolis/2011/10/19/who-is-occupying-wall-street-a-pollster-surveys-protester>.



11% actually aim to break the two-party duopoly; while another almost equivalent number of responses refer to redistribution of wealth, experimentation with direct democracy, reform of the health system, overthrowing capitalism and withdrawing troops from Afghanistan.

More generally, the array of issues to which the Occupy movement/s have committed is quite heterogeneous. To be sure, the protest started with a specific and clear concern in mind, related to the corruptive power of financial markets and corporations. This claim evolved into a more general protest against inequality. Another core issue, though, has to do with an experiment in participatory democracy and, more generally, in alternative forms of organization of daily life, which has little to do with Wall Street or the London Stock Exchange. Moreover, Occupy has progressively extended its references to systemic injustices to a number of topics – such as housing, working conditions, environment, wars, etc. ‘crawling’ their inter-relatedness in the real world.

Whereas this polyphony of voices is sometimes criticized as demonstrating a lack of coherence and unity among the mobilization, which is accused of being a chaotic assembly of people with unclear, variegated and even incompatible views and goals, there is something much more substantial, and theoretically profound, behind the failure – or better, the refusal – to provide specific demands.

A few days after the occupation of Zuccotti Park, another AdBusters post displayed the inspiring title ‘the demand is a process’:<sup>72</sup> what really should count for Occupy, the article stated, *is not ‘what’ is to be achieved, but ‘how’ to achieve it*. A growing trend, joined by influential intellectuals such as anthropologist David Graeber and philosopher Judith Butler, embraced this counterintuitive stand for a strategic rejection of the demand for demands: it was suggested that in order to express its prefigurative nature, Occupy should not limit its goals, nor acknowledge the current political system by issuing definite requests.

### **3.4 - #OccupySocialMovementTheory**

The previous sections have discussed the plurality of associations that the signifier Occupy has drawn into its re-semantization trajectory, and have contended that Occupy has been deployed as a protest tool without predefined content, which is capable, for this reason, of intercepting, and branding,

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<sup>72</sup> See: <https://www.adbusters.org/abtv/demand-process.html>.

various flows of solidarity and contention. Focusing on the contentious brand and the surface it traces, rather than assuming one Occupy movement and digging for its core, makes it possible to cope with the ambiguity of its boundaries and to follow its subversion of the form and the substance, the means and the meanings, of contention.

From a purely denominational point of view, ‘Occupy’, as a label for a movement, is quite distinctive: it is not composed of a noun that expresses an ideology, an identity or a goal – as in the case of ‘communism,’ ‘LGBT’ or ‘civil rights movement’ – rather, it is a verb denoting a specific tactical tool. Thus, an identity element of the movement/s – its name – expresses an organizational dimension – the form of action. Moreover, considering that the genesis of the movement/s is largely rooted in a (meta-)hashtag – #Occupy – the role of digital media and entities as both organizational and identity tools also becomes apparent.

As was shown in the theoretical chapter of this work, social movement theory is a composite field that is articulated around a cleavage between strategic / organizational (e.g. McCarthy and Zald 1977; Tarrow 1994) and cultural / identity perspectives (e.g. Melucci 1996; Touraine 1971).<sup>73</sup> Whereas this gap should be overcome in general for epistemological reasons, *Occupy explicitly transgresses these analytical boundaries*; this becomes clearer if attention is placed on the contentious brand, rather than on a specific movement. On the one hand, the adoption of the Occupy brand by a number of more or less (un)connected local networks evidently manifests their attempt to seize the structural opportunities of linking themselves to an established mobilization, accessing the resources condensed in the visibility of its successful contentious brand. On the other hand, the subversion of the form and the substance manifested by this case explicitly shows how the construction of a collective identity is a reflexive attempt, not only a precondition for mobilization.

This general argument, which is just sketched here, will be discussed in the concluding chapter of this work, where the relation between branding and the number of social movement-related processes developed by the literature will be presented.<sup>74</sup> The blurring between organizational and identity elements, though, parallels the claim that *branding, something commonly considered as a matter of ‘mere packaging’, enters into the very definition of what Occupy really is.*

The more specific contribution of a branding perspective to the understanding of Occupy is presented following the dimensions discussed in the empirical investigation – semantic, spatial and temporal – adding to the more general one of boundary-making.

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<sup>73</sup> See Chapter 2, Section 2.8 (‘The means and the meanings’).

<sup>74</sup> See Chapter 6, Section 1.1 (‘Contentious branding and social movement processes’).

From a semantic point of view, a number of variegated political participants and contentious issues have been brought together under the banner ‘Occupy’. Social movement theory has already moved from definitions of a social movement as a coherent set of beliefs and opinions (McCarthy and Zald 1977), towards the idea of a movement reflexively constructing itself as a unity (Melucci 1996). Different social movements, with their specific identities and pursuing their specific goals, collaborate and compete on a number of themes and often create multi-issue coalitions (Jung, King and Soule 2014). A specific protest event sometimes hosts a number of more or less related protest issues at the same time (Bennett 2005). Nonetheless, compared to classical mobilizations held together by structured ideologies, the signifier ‘Occupy’ presents a peculiarly polysemic character: despite the presence of a master-frame related to the rise of inequality and the influence of economic powers over politics, the range of issues covered by its different participants is highly differentiated (Calhoun 2013). Analogously, the adoption of ‘easy-to-personalize’ frames (Bennett and Segerberg 2013) allows a heterogeneous range of people to converge in the same protest, sometimes bringing with them different motivations for that protest. A branding perspective aims to capture the semiotic dimension behind the transition from ideological to post-ideological – or, better, ‘inter-ideological’ – movements: *the syntax prevails over the semantic in the process of mutual recognition*; the form represents the substance; the meanings correspond to the means.<sup>75</sup>

A branding perspective makes it possible to better focus on the debated relation between the global and the local scale of contemporary, digitally-mediated contentious politics. Social movement literature has oscillated between ‘nationalist’, ‘transnationalist’ and ‘globalist’ perspectives. Whereas classical research locates movements within the arena of the nation-state, more recent developments sometimes look at the mechanisms through which mobilizations reach a transnational scale (e.g. Della Porta and Tarrow 2005; Tarrow, McAdam and Tilly 2003) or advance the strong claim of the existence of proper global actors (e.g. McDonald 2006; Montagna 2007). Occupy itself can be legitimately framed in different ways: a national movement, shaped by and concerned with the trajectories of the United States’ political and economic arenas; a network of local mobilizations forming a transnational coalition of solidarity; a global protest wave that has arisen in response to the global crisis, with its various ramifications. Each of these conceptualizations has its own legitimacy and epistemological purpose; but their heterogeneity suggests, beyond any specific contention regarding the proper scale of the movement, the existence of a *common denominator* between the

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<sup>75</sup> See Chapter 6, Section 3.2 (‘The means are the meanings’).

many levels involved. *What is truly global in Occupy is the brand*, which works as an ‘assembling device’ between heterogeneous locales.

Social movements research widely acknowledges the importance of processes of diffusion and so-called ‘social movements spillovers’ (Meyer and Whittier 1994). From a wide dynamic perspective, protests commonly emerge in interconnected waves, shaping periodic cycles of contention (Tarrow 1994). Despite the fact that when talking about the Occupy movement/s the reference is usually to a protest wave that took place in the autumn of 2011, since then the brand Occupy has made an appearance in many other episodes all over the world, which bear few direct relations, or almost no relation, to the original Occupy Wall Street event. Involving both some major protest waves and countless minor initiatives, the array of mobilizations that label themselves as ‘Occupy[something]’ most vividly testifies to *the proliferation of a brand beyond the more specific mobilization that first developed it*.

It is not a matter of coincidence that in the previous chapters, when referring to Occupy, very general and loosely connoted terms have been employed – such as ‘case’, ‘phenomenon’, ‘entity’ – instead of the more specific expression ‘social movement’. So far, the academic and public discourse has been involved in a sort of semiotic struggle when reporting on this case. The ‘Occupy Wall Street movement’, the ‘Occupy movement/s’, the ‘99% movement’, the ‘occupied squares movements’, etc. are among the many expressions that have been employed. What exactly the expression ‘the Occupy movement’ corresponds to has been variable and sometimes ambiguous: it alternatively refers to a specific movement based in New York City, a broader American protest wave, a transnational coalition of occupations, or a long-term cycle of contention characterized by a specific repertoire and loosely related goals. This is not a surprising finding: the boundaries of social movements are notoriously porous, shifting and complex (Diani 2003; Melucci 1996). Nonetheless, what is worth noticing in the case of Occupy is that, *along with the loosely-defined boundaries of the movement/s, comes the clear-cut boundaries of the brand*.

To conceive of Occupy as a contentious brand is not the same as denying it the status of a social movement; it is an epistemological move aimed at distilling a more abstract, but more precisely denoted, entity. In this case, the intention is to deal with the many semantic ambiguities that the expression ‘the Occupy movement’ alone entails. The perspective of branding overcomes these analytical ambiguities, by granting a proper ontological status to the common denominator among the array of empirical phenomena that forge the Occupy [Something] empirical spectrum.

## 4 – Unfolding Anonymous

### The networks behind the mask

*For here is the problem. The objects we study, the objects in which we are caught up, the objects which we perform, are always more than one and less than many.*

(John Law, 'After ANT', 2009)

*Nothing is more real than the masks we make to show each other who we are.*

(Christopher Barzak, 'The love we share without knowing', 2008)

### 4.1 - Introduction

#### 4.1.1 - Overview

The previous chapter presented Occupy as a prototypical case of a 'contentious brand' in the digital age. In the case of the originator of Occupy, Occupy Wall Street, it is still possible to recognize many elements of classical mobilizations: traditional redistributive claims – along with an array of many other claims; the dynamics of an urban-based movement – complementing the digital sphere; a specific wave of protest – prefiguring a generalized re-instantiation process. Moreover, it is quite legitimate to isolate a proper network of 'Occupy movements', as well as a more specific 'Occupy Wall Street movement', from more indirect re-semantizations of the 'Occupy' signifier. The chapter suggested that the fact that entities gradually 'overflowed' the boundaries of the original mobilization should be interpreted as those entities exploiting that mobilization's persisting 'contentious brand'.

The case that will be the object of the present and following chapters approximates to a greater extent the ideal-type of contentious branding. Scholars and commentators have adopted a plethora of expressions to refer to Anonymous, ranging from the more demanding terms to more cautious formulations: a 'social movement', a 'hacktivist collective', a 'loosely associated protest network', an 'internet phenomenon', and a 'collective label'. Consequently, a straightforward question arises: *what is Anonymous?*

The proposal of this work is to characterize Anonymous as a 'contentious brand', which means focusing on the connective potential related to its standardized semiotic repertoire. Methodologically,

the chapter adopts a structural-relational perspective, involving exploiting Twitter data. The exploration concentrates on three dimensions: the structure of users' interaction and the evolution of that interaction; the dynamic articulation of issues resulting from a large number of Anonymous operations; and the distinctive process of 'brand variation' that characterizes the relation between Anonymous and its many offshoots. The general goal is to show empirically the limits and contradictions related to conceiving of Anonymous as an individual social movement; the alternative proposal is to interpret Anonymous as a 'contentious brand' appropriated by and interacting with various mobilizations.

The first section of the chapter focuses on the structural properties of the network of interactions between users whose activity is branded as being related to Anonymous. The goal is to understand to what extent Anonymous can be analyzed as a single network, either maintaining a certain structure over time or involved in an overall process of evolution. This section investigates the stability of participants, the links and clusters of interaction among them, and looks for patterns of compactness and centralization of the network structure. The network is characterized by a markedly unstable character and by fluctuating behavior: rearranging its composition and oscillating between phases of greater or lower stability of components, integration of its modules and concentration of centrality.

The second section investigates the articulation of Anonymous' operations. It looks at the main issues of concern, their evolution in time and their structural interrelation. The aim is to understand whether a core mission of Anonymous can be isolated – e.g. the fight for internet freedom. The hashtags related to operations are mapped and aggregated in order to propose a heuristic categorization of the many, distinct 'souls' behind Anonymous activism, each characterized by quite divergent goals, targets and concerns. The observation of the dynamics of operations leads to the conclusion that there is no dominant issue, or set of issues, which is stable across time; conversely, Anonymous targets are always shifting, and users' flows sometimes converge on specific issues, while at other times they diverge toward heterogeneous targets. The various operations are structurally connected due to a minority of users flowing from operation to operation, though each operation presents a largely independent constituency.

The third section introduces the theme of the relation between Anonymous and some more or less differentiated offshoots. It tries to understand the structural relation between these partially distinct entities, in order to assess to what extent and in what sense they are to be considered part of, or independent from, Anonymous. Matching the dataset of users and hashtags for recurring matching sub-terms results in a list of 'sub-brands', some of which are minor variations of the word 'Anonymous' with a more connoted meaning, while some are external groups with which

Anonymous has collaborated, and others are more ambiguous entities, partially distinct and partially overlapping with Anonymous. These offshoots re-brand themselves to mark their specificity, though they maintain a more or less direct symbolic reference to the Anonymous brand. The analysis of the users' overlap reveals that whereas few broker users connect most of the offshoots together, these offshoots are largely independent in terms of the long tail of users. The focus on the Million Mask March offshoot shows that, despite its strong symbolic association with Anonymous, consistent modules of the Anonymous network have been almost untouched by the march of 5 November 2013, which took place worldwide. Altogether, these observations suggest the distinctive role of Anonymous as an 'umbrella brand' involved in a process of 'brand differentiation'.

This chapter will argue that it is problematic to try to observe Anonymous through the lens of categories that are classically associated with social movements, for many reasons – related to the complex and counterintuitive articulation of this entity. This work wants instead to put into focus the dimension of contentious branding: unfolding the assemblage traced by the 'Anonymous signifier', instead of uncovering the essence of Anonymous, allows us to have a better grasp of the ontological status of the entity named Anonymous.

#### 4.1.2 – *What is Anonymous? Interaction, issues, offshoots*

The origins of Anonymous are rooted in the internet platform '4chan' (Coleman 2013; 2014; Olson 2012), a simple bulletin board where anyone can post images and comments. Such posts must be anonymous. Among the many thematic channels hosted, the most peculiar is the '/b/ channel', where the topic leading the flow of posts is, explicitly, randomness. It is quite easy to understand how this site works as an incredibly powerful incubator of creativity, weirdness and distinctive internet subcultures. Some of the most successful internet memes, indeed, originated and proliferated on 4chan (Chen 2012).<sup>76</sup> Started around 2004 as a collective noun adopted in the name of 'the lulz' – the amusement that derives from performing irreverent and outrageous pranks for their own sake – it evolved in a few years into a proper, though *sui generis*, actor of political contention, making the unexpected transition 'from the lulz to collective action' (Coleman 2011). In the following years, Anonymous evolved through a series of 'saltations', signaling a continuously evolving logic, partly related to the affordances of the various media platforms it appropriated (Uitermark 2016). The

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<sup>76</sup> It is interesting to notice here the apparent socio-technical element underlying the emergence of this entity: a mere technical peculiarity of a website, such as the decision to let users adopt the standard nickname 'anonymous', progressively led people to refer to Anonymous as a collective actor, fostering a quite distinctive process of identification.

emergence and reproduction of Anonymous as an individual entity should be understood as the effect of processes of ‘designation’ (Cavely and Jager 2015), according to which a variety of actors recognize its identity and attribute it with agency. Consequently it is extremely challenging to grasp Anonymous’ ontological status, which is somewhere in between categories such as movement, network, swarm and multitude (Wiedemann 2014).

Despite the many sources of entropy it has to confront, Anonymous is still periodically subjected to the spotlight of intense media coverage, for its spectacular actions or for engaging in many critical scenarios. It has been widely appointed the status of a serious geopolitical actor, at times has been presented within the negative frame of cyber-terrorism and at other times linked to the positive frame of cyber-vigilantism.<sup>77</sup> The media discourse often refers to Anonymous as a unique, unified and univocal group – something that Anonymous ‘members’ themselves have often deemed completely misleading.

Existing in-depth studies of Anonymous (Coleman 2015; Olson 2012) highlight the counterintuitive character of this entity, as well as the heterogeneity in biographies and motivations that characterize the many faces of Anonymous activism. Nonetheless, in their empirical investigations, these contributions tend to focus on a core of activities and activists, which has been crucial in specific stages. This automatically follows from the premises of journalistic and ethnographic methods: the depth and accurateness of these accounts is involved in a trade off with their synoptic potential; this would also be a reasonable strategy if the goal were to unveil the true face of an obscure social movement. Despite few exceptions (e.g. Dobusch and Schoeneborn 2015),<sup>78</sup> very limited attention has been put on unfolding the complex articulation of the many actions, mobilizations and groups ‘branded’ with the name and symbols of Anonymous, especially in recent years. The resulting picture, then, is often that Anonymous, despite its obscure traits, is after all a composite movement fighting for internet freedom. Is there something like a core within Anonymous? Is it what we might expect it to be? What does Anonymous’ overall composition suggest in terms of ontological reflection? This work aims to shed a light on the articulation of Anonymous from a synoptic point of view, exploring the whole range of actors, issues and sub-groups collected under the label Anonymous. Instead of starting from the assumption that Anonymous is, for example, a ‘social movement for internet freedom’, it inductively asks what kind of networks are articulated around the Anonymous brand.

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<sup>77</sup> On these competing evaluative frames adopted by media outlets, compare, for example, the following sources: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DNO6G4ApJQY> and <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/anonymous-hackers-prepare-launch-cyber-attacks-isis-article-1.2436494>.

<sup>78</sup> See also the visualization of a network of Anonymous’ Facebook pages created by Yevgeniy Golovchenko (<http://anonymous.hol.es/#Anonymous>).



Considering that an important definition of social movements sees them as networks involved in conflicts and sharing a collective identity (Diani 1992), in order to understand what Anonymous is, each of these elements is assessed: what kind of network, what kind of conflict and what kind of identity? The empirical analysis thus concentrates on three layers: interaction between users; issues covered by operations; and offshoots springing from the Anonymous concept. The following are thus the empirical questions that orientate the exploration:

- *Interaction: What are the structure and dynamics of the Anonymous interaction network?*
- *Issues: What is Anonymous concerned with and fighting for?*
- *Offshoots: What is the relation between Anonymous and its many offshoots?*

The first dimension has to do with the structure and evolution of the network of interactions between users who adopt the hashtag #Anonymous on Twitter: what sort of network emerges from users' interactions, and how does its structure evolve over time? The second dimension unfolds the array of conflictual issues manifested by the vast number of Anonymous' operations: what is Anonymous concerned with, and what is the relation between its various souls? The third dimension concentrates on the identity of offshoots that Anonymous has given rise to: to what extent are they independent and to what extent do they continue to be related to the originator?

An important remark is that, for reasons of presentation, Anonymous will often be referred to, also grammatically, as a subject of action – i.e. Anonymous 'does' something. However, it would be more appropriate, considering its modular, heterogeneous and contested nature, to adopt expressions like 'actions performed in the name of Anonymous'; or, even more in line with the theoretical characterization of contentious branding, '*through* the name of Anonymous'.

#### *4.1.3 - Unfolding the #Anonymous network on Twitter*

This chapter undertakes a methodological approach variously inspired by exploratory data analysis (Tukey 1977), mapping of controversies (Venturini 2012) and digital methods (Rogers 2013). The intended contribution is to adopt a synoptic point of view, by taking into consideration Anonymous' broader spectrum of activities and unfolding the network surrounding its brand. This means not giving priority to a supposed core of activities, but bringing into the analysis, in addition, the long tail of minor operations that would likely not be covered by means of other methods.

In order to do this, the empirical investigation will shed a light on the articulation of different networks on Twitter related to the hashtag #Anonymous. The reason for choosing Twitter data is related to the prominent role this platform plays for Anonymous' 'PR' and propaganda activity, as well as the

research affordances it provides (Gerlitz and Rieder 2013; Weltevrede 2016): the possibility to trace large-scale and long-term networks of communicative interaction. The operative choice to limit the data collection to a single hashtag and to include all users of that hashtag, instead of applying a more nuanced sampling procedure, is in line with the idea of a branding perspective. The rationale, indeed, is not to assume the existence of a proper, consistent Anonymous movement, that should be isolated from other less authentic utilizations of the label; rather, the strategy is to ‘follow the hashtag’, so as to open up the black box of what is commonly referred to as a unique entity.

The main corpus of analysis is a dataset of three years of activity on Twitter (1 December 2012 – 30 November 2015), collected by exploiting Twitter Streaming API, following the hashtag ‘#Anonymous’.<sup>79</sup> The resulting dataset corresponds to 6,754,197 communicative acts carried out by 1,296,589 unique users. Another supplementary dataset related to Anonymous’ offshoot named ‘the Million Mask March’ is described in the related section. Networks have been variously filtered and split for specific analytical purposes, as detailed in each section.

It must be stressed that this dataset, no matter how huge it is, is not a statistically representative sample of Anonymous’ overall activity on Twitter, and by no means is it a comprehensive outlook on the Anonymous phenomenon as a whole. First, the timespan included in the data leaves out crucial phases of Anonymous’ evolution, which it could have been interesting to explore; however, this partial coverage already provides enough interesting information. Second, Twitter is only one among the many media adopted by Anonymous, so this chapter is not an exploration of Anonymous as a whole, but rather of Anonymous on Twitter. As already said, though, the publicity scope associated with Twitter is in line with the goals of this chapter. Third, the hashtag-based selection of data leaves out potential relevant tweets and introduces sampling biases; nonetheless, the emphasis on long-term dynamics and the exploratory character of the analyses largely temper this concern.

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<sup>79</sup> This main dataset has been collected through the Twitter Capture and Analysis Toolset (TCAT) on the servers of the Digital Methods Initiatives, University of Amsterdam.

## 4.2 - The dynamics of the #Anonymous interaction network

This section focuses on the structural evolution of the network of interactions between users. It will concentrate on patterns of stability, compactness and centralization, showing how the network surrounding the hashtag #Anonymous on Twitter demonstrates oscillating behavior.

Looking at the evolution of the number of tweets collected referring to the hashtag #Anonymous, the persistence of attention around this entity is clear.

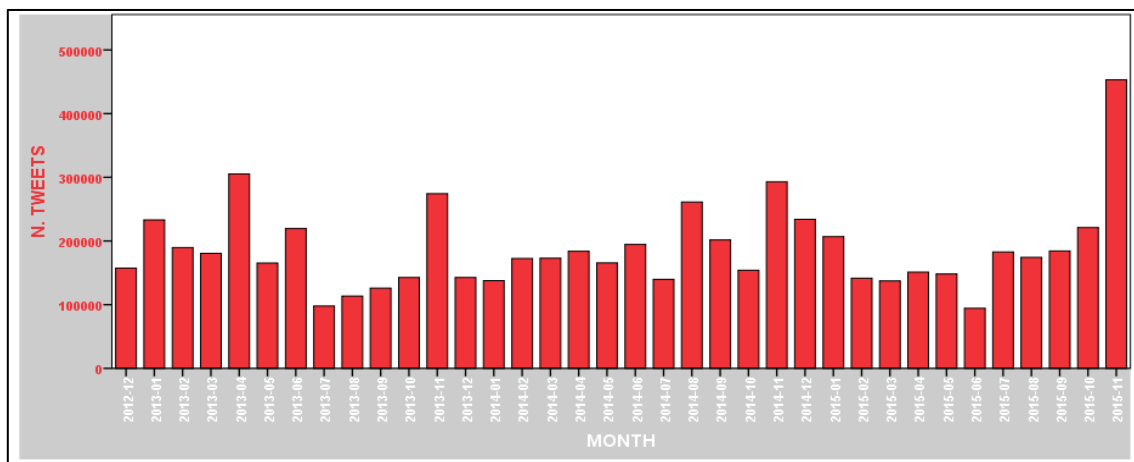


Fig. 18 – Tweets emitted with the hashtag #Anonymous, December 2012 – November 2015. The chart reports the evolution of Twitter activity associated with the hashtag #Anonymous in the timespan considered.

The volume of activity rarely falls under the threshold of 100,000 tweets per month. Nonetheless, it undergoes a number of important oscillations, presenting various local maxima and minima.

In order to obtain a more nuanced understanding of the nature of the entity underlying this communication flow, this section intends to analyze the evolution of the network of interaction between users aggregated around the Twitter hashtag #Anonymous.. More particularly, the focus will be on patterns of stability, compactness and centralization.

A network of interaction has been built, linking each user who sent a tweet with each of the users included in the text of the tweet; thus, different Twitter relations (retweets, mentions and replies) are treated as general signatures of interaction between users. For simplicity of analysis, the network has been analyzed as non-directed: whereas mentioning a user in a tweet should be more appropriately interpreted as a directed relation from the sender to the receiver, to evaluate the evolution of the structure we can interpret each relation as an interaction between two users in general terms.

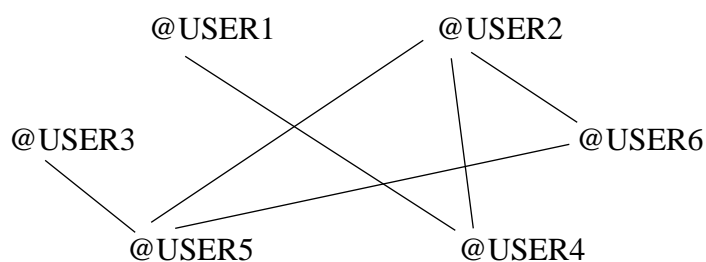


Fig. 19 – Model of Twitter ‘interaction network’. Nodes are users; links are mention relations. Two users are connected whenever one is mentioned in an individual’s tweet.

Considering the whole range of users would mean including a lot of noise in the analysis – e.g. other less connoted uses of the hashtag #Anonymous, people just occasionally commenting on an Anonymous-related event, or celebrities randomly mentioned in a tweet. For this reason, a threshold of five tweets sent has been set: under this threshold, users were discarded from the network. It is, then, important to interpret the results taking into consideration that they have already been filtered for the long tail of low-activity users. This operative choice is meant to increase the robustness of the results and the validity of the operationalization, since it should cut off random noise and retain only users who are consistently associated with Anonymous. This operation resulted in a network of 113,743 nodes, tied by 1,025,904 edges. The network was then divided into monthly snapshots, so as to derive a structure more reflective of the dynamic nature of the phenomenon, and in order to allow for the observation of patterns of evolution. Due to a consistent number of missing observations, the month of July 2014 and its other related variables have been discarded.

#### 4.2.1 - Stability

To which extent does the reproduction of the Anonymous brand in time correspond to the stability of its components? Is there a trend toward greater stability? Stability is assessed here across each contiguous month, considering three elements: the users involved – i.e. network nodes; the links among users – i.e. network edges; and the clusters of interaction among users – i.e. network modules. The first variable (stable nodes) simply considers the proportion of active or mentioned users that are present in both of the months constituting each time interval. The second variable (stable edges) focuses instead on the persistence of a link between two users across months. The third variable (stable modules) considers whether users tend to belong to the same cluster of denser interaction, as computed by a so-called community detection algorithm.

The following table (Table 6) summarizes the results, presenting the minimum, maximum, average and standard deviations of each variable.

	Min	Max	Avg.	Std. Dev.
% stable nodes	32.0	61.0	47.8	7.4
% stable edges	4.0	19.0	12.5	3.1
% stable clusters	2.0	17.0	7.4	4.1

Tab. 6 – Interaction network. Distribution of stability measures across time intervals (month / prev. month). The table shows minimum, maximum, average and standard deviations of the proportion of nodes, edges and clusters that are stable across each month interval.

Despite the fact that the lack of a benchmark does not allow for making definite claims concerning absolute values, the data are nevertheless quite clear in depicting the unstable character of the network under investigation. On average, the stability of nodes scores 47.8%, which means that more than a half of the nodes observed in one month are not included in the network of the following month. However, nodes stability oscillates quite a lot around this average, ranging between 32% and 62%. As for the recurrence of links between users, the average stability across months is 12.6% and oscillates quite a lot across various time intervals: from 4% to 19%. Consequently, the vast majority of connections among nodes are rather extemporary. Similarly, the stability of clusters of interaction is extremely low, scoring 7.4% on average, and oscillating between 2% and 18%. This means that the network is not composed of recurrent ‘communities’ of nodes that are tightly connected to each other. Comparing the first and the last snapshot – December 2012 and November 2015 – gives a better understanding of how the network has mutated over three years. Out of the 22,042 final users, only 1,851 were part of the network in its first instance, corresponding to 8.4%. Similarly, the share of persistent connections amounts to 0.25%, while the proportion of nodes belonging to the same cluster of interaction is 0.01%. As noted, the level of stability is itself rather unstable. Is this associated with a trend toward progressively greater stability or instability? In order to answer this question, Figure 20 plots the data on a longitudinal axis.

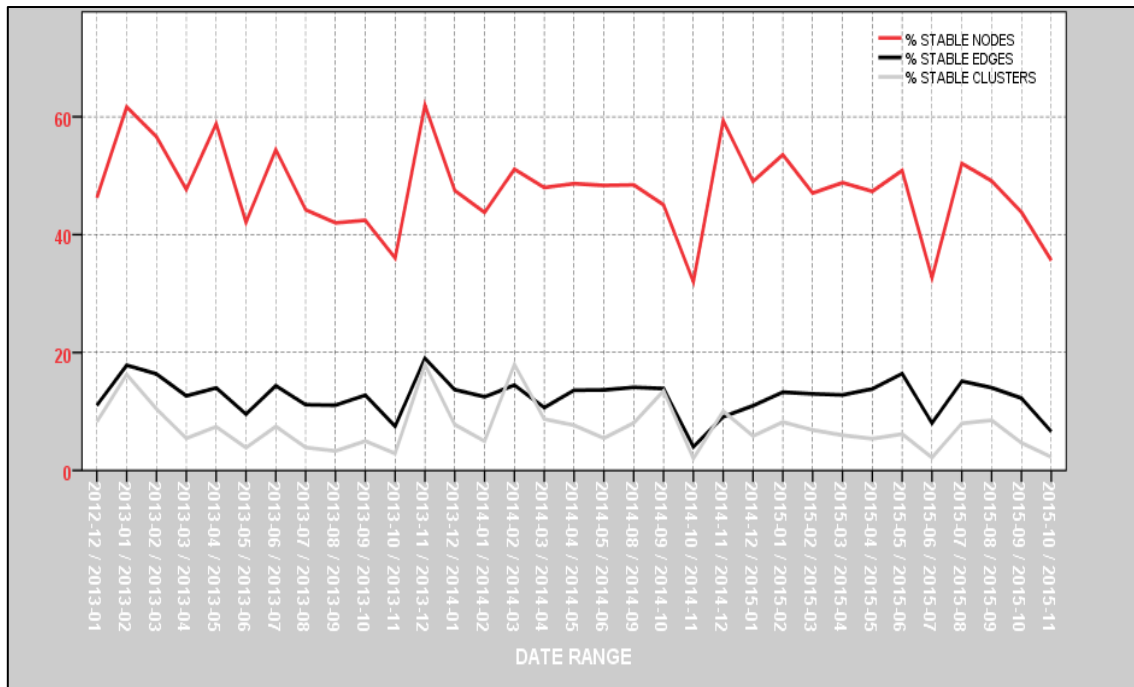


Fig. 20 – Interaction network. Trend of stability measures across time (month / prev. month). The proportion of stable nodes (red line), edges (black line) and clusters (gray) is plotted against each time interval. The components of the network are in general non-recurrent.

The distribution across time intervals of the different definitions of stability – nodes, edges and cluster stability – highly correlate, though no specific trend can be observed. We can observe peaks of stability between January and February 2013, November and December 2013, and November and December 2014. Conversely, between October and November 2013, October and November 2014, and June and July 2015 there is a wide reshuffling in the composition of the network. It is worth noting that 5 November is a topical day for Anonymous: the anniversary of the plot perpetrated by Guy Fawkes – the British plotter whose mask is Anonymous’ well-known icon. This may explain the recurrence of peaks of instability in the snapshot preceding the event and of peaks of stability in its aftermath: the resonance of the celebration provides a boost of new recruits, whose involvement lasts throughout the following month.

To sum up: the analysis of the stability of nodes, links and clusters suggests that the Twitter network around the hashtag #Anonymous presents an ever-shifting composition; the turnover oscillates itself, but without exhibiting any pattern of evolution. There is no evidence for the emergence of a stable community around ‘the Anonymous movement’.

#### 4.2.2 - Compactness

Another possibility that is worth inquiring into is whether the network presents any trend toward an increasing concentration of interactions, signaling a progressive integration of its structure into a compact network.

Compactness is operationalized through two standard network measures: the average shortest path and the modularity index. The first variable is defined as the average value of the shortest path between every possible pair of nodes in the network; the shortest path is the lowest number of nodes that indirectly connect a couple of nodes. The average shortest path thus gives information about the size of the network, measuring whether it takes a lot of ‘hops’ to move from one node to another following the existing links. The second variable defines instead the modularity of the network: that is to say, a measure of the extent to which a network tends to be composed of relatively isolated clusters of interaction, characterized by higher internal density. The evolution of the modularity index, consequently, provides insights into the overall integration of the network.

Table 7 reports the minimum, maximum, average and standard deviation values of the two indicators of compactness calculated.

	Min	Max	Avg.	Std. Dev.
avg. shortest path	3.92	8.32	4.69	0.78
modularity index	0.46	0.67	0.58	0.06

Tab. 7 – Interaction network. Distribution of ‘compactness’ measures across months. The table shows minimum, maximum, average and standard deviations of the average shortest path and the modularity index of the monthly networks.

The mean of the average shortest path across month is 4.69. This value, however, oscillates between 3.92 and 8.32, signaling that the size varies across different timespans. Concerning the second indicator of compactness, the monthly network presents on average a modularity index of 0.58. However, it also ranges between a minimum of 0.46 and a maximum of 0.67. The network, consequently, presents a fairly oscillating degree of integration.

What is really of concern for the present analysis is the evolution in time of these parameters, in order to identify whether the interaction evolves toward a more compact structure. For this purpose, Figure 21 plots the normalized value of the average shortest path and of the modularity index for each month, in order to understand whether there is a trend in their fluctuation. The size of the network in terms of number of nodes is also included as a reference.

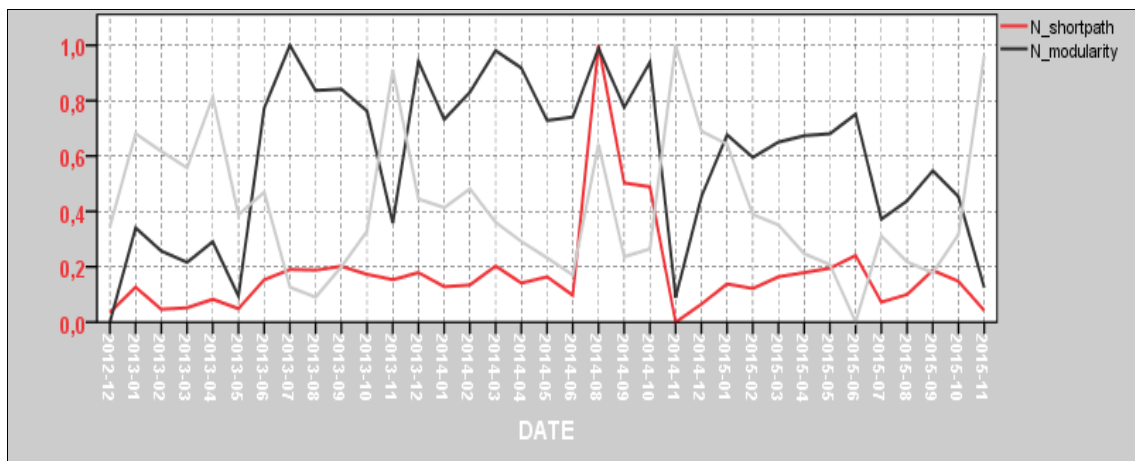


Fig. 21 – Interaction network. Evolution of compactness measures across months (normalized values). The values of the average shortest path (red line) and the modularity index (black line) are plotted against each month; the size of the network is also included as a reference (gray line). The network fluctuates between moments of highest compactness without following any trend.

No specific trend in the evolution of the compactness of the network can be identified. The two variables highly correlate with each other through time, though they reach several local maxima and minima. The compactness, moreover, sometimes follows the size of the network, while in other cases it does not. In the time of observation, the networks start quite scattered, becoming more compact from June 2013 onwards, then experiencing an inverse trend that reaches its peak in November 2013; compactness progressively increases thereafter, reaching a maximum peak around April 2014, but then starts decreasing again.

To give a better characterization of this result, the following visualizations (Figure 22) compare the pair of months which correspond to the greatest variation of compactness. The algorithm adopted to spatialize the nodes is OpenOrd, which is designed to highlight the ‘community structure’ of a network.



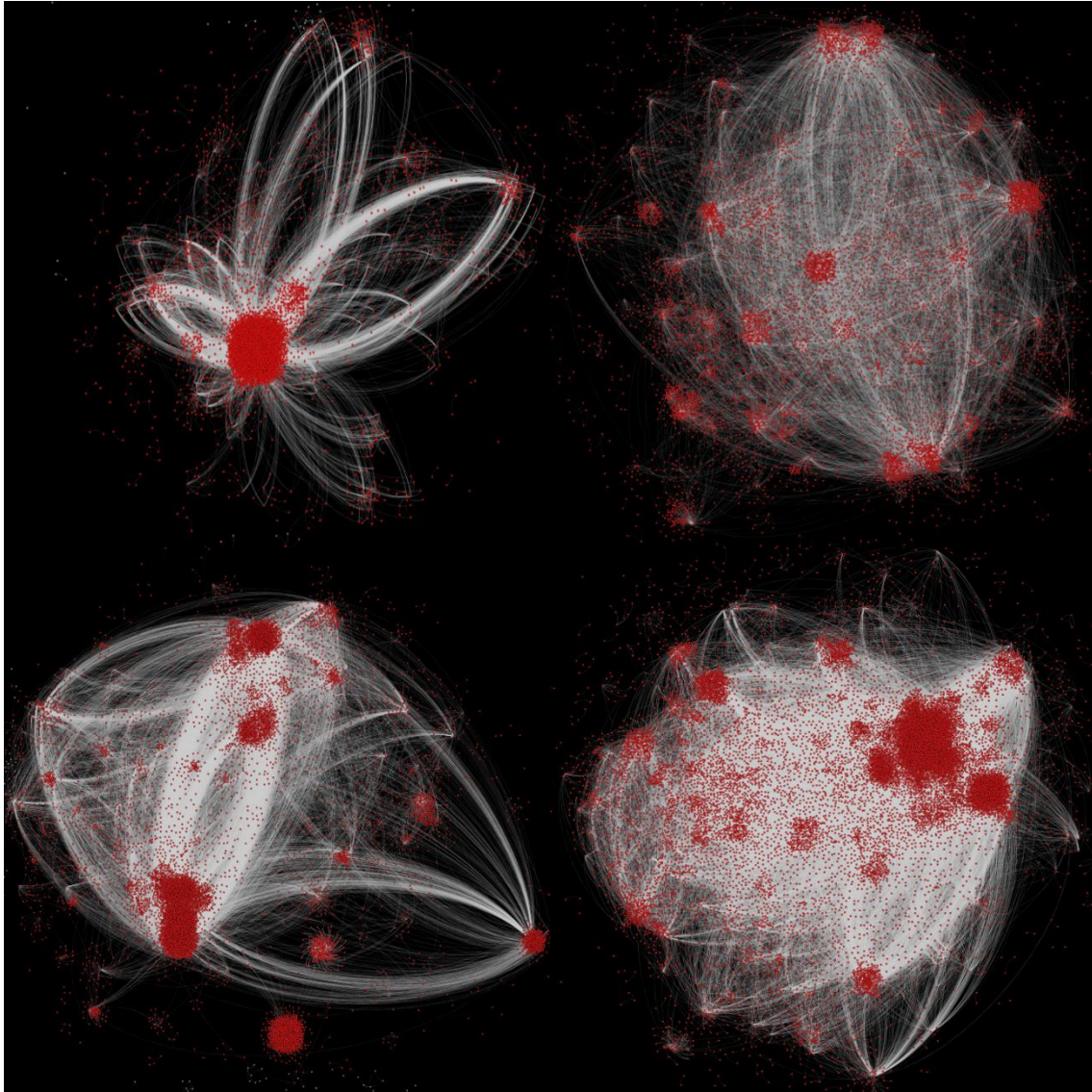


Fig. 22 – Cluster structure of #Anonymous interaction network, May 2013, July 2013, August 2014 and November 2014. The four network visualizations highlight the cluster structure of the network in different months, corresponding to extreme levels of integration and fragmentation.

The comparison of the networks' divergent community structures allows a clear understanding of the evolving compactness of the Anonymous interaction network. On May 2013 the network consists of a largely predominant cluster with few sparse independent nodes, while on July 2013 (just two months) it turns into an array of almost equally sized and relatively disconnected modules. Analogously, on August 2014 at least four very compact clusters of the same magnitude are visible, which on November 2014 evolve into a much more integrated structure.

As the analysis of the compactness of the network shows, there is no evidence for an evolution toward a more integrated and compact structure, nor toward a more fragmented and sparse one; rather, the network alternates in phases of greater integration and greater fragmentation.

#### 4.2.3 - Centralization

The following analysis evaluates whether the network progressively verticalizes, following a trend toward greater formalization of its structure. In operative terms, this requires assessing the centralization of the network, that is to say the skewness of the distribution of the centrality of users. There are a number of network measures to define the centrality of a node and this analysis will focus on two of these: degree centrality and betweenness centrality. The first defines centrality in terms of the number of connections held by a node, while the second elaborates on the number of shortest paths on which a nodes lies. Thus, in this context, degree centrality measures the level of popularity and activity of a user, while betweenness centrality reflects how strategic is the position occupied by a user in holding the network together.<sup>80</sup> In order to provide a synthetic indicator of whether each snapshot of the network is more or less centralized, the analysis relies on the coefficient of the variation of the distribution of the centralization parameters mentioned above. This measure corresponds to the standard deviation of the centrality distribution divided by the mean, and allows observation taken across different months to be comparable.

Table 8 reports the minimum, maximum and average value of the centralization in terms of degree centrality and betweenness centrality.

	Min	Max	Avg.	Dev. Std.
degree centralization	4,14	10,81	6,45	1,79
betweenness centralization	7,83	27,83	13,19	4,99

Tab. 8 – Interaction network. Distribution of centralization measures across months. The table shows minimum, maximum, average and standard deviations of the average shortest path and the modularity index of the monthly networks.

Whereas it is not possible to make any inference with respect to the level of centralization itself, the most striking observation is the extent to which centralization varies across different monthly snapshots of the network: degree centralization ranges between a minimum of 4.14 and a maximum of 10.81, while betweenness centralization oscillates between 7.83 and 27.83.

In order to understand whether this corresponds to a trend toward increased verticalization, or increased horizontality, of the network structure, the normalized values of the two indexes of centralization are plotted in Figure 23, in regard to their evolution in time.

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<sup>80</sup> It is important to consider this, provided that the network, as shown, often passes through phases of high modularity of its structure.

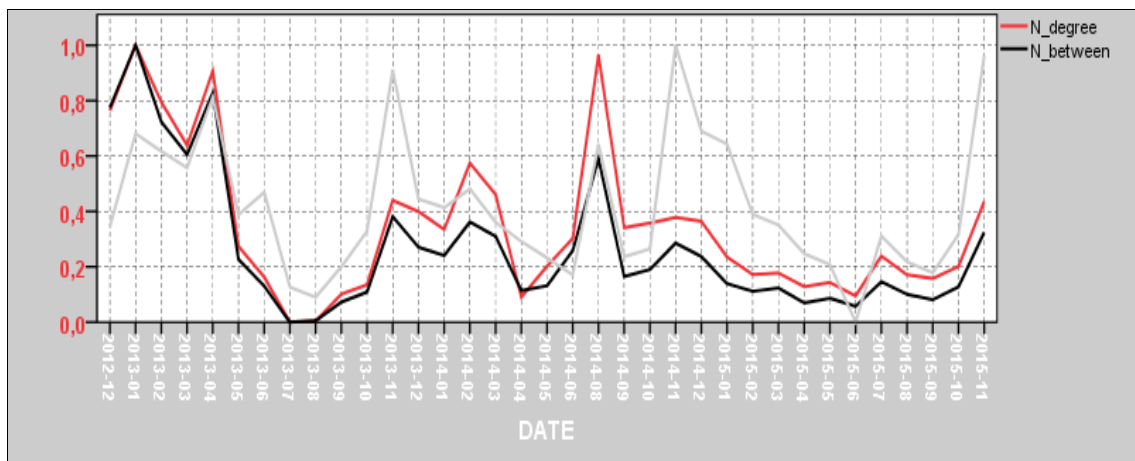


Fig. 23 – Interaction network. Evolution of centralization measures across months (normalized values). The values of degree centralization (red line) and betweenness centralization (black line) are plotted against each month; the size of the network is also included as a reference (gray line). The network fluctuates between moments of highest and lower centralization, without following a trend.

Again, the two indicators follow a very similar evolution, strengthening the reliability of the measure; the plot shows that the centralization does not follow any specific trend. The network starts as very centralized, following a trend toward increased horizontality that culminates between July and August 2013; then it reaches a relative peak of centralization between November 2013 and February 2014; centralization declines around April 2014 and then suddenly increases in August 2014; in the following months the network remains relatively decentralized, but a new wave of centralization can be seen in the last observations available. In general, network centralization is strongly associated with network size: the higher the number of nodes involved, the more uneven the distribution of centrality measures is.

It is possible to reinforce this deduction examining the network visualized in Figure 24, referring to the months in which the greatest fluctuation of centralization measures takes place. The network layout is computed with the Fruchterman Reingold algorithm, which tends to move central nodes in the middle of the graph; the size of nodes is linearly proportional to the weighted in-degree (scale 1:50), another measure of centrality that considers the number of links received by a node and includes the frequency of each interaction.



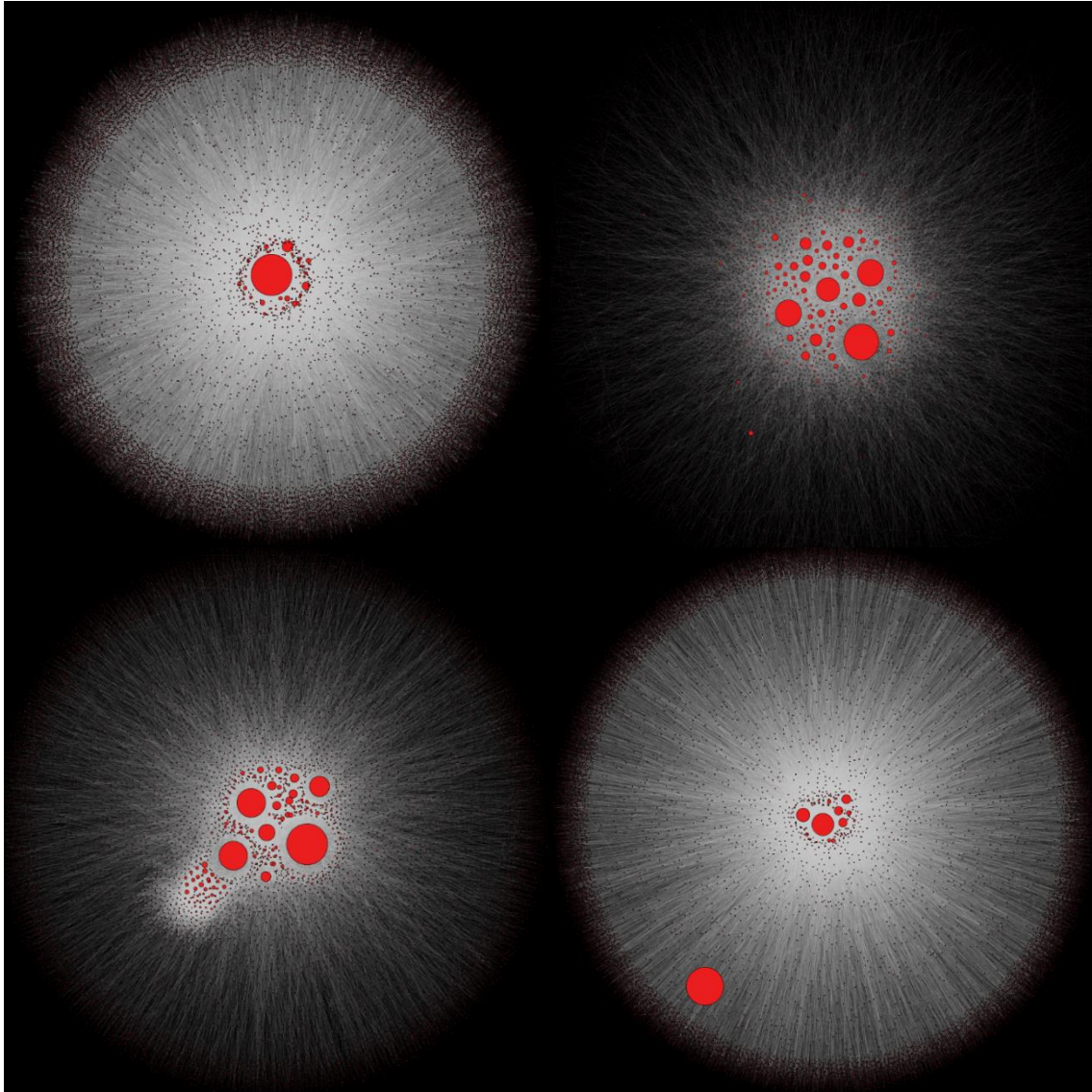


Fig. 24 – Centrality distribution of #Anonymous interaction network, April 2013, July 2013, April 2014 and August 2014. The four network visualizations highlight the cluster structure of the network in different months, corresponding to extreme levels of integration and fragmentation.

The transition across different and oscillating stages of centralization is clear from the network representations. In April 2013 one single node concentrates a large share of connections, while in July 2013 influence is distributed across a set of distinct users. In April 2014, analogously, there is no clear center of the network and users tend to converge around the core, while in August 2014 a vast share of users is pushed to the boundaries and influence is concentrated in a couple of nodes (including a node with high weighted in-degree, but with low centrality in terms of number of connections).

Just as was observed for stability and compactness, the level of centralization of the network oscillates without following a specific evolutionary pattern.

#### 4.2.4 - Summary

The analysis of patterns of stability, compactness and centralization of the structure of Anonymous' interaction network on Twitter allows us to draw the following observations:

- the components of the network – nodes, edges and clusters – are generally unstable, and the network alternates stages of more relative stability with many moments of a sudden reshuffling of its elements;
- the network structure oscillates between moments of greater compactness, where users' interactions are largely concentrated in a predominant cluster, and moments of higher fragmentation, where a number of consistent modules of interactions coexist; and
- the distribution of centrality of nodes also varies, demonstrating a continuous transition between more multi-polar / horizontal to more concentrated / hierarchical structures.

The Anonymous network of interactions is characterized by a fast evolving pattern of evolution, alternating between radically different structures. These findings imply that Anonymous as a whole is structurally erratic: a trend toward one certain configuration is systematically counterbalanced by a trend toward another.

### **4.3 - The complex articulation of Anonymous' issues**

This section moves to the 'semantic' level of social movement goals and issues of concern, it elaborates on the hashtags included in the Twitter corpus already presented. In particular, the focus will be on the hashtags related to Anonymous operations.

An Anonymous operation is a sustained campaign that is concerned with a specific issue or target. In the syntax of online communication, it commonly follows the standard format Op[name of the operation]. Tweets related to a specific operation consequently include a hashtag in the form #Op[name of the operation]. It is thus possible to explore the dataset of tweets available for the specific operations in which the shifting Anonymous network has been involved. The list of hashtags included in the corpus has been parsed so as to retain those starting with the characters '#OP'; this resulted in a long list of 7,815 hashtags related to operations. A threshold of 50 occurrences has then been set to filter out the more insignificant ones, which produced a list of 911 distinct relevant markers of operations.



The most recurrent operations in the dataset are #OpIsrael (136,388 tweets), #OpISIS (92,828 tweets) and #OpKKK (69,975 tweets). Thus, the three most important operations related to Anonymous in the last three years have been targeting three entities as different as the state of Israel, the Jihadist organization ISIS, and the white-supremacist group the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Quite surprisingly, the theme of internet freedom, which has been predominant in the first big wave of Anonymous' political commitment, seems to have been more marginal in the three years covered by this dataset: the only higher-ranked related operation is #OpNSA. Next to these top operations stands a long tail of medium-sized and minor ones, encompassing an array of formulations as varied as #OpFerguson, #OpNSA, #OpSeaWorld, #OpBahrain, #OpChemtrails and #OpCannabis.

#### *4.3.1 - Anonymous' heterogeneous souls*

In order to assess the macro-issues involved in the activity of Anonymous associates, the list of 911 hashtags related to operations has been clustered according to patterns of co-occurrence. A tweet related to an operation is often marked with a plurality of hashtags; furthermore, operations are sometimes bridged by including the related hashtags in the same tweet. It is legitimate to expect hashtags that repeatedly co-occur in the same tweet to be strongly related in terms of their semantic content.

The following visualization (Figure 26) presents the resulting network of hashtag co-occurrence. In order to strengthen the logic of clustering, edges have been retained only above a threshold of five occurrences. So as to render the graph more readable, it displays only the labels of the nodes that count more than 1,000 occurrences.



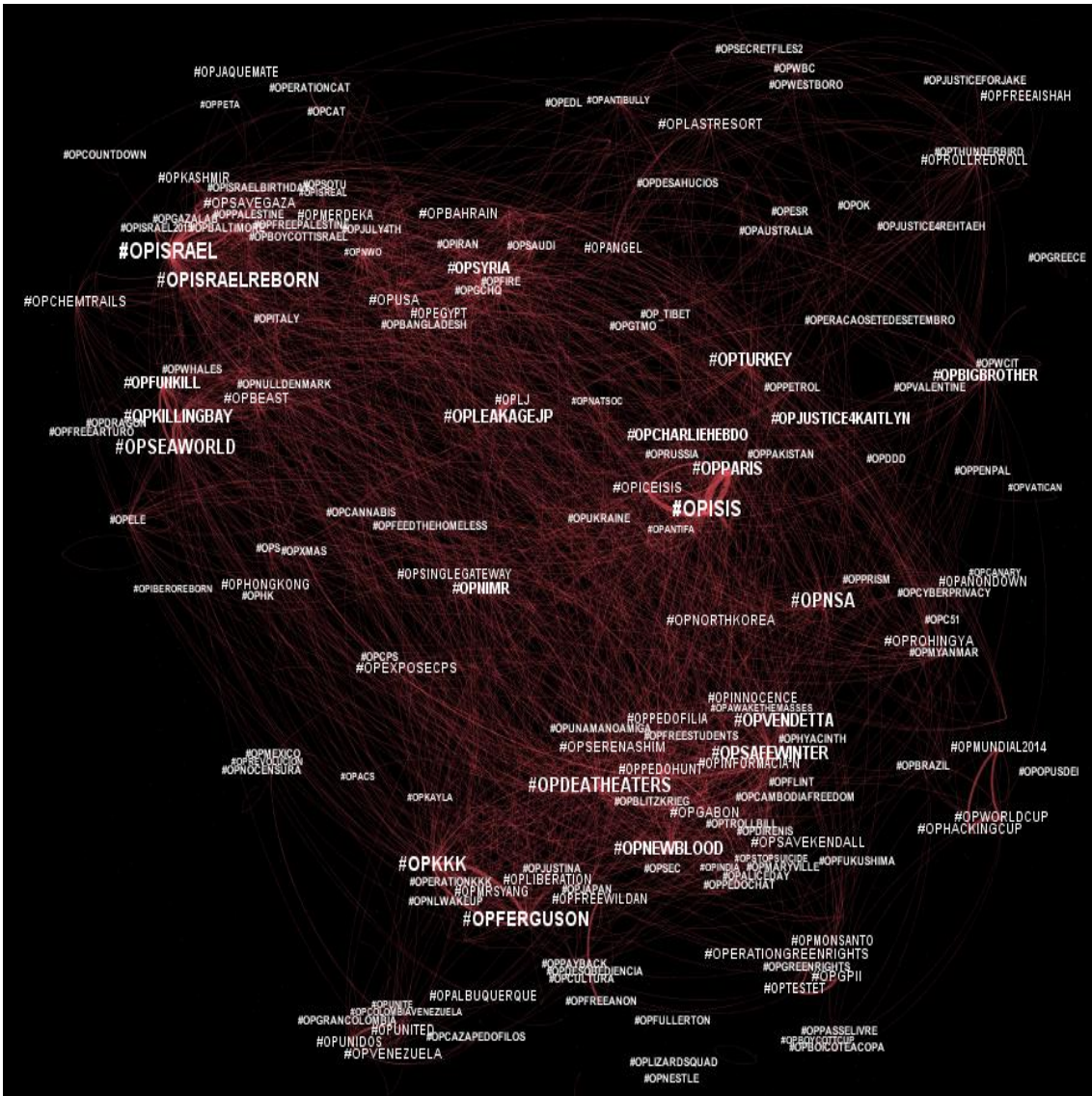


Fig. 26 – #Anonymous operations hashtags co-occurrence network; edge-cut = 5. Nodes are hashtags; edges are co-occurrences between hashtags in the same tweet; weights corresponds to the number of co-occurrences. The clustering of hashtags related to operations allows us to isolate groups of issues of concern.

The spatialization algorithm adopted (OpenOrd) confirms the tendency of operation hashtags to generally cluster according to a logic of semantic contiguity. Consequently, the resulting map has been used as a heuristic tool to assist in the process of reconstructing the categories of issues that have seen the involvement of Anonymous, according to the dataset explored. Nonetheless, it is also worth noticing that the co-occurrence of quite heterogeneous operations is not exceptional – e.g. #OpSafeWinter with #OpKkk, #OpIsis with #OpSeaWorld, #OpFerguson with #OpDeathEaters; this implies that sometimes there is an explicit intent to bridge different mobilizations. Table 9 reports the various ‘souls’ that emerge from the interpretation of the previous step. The merely heuristic function of the categorization presented must be stressed, considering the existence of



complex overlapping layers among different operations. However, the goal is to give a contextualization to the crucial claim that the Anonymous brand is involved in a number of markedly heterogeneous struggles. General information about the operations has been collected through Google searches. A particularly useful source of knowledge has proved to be the affiliated website AnonInsider (<https://anoninsiders.net>), where most of the operations press releases are aggregated.

Type	Description	Examples
<b>anti-Zionism</b>	In quite a strong contrast to the common picture of Anonymous, the numerically most consistent area of intervention in the data range analyzed is the fight against the state of Israel and in support of the Palestinian cause. Having originated in 2012, as a response to the Israeli threat to cut off internet communication in Gaza, #OpIsrael turned into a sustained operation, with a consistent Islamist background, converging on 7 April as a date to ‘wipe Israel off the web’. The operation has also attracted criticism in relation to alleged anti-semitic currents.	#OpIsrael, #OpIsraelReborn, #OpSaveGaza
<b>counter-jihad</b>	In the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attacks and following the Islamist offensive in Paris in November 2015, Anonymous’ most visible target became the self-proclaimed Islamic State, and the Jihadist universe more widely. #OpISIS provided unprecedented visibility to Anonymous on mainstream media and contributed to a general reframing of its reputation. However, it also created two opposite sources of controversy, involving the close relation of some of its offshoots with Western intelligence and with the Islamist world.	#OpISIS, #OpParis, #OpCharlieHebdo
<b>internet freedom</b>	The theme of internet freedom is a candidate for being considered the master issue of Anonymous’ heterogeneous souls, since the web is often represented as their homeland. On the one hand, champions of this cause such as Edward Snowden, Julian Assange and Aaron Swartz have been a direct inspiration for a number of crucial operations. On the other hand, many unrelated targets attracted the interest of Anonymous precisely because of their violations of the principal of transparency and information freedom.	#OpNSA, #OpLastResort, #OpBigBrother

<b>anti-regime</b>	<p>Since its debut with #OpTunisia and #OpEgypt, Anonymous became a constant presence in scenarios of uprisings against authoritarian regimes all over the world, attacking government websites and accounts, as well as providing support to protesters. The list of interventions includes the civil war in Syria, the Gezi protests in Turkey, the street demonstration in Venezuela, the ‘umbrella revolution’ in Hong Kong and the ‘Euromaidan’ protest in Ukraine. Sometimes, the fact that Anonymous has taken sides in critical geopolitical scenarios has been a cause of controversy among its supporters.</p>	<p>#OpSyria, #OpTurkey, #OpHongKong</p>
<b>animal rights</b>	<p>Another recurrent theme of intervention is that related to animal rights. In particular, various actions refer to the indiscriminate killing of maritime animals, such as dolphins and whales, especially in specific contexts, such as the Taji bay in Japan. Some operations have also campaigned to ban ‘animal rape’ within countries where it is legal, such as Denmark.</p>	<p>#OpSeaWorld, #OpKillingBay, #OpFunkill</p>
<b>environmental</b>	<p>An important soul of Anonymous is particularly concerned with the environmental cause, targeting companies and governments accused to put economic greed before the needs of the planet. This range of operations involves a number of more specific focuses, such as nuclear energy, mega projects or genetically-modified organisms.</p>	<p>#OpGreenRights, #OpMonsanto, #OpLeakageJP</p>
<b>police abuse</b>	<p>In August 2014 the killing of the African-American teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, by a white police officer, spurred protests against police abuse and racialized aspects of that abuse. #OpFerguson became one of the most popular Anonymous operations ever. The struggle against police abuse involved Anonymous in several antecedent and subsequent similar episodes. Often the main goal has been to identify the names of the guilty parties and to make sure the case is taken to court.</p>	<p>#OpFerguson, #OpBaltimore, #OpBART</p>
<b>anti-racist</b>	<p>During the 2014 Ferguson protest against police violence and racism, the Ku Klux Klan overtly threatened the protesters. As a response, Anonymous launched a huge effort directed toward ‘unhooding’ KKK members. Similarly, other operations have targeted white-supremacist and Nazi organizations, as an</p>	<p>#OpKKK, #OpAntifa, #OpStormFront</p>

	expression of an openly anti-fascist Anonymous branch.	
<b>child abuse</b>	The internet is notorious as a space where pedo-pornographic material and children hunters proliferate. A vast array of Anonymous activists has engaged in detecting and reporting suspected pedophiles. #OpDeathEaters is a related operation focusing on uncovering a worldwide network of influential people involved in large-scale abuses of children, allegedly covered up by the authorities.	#OpDeathEaters, #OpPedoHunt, #OpInnocence
<b>avengers</b>	A number of Anonymous' operations have arisen in relation to very specific episodes, as a response to a perceived sense of injustice. Several episodes related to sex crimes, induced suicides or persecutions have led Anonymous associates to confront police departments accused of covering up cases, and to take up the role of 'white knights'.	#OpJustice4Kaitlyn, #OpJustice4Rehtaeh, #OpJustice4Savannah
<b>conspiracy theories</b>	Among the variegated ideological orientations of Anonymous affiliates, a conspicuous cluster engages with themes that would be generally framed as part of a conspiracy theory orientation. The related operations include campaigns against chemical trials and geo engineering projects, which are accused of manipulate the climate and causing natural disasters, as well as against the plan for a New World Order endorsed by the powerful Masonic clique, the Illuminati.	#OpChemtrials, #OpNWO, #OpMason

Tab. 9 – Heuristic categorization of Anonymous' most recurrent issues of concern. The table proposes a classification of Anonymous' 'souls', according to the aggregation of operations for contiguous issues. As the brief description suggests, these souls are sometimes extremely heterogeneous.

#### 4.3.2 – Operation dynamics

The section above has opened the black box of Anonymous, showing the vast array of issues covered by the most important operations included in the dataset. A straightforward question that arises concerns the temporal dynamic of this heterogeneous network: is there a stable core of operations or, alternatively, does the attention shift among different issues of concern? If Anonymous is to be conceived of as a unique organizational entity, then a specific set of issues should be predominant over a reasonably long timespan, signaling the existence of a stable core that is distinctive of the 'Anonymous movement'.

For this purpose, the distribution across months of the occurrence of hashtags related to operations has been computed. Out of this list, a core of 77 operations has been retained, corresponding to the five most tweeted operations per month. In this way it is possible to observe the dynamics of the focus of actions related to Anonymous. The chart<sup>81</sup> in Figure 27 represents the ‘ebbs and flows’ of Anonymous operations over time. The size of each pipe is proportional to the number of tweets that refer to each operation and values are normalized to increase readability.

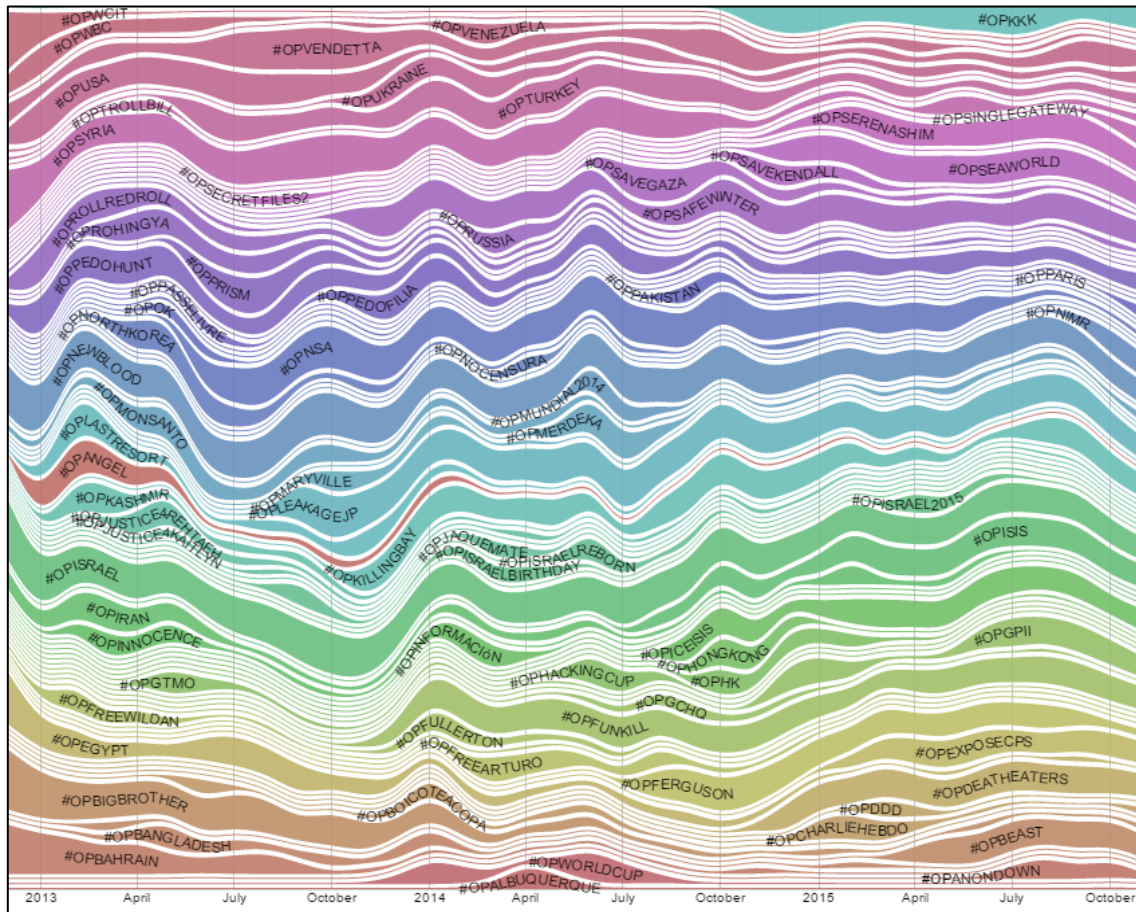


Fig. 27 – Volume of monthly top-five operations over time (normalized values), December 2012 – November 2015. The ‘bump chart’ shows the evolution of the relative tweet volume of the 77 operations that fall into the five most consistent operations (at least) in a month. As the shape of the pipes show, some operations remain in the top-five throughout the whole dataset, while others reach the top and then disappear in a rather short time.

This visualization allows us to make two important inferences: one related to the dynamics of the operations themselves and the second concerning the shifting focus of Anonymous actions.

<sup>81</sup> The chart was generated using the Bump Chart model provided by the tool Raw ([app.raw.densitydesign.org/](http://app.raw.densitydesign.org/)) developed by the research lab Density Design, Politecnico di Milano (<http://www.densitydesign.org/>).

It can be easily noticed that different operations present a distinct evolution. The only constant presence in the overall period is #OpIsrael. Other operations present a likewise persistent character, such as #OpLeakageJP. Conversely, other operations appear prominent at the beginning of the timespan, but die out before the end, such as in the case of #OpBigBrother. To conclude, some operations present a more contingent character, suddenly rising and then declining in a relatively short time, as in the case of #OpUkraine, #OpHongKong and #OpInnocence, etc.

More interestingly, the data show that not only is Anonymous made up of heterogeneous souls: the prominence of these souls shifts dramatically over time. The five most consistent operations each month do not recur – indeed, they amount to 77 in total – signaling a continuously evolving structure of attention of the network at large.

The shifting character of Anonymous’ attention toward issues, as expressed by the dynamic of its operations, is even clearer in Figure 28, which allows us to make more exact inferences regarding the monthly quantitative composition of the operation set. It shows the evolution in time of a total of 611 operations, corresponding to the aggregation of the 50 most prominent operations in each month. Each pipe of a different color represents an operation and its size is proportional to the absolute value of its count.

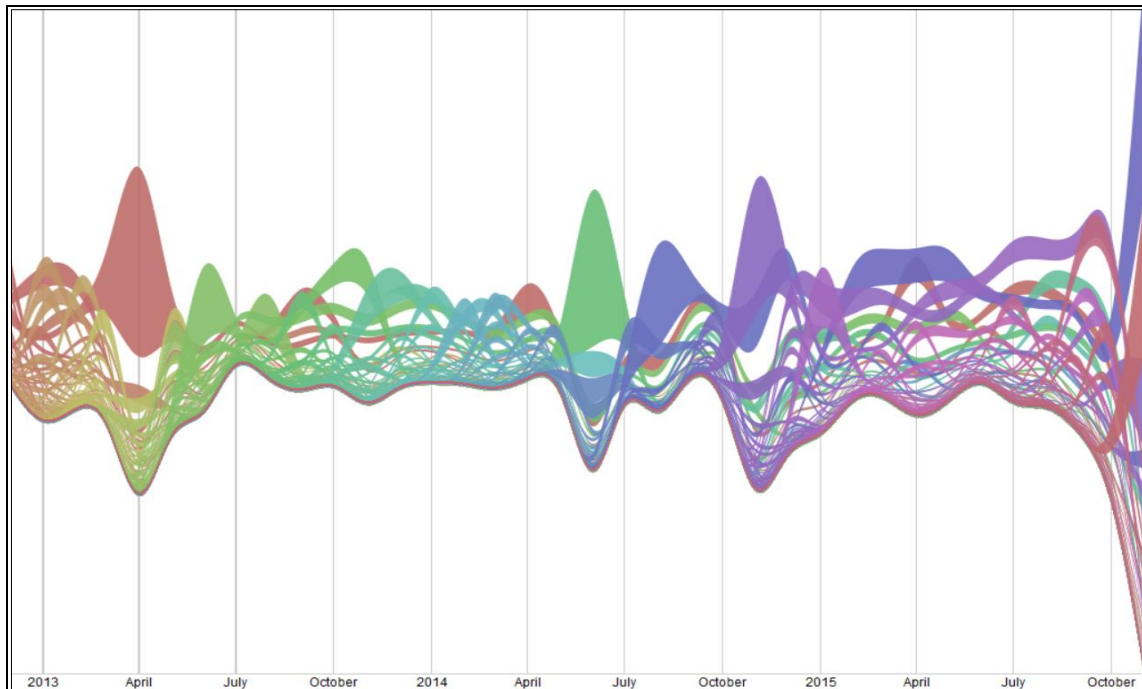


Fig. 28 – Volume of monthly top-50 operations across time (absolute values), December 2012 – November 2015. The ‘bump chart’ shows the evolution of the absolute tweet volume of the 611 operations that fall into the 50 most consistent operations (at least) in a month. Some phases present a concentration of activity around one operation, while in other phases Anonymous’ activity is spread across a number of operations.

The articulation of the chart reflects the unstable character of the ‘semantic core’ of Anonymous. The evolution shows the cyclic transition from periods in which Anonymous’ involvement is concentrated around a specific issue (such as around April 2013, or before July 2014) and thus other operations are less popular, to phases in which the attention is given in an equal share to a number of different concerns (such as at the beginning of 2013 or before October 2015).

#### 4.3.3 – Operations structure

Another aspect that is worth inspecting is the structural relation between operations, in terms of overlap among the users involved. How can we characterize the structure and evolution of this ‘socio-semantic’ network? In particular, two alternative scenarios are possible: operations are largely disconnected one from each other, in the sense that a specific set of users tends to converge around a specific set of operations; or operations are densely associated, meaning that users tend to shift between different operations.

In order to inquire into this dimension, a bipartite graph connecting users and operations has been built. A bipartite graph is a network composed of two classes of nodes, in which edges link nodes of different classes. Any bipartite network can be translated into a unipartite network, by following a procedure of ‘projection’: nodes belonging to one of the two classes are connected one with each other, considering the number of shared connections with the nodes of the other class. For the purpose of this analysis, the bipartite users-to-operations graph has been projected into a unipartite operation network: operations are linked according to whether they have overlaps of active users who include the operation-related hashtag in their tweets. Links among operations are assigned a weight corresponding to the number of overlapping users.

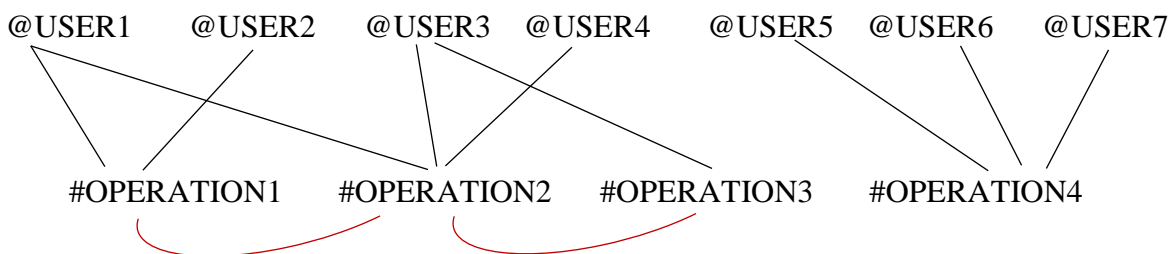


Fig. 29 – Model of Twitter hashtag projected network. Nodes are operation hashtags; edges are indirect links between operations through shared users; weights are the number of shared users.



If users tend to aggregate around distinct sets of operations, the resulting graph should be rather sparse and clustered; and on the other hand a denser and more integrated graph would signal a large share of users that are active across different operations.

The visualization of the graph in Figure 30 makes quite clear which of the two scenarios is reflected by the data. It is worth noticing that the algorithm of spatialization adopted (OpenOrd) is meant to emphasize the community structure of a network.

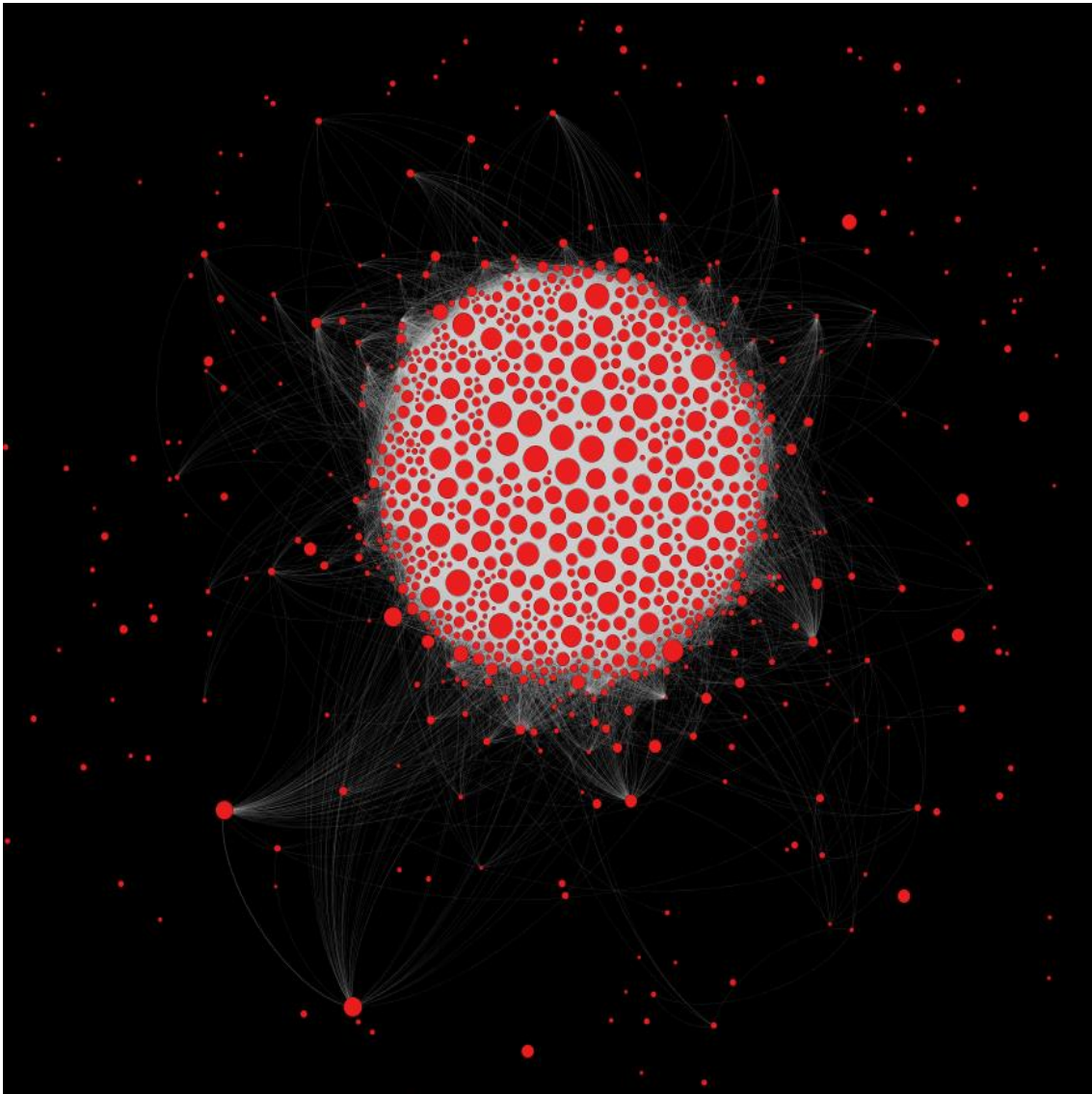


Fig. 30 – User operations projected network (nodes are operations; links are shared users). The network visualization shows the dense structure of the network between operations linked by overlapping users, revealing the existence of overlapping users across a large number of distinct operations.

The network of overlapping participants among operations is strikingly dense and compact. The projected network counts 911 nodes, which corresponds to operation hashtags; nodes are linked by 54,111 unique edges, which correspond to the existence of shared users. Despite the presence of a

few isolated nodes (most of which correspond to slight variations on, or mistyping of, the names of other operations), the vast majority of nodes coalesce in a tightly connected principal component, which includes 85.18% of the operation hashtags. Table 10 lists the 30 most recurrent links between operations based on shared users.

OPERATION 1	OPERATION 2	SHARED USERS
#OPFERGUSON	#OPKKK	761
#OPSEAWORLD	#OPKILLINGBAY	460
#OPISIS	#OPPARIS	448
#OPISIS	#OPKKK	394
#OPKILLINGBAY	#OPFUNKILL	389
#OPDEATHEATERS	#OPKKK	343
#OPISIS	#OPDEATHEATERS	309
#OPSAFEWINTER	#OPKKK	283
#OPSEAWORLD	#OPFUNKILL	279
#OPFERGUSON	#OPISRAEL	263
#OPISRAEL	#OPKKK	257
#OPSAFEWINTER	#OPDEATHEATERS	253
#OPISRAEL	#OPVENDETTA	240
#OPISRAEL	#OPSAFEWINTER	239
#OPISRAEL	#OPISIS	238
#OPVENDETTA	#OPSAFEWINTER	238
#OPFERGUSON	#OPSAFEWINTER	226
#OPHACKINGCUP	#OPWORLD CUP	224
#OPISIS	#OPSAFEWINTER	223
#OPFERGUSON	#OPISIS	221
#OPISRAEL	#OPTURKEY	217
#OPFERGUSON	#OPDEATHEATERS	214
#OPNEWBLOOD	#OPISRAEL	208
#OPSEAWORLD	#OPBEAST	207
#OPISRAEL	#OPSAVEGAZA	203
#OPISRAEL	#OPSYRIA	197
#OPNEWBLOOD	#OPSAFEWINTER	193
#OPKILLINGBAY	#OPSAFEWINTER	190
#OPBIGBROTHER	#OPISRAEL	189
#OPROHINGYA	#OPISRAEL	181

Tab. 10 – Top 30 operation connections based on co-users. The table reports the most consistent pairs of operations tied by overlapping users and the number of shared users. Most of the user overlaps are across contiguous issues, but some connect more distant operations.

The majority of connections, as could be expected, link operations involved with the same or with a contiguous issue – e.g. #OpISIS and #OpParis, #OpKillingBay and #OpFunKill. Interestingly, though, in some cases the semantic connection is rather loose – e.g. #OpKKK and #OpDeathEaters, #OpIsrael and #OpSafeWinter.



The static vision provided by Figure 30 and Table 10, however, does not reflect the dynamic character of the underlying data. For this reason, the following graph (Figure 31) reports the flows of users from operation to operation across time. The top-five operations per month are retained and spatialized following the time evolution: the upper-left corner correspond to the first month, January 2012, and the curve progresses with time, ending in the upper-right corner with the last month, November 2015.

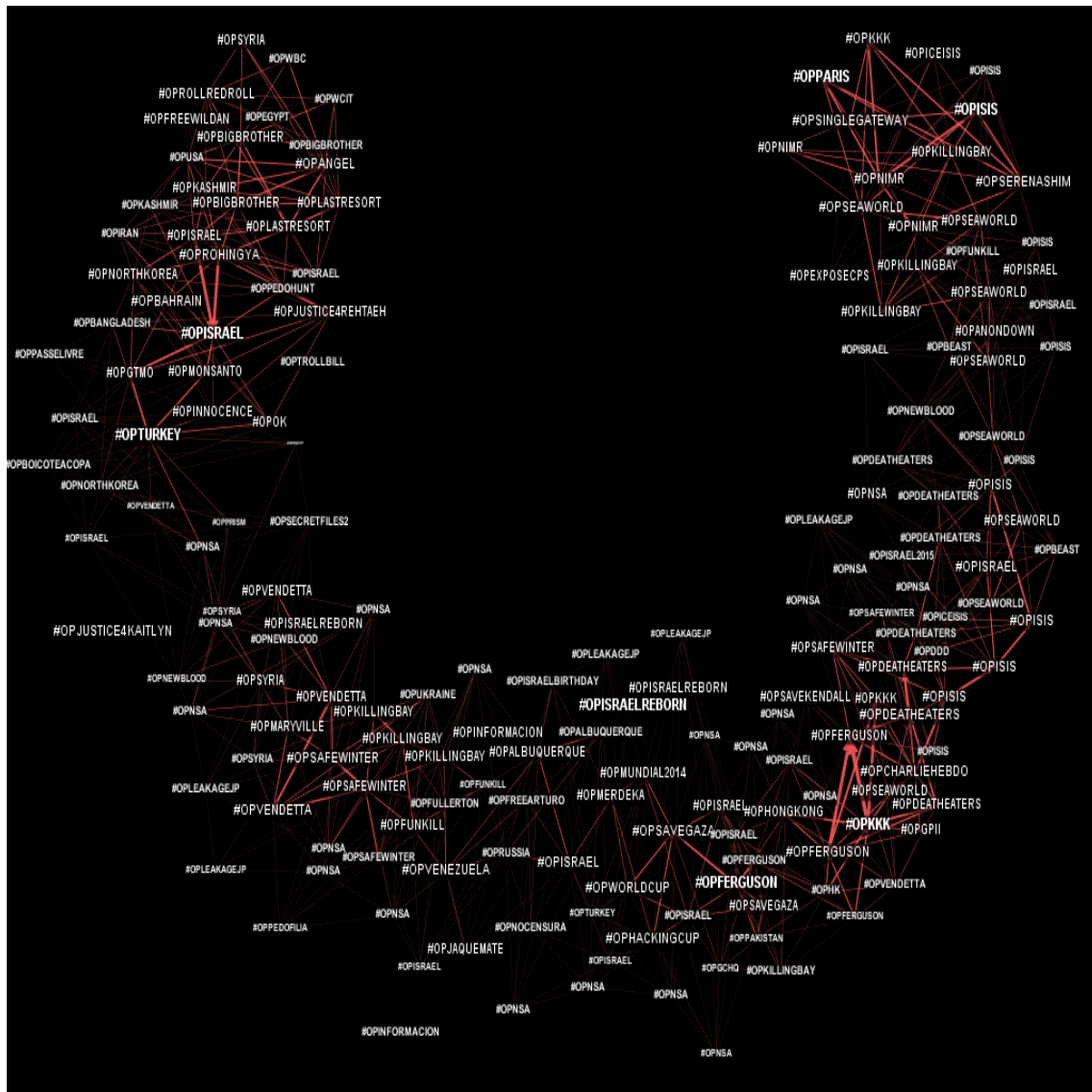


Fig. 31 – Dynamic operations network based on shared users, December 2012 – November 2015. The dynamic network shows, in a counterclockwise direction, the spillovers of users across monthly top-five operations over time. Some phases present consistent spillovers, while in other phases operations do not inherit many of their users from previous operations.

The networks represented in Figure 28 allow us to infer the dynamics of the transitions of users between operations across time. An emerging aspect related to the structure of network paths is the

clear alternation between phases in which a consistent number of users flow to other operations in the next month – in the areas where many strong links are shown – and phases in which the base of the core operations is largely regenerated. Again, in certain cases the flow involves the same operation, which is part of the core for two consecutive months (e.g. there is a long #OpISIS path), while in other cases the transition involves two operations which have clear overlapping issue (e.g. #OpKKK and #OpFerguson, both related to the broker issue of racial discrimination); and in other cases the relation in terms of shared users is not reflected by a close relation in semantic terms (e.g. #OpMonsanto and #OpTurkey – an ecologist mobilization and an anti-authoritarian one). In general, paths have a clear semantic coherence, though transitions of users among highly heterogeneous operations are present, though they are unlikely to occur.

These results, and in particular Figure 27, could give the impression that overall, despite its many ambiguities, Anonymous is a highly integrated entity, since the heterogeneous actions undertaken in its name are structurally linked by overlapping participants. In order to understand to what extent this is the case, however, the relative values of the overlaps should be estimated, by referring to the volume of the operations involved. The network above shows that there are a certain amount of users who create a layer of connectivity among most of the heterogeneous operations, though it does not show the actual share of users moving from operation to operation. Consequently, for each operation, a list of relative overlaps with every other operation has been computed; that is to say: the proportion between overlapping users and the occurrences of the operation. In this way, a list of the distribution of relative overlaps is generated. The list of operations has been limited to the 77 top-five operations per month, so as not to include minor hashtags that would bring a lot of noise to the analysis. Table 11 reports, for each operation, the number of operations connected via overlapping users, and the minimum, maximum and average shares of users between that operation and the operations to which it is connected.

OP HASHTAG	N. LINKS	MIN	MAX	AVG.
#OPISIS	75	0.00%	5.83%	0.91%
#OPPARIS	75	0.00%	19.73%	1.63%
#OPCHARLIEHEBDO	75	0.00%	18.40%	2.97%
#OPKKK	76	0.00%	9.87%	1.22%
#OPJUSTICE4KAITLYN	73	0.00%	33.33%	9.83%
#OPVENEZUELA	76	0.03%	8.70%	2.48%
#OPWORLDCUP	76	0.03%	17.43%	2.97%
#OPHACKINGCUP	76	0.03%	19.23%	2.89%
#OPSEAWORLD	75	0.00%	5.85%	0.83%
#OPSINGLEGATEWAY	74	0.00%	13.80%	2.67%

#OPROHINGYA	75	0.00%	20.11%	3.35%
#OPSERENASHIM	74	0.00%	9.12%	1.76%
#OPANGEL	75	0.00%	17.12%	3.53%
#OPBAHRAIN	75	0.00%	12.87%	2.21%
#OPSAVEKENDALL	73	0.00%	2.48%	0.55%
#OPFREEWILDAN	73	0.00%	14.00%	1.67%
#OPFERGUSON	76	0.00%	12.25%	1.28%
#OPBIGBROTHER	75	0.00%	12.46%	2.45%
#OPMUNDIAL2014	76	0.05%	26.85%	4.19%
#OPJAQUEMATE	74	0.00%	14.91%	1.04%
#OPANONDOWN	75	0.00%	17.74%	3.71%
#OPSAVEGAZA	76	0.01%	20.44%	2.99%
#OPICEISIS	75	0.00%	23.51%	2.99%
#OPMERDEKA	75	0.00%	6.19%	1.78%
#OPINNOCENCE	75	0.00%	8.69%	2.21%
#OPISRAELREBORN	74	0.00%	0.33%	0.07%
#OPHONGKONG	75	0.00%	17.14%	3.90%
#OPKILLINGBAY	76	0.01%	8.44%	1.39%
#OPLASTRESORT	75	0.00%	15.73%	3.52%
#OPGTMO	75	0.00%	23.98%	5.04%
#OPNIMR	75	0.00%	9.45%	1.68%
#OPOK	75	0.00%	13.11%	4.20%
#OPEXPOSECPS	74	0.00%	5.10%	0.95%
#OPROLLREDROLL	75	0.00%	13.89%	3.55%
#OPMONSANTO	75	0.00%	22.47%	5.86%
#OPNSA	76	0.01%	2.32%	0.61%
#OPJUSTICE4REHTAEH	75	0.00%	18.83%	4.74%
#OPGPII	74	0.00%	7.26%	1.62%
#OPMARYVILLE	75	0.00%	16.71%	4.81%
#OPISRAEL	76	0.00%	1.94%	0.66%
#OPISRAEL2015	75	0.00%	14.42%	2.21%
#OPUSA	75	0.00%	18.85%	3.30%
#OPINFORMACION	21	0.00%	70.00%	3.82%
#OPDEATHEATERS	75	0.00%	7.94%	1.42%
#OPPASSELIVRE	71	0.00%	19.24%	1.25%
#OPBANGLADESH	75	0.00%	17.68%	3.90%
#OPHK	75	0.00%	24.80%	5.44%
#OPWBC	75	0.00%	21.06%	5.34%
#OPWCIT	75	0.00%	23.44%	4.03%

Tab. 11 – Descriptive variables of the distributions of relative overlaps between monthly top-50 operations. The table reports, for each of the monthly top-five operations, the number of linked operations via overlapping users, and the minimum, maximum and average overlap of users with other operations. The distributions imply that, despite the fact that operations are frequently connected one with each other through shared users, the proportion of overlapping users is generally very low.

From Table 11 we can make the following observations. First, looking at the number of links per operation, we notice that almost all of the operations connect with almost all the others – most of the

values are between 75 and 76; only one operation connects with a minority of others – #OpInformacion, with 22. Nonetheless, the maximum minimum share of overlapping users is 0.05%, indicating that all the operations have at least some extremely weak connections with others. Looking at the distribution of maxima, we can indeed observe that there are at least some strong connections, thus cases where two operations shares a large number of users; the maximum of the maxima of shared users is 70%, reached by the two Latin American-based operations #OpInformacion, devoted to collaboratively sharing counter-information, and #OpPedofilia, against child abuse. Many operations, though, present very low maximum maxima: the most extreme cases are #OpIsraelReborn and #OpLeakageJP, which, respectively, share only 0.33% and 0.59% of users with the operation to which they are most connected. The distribution of the average relative overlaps, to conclude, oscillates between the 0.07% of #OpIsraelReborn (thus, a more ‘autonomous’ operation) and the 9.84% of #OpJustice4Kaitlyn (an operation that shares more users with others). The average value of the average relative overlap is 3.13%, a value that reinforces the conclusion that despite the fact that some ‘Anonymous’ users do move from operation to operation, thus integrating the heterogeneous activity in an overall connected network, this does not imply a ‘unity of action’.

To obtain a better understanding of this process of users brokering operations, resulting in such a densely connected network, the histogram below (Figure 32) plots the distribution of the number of operations-related hashtags to which each user is connected. The number of operations is represented in a logarithmic scale, while the frequency is represented on an exponential scale, so as to increase the readability of the values.

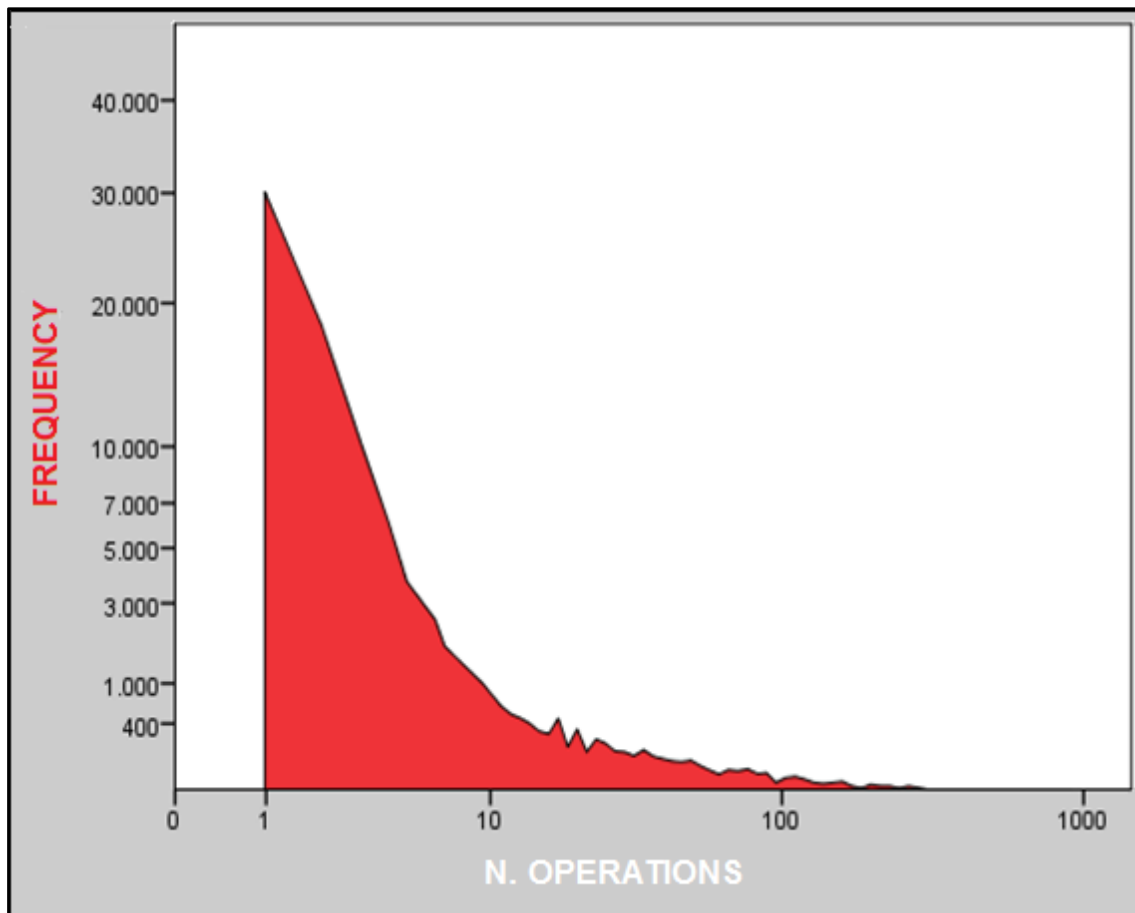


Fig. 32 – Frequency distribution of number of operations per user (logarithmic-exponential scale). The histogram represents the frequency of each number of operations related to a user. The extremely skewed distribution shows that few hubs account for the overall connectivity of the co-users operation network.

The distribution clearly shows that the large majority of users connect to a limited amount of operations, while there is a limited cluster of users that are involved in dozens, and sometimes hundreds, of them. Consequently, the overall connectivity of the co-users operation network not only reflects largely weak connections, but also depends on the role of a minority of brokers and not on the generalized involvement of users in distinct operations.

#### 4.3.4 - Summary

The analysis of the issues resulting from the exploration of Anonymous operations' related hashtags allows us to make the following observations:

- Anonymous' activities reflect the existence of heterogeneous souls, with quite distinct goals, targets and concerns;

- Anonymous does not possess a predominant, nor stable set of issues of concern, as the targets of its actions continuously shift, and the structure of attention alternates between moments of concentration on a few, largely dominant issues, with moments of much higher diversification; and
- the distinct Anonymous operations do not involve completely isolated groups, as some users flow between different operations (sometimes even heterogeneous ones); however, this overlap generally involves a small minority of broker users, while most of the users concentrate their activity on specific operations.

These observations confirm that Anonymous lacks a stable core of more or less homogeneous issues, as might be expected within a single movement; its activities are instead sometimes strikingly heterogeneous and the focus is continuously evolving according to contingent factors.

#### **4.4 - Anonymous as an umbrella brand and its offshoots**

Anonymous has often intertwined its destiny with other organizations, mobilizations and causes, promoting campaigns that were found worthy of its endorsement. Interestingly, a number of more or less related offshoots have arisen. This section intends to shed a light on the peculiar process of ‘brand variation’, by assessing the structural relation between Anonymous as a whole and its many offshoots; this is meant to highlight the role of Anonymous as an ‘umbrella brand’ for largely autonomous mobilizations.

##### *4.4.1 - Anonymous’ sub-brands*

In order to identify the interaction between Anonymous and other entities in a grounded manner, the following heuristic procedure has been followed. The lists of hashtags and usernames extracted from the Twitter dataset have been matched, looking for patterns of occurrence of the former within the latter. In order to increase the relevance of the results, only hashtags occurring more than 1,000 times and users occurring more than five times have been considered. Subsequently, the list of terms obtained have been filtered for all the meaningful words, names of locations, institutions etc. The

analysis of the resulting list of most recurrent terms that appear within both hashtags and usernames allows us to make some interesting inferences.

A first class of terms refers to direct variations related to the Anonymous brand, which characterizes influential accounts or websites. For example, ‘AnonOps’ (Anonymous Operations) relates to the IRC servers network that hosts Anonymous’ communication channels; and ‘YourAnon’ refers to influential accounts devoted to sharing information about, and giving visibility to, various operations. Similarly, other direct variations express a specific connotation related to the messages. For example, ‘AnonFamily’ emphasizes the feeling of ‘unity within diversity’; ‘FreeAnons’, and expresses solidarity toward imprisoned comrades. Particularly interesting is the case of ‘AnonyMiss’, a derivation which includes dozens of accounts and involves a specific variation of the logo, which has emerged to identify female activists.

Another cluster is related to more autonomous groups, which have been interacting with Anonymous: ‘OWS’ (Occupy Wall Street), for whose emergence the role of Anonymous has been crucial; ‘Wikileaks’, whose struggle for government transparency and against surveillance has become one of the central issues for Anonymous; and ‘RedHack’, a Turkish Marxist-Leninist hacker crew that has cooperated closely with Anonymous.

However, the group of terms that is more interesting here is a class that, in a sense, stands in between the mostly syntactic variations pertaining to the first group and the external interactions associated with the second. This is a set of ‘sub-brands’ that have developed at various stages of Anonymous’ history, whose relation to Anonymous as a whole is sometimes more directly evoked, while at other times it exists only in the background.

The main sub-brands identified by carrying out the heuristic procedure described above are the following:

- ‘LulzSec’: a well-known spinoff created by hardcore Anonymous hackers in 2011, which has been involved in spectacular defacement and leaking actions which exist at the boundary between the ‘lulz’ and the political;
- ‘AntiSec’ (Anti-Security): a branch, which refers to a preexisting 1990s movement, which has targeted the internet security industry;
- ‘MMM’ (Million Mask March): an offshoot of Anonymous, often depicted as its ‘offline version’, related to a worldwide network of protest events that take place on the fifth of November;
- ‘Trutherbot’: the name of a vast array of accounts associated with the most conspiracy theory-oriented soul of Anonymous;

- ‘GhostSec’: a spinoff focused on fighting the presence of Islamic terrorist groups on the internet;’
- ‘CtrlSec’: a derivation of GhostSec, focusing on reporting ISIS sympathizers on Twitter;
- ‘AnonGhost’: an Islamist offshoot particularly active in #OpIsrael and other Middle-East operations; and
- ‘Sector404’: a South American spinoff of Anonymous.

As the recurrence of these terms in the usernames and in the hashtags shows, these derivations have branded themselves as somewhat autonomous entities, despite their common origin linked to Anonymous’ activities. However, looking at the associated Twitter profiles and website makes it clear that they often maintain a more or less strong reference to the ‘umbrella brand’ and its visual identity, as Figure 33 makes clear.



Fig. 33 – Logos of AnonGhost and of the Million Mask March, both sporting the Anonymous-related Guy Fawkes mask.

There is thus an apparent ambiguity when it comes to assessing the boundaries between Anonymous and its derivations: on the one hand, there are elements of explicit differentiation; on the other hand, there are elements of implicit continuity.



#### 4.4.2 - Structural relations of Anonymous' offshoots

It is important to stress that these more or less autonomous offshoots, despite having developed a distinct focus and visual identity, still maintain a more or less direct reference to Anonymous as a whole and, often, to its symbolism.

In order to understand how the different sub-brands identified relate to each other from a structural point of view, Figure 34 represents their network clustering. The network is a bipartite graph between users and hashtags containing one of the sub-brands; the hashtags have then been collapsed to a single node representing the sub-brand itself. The closer the 'audiences' – represented by red nodes – of each of the offshoots, the more overlap among them.

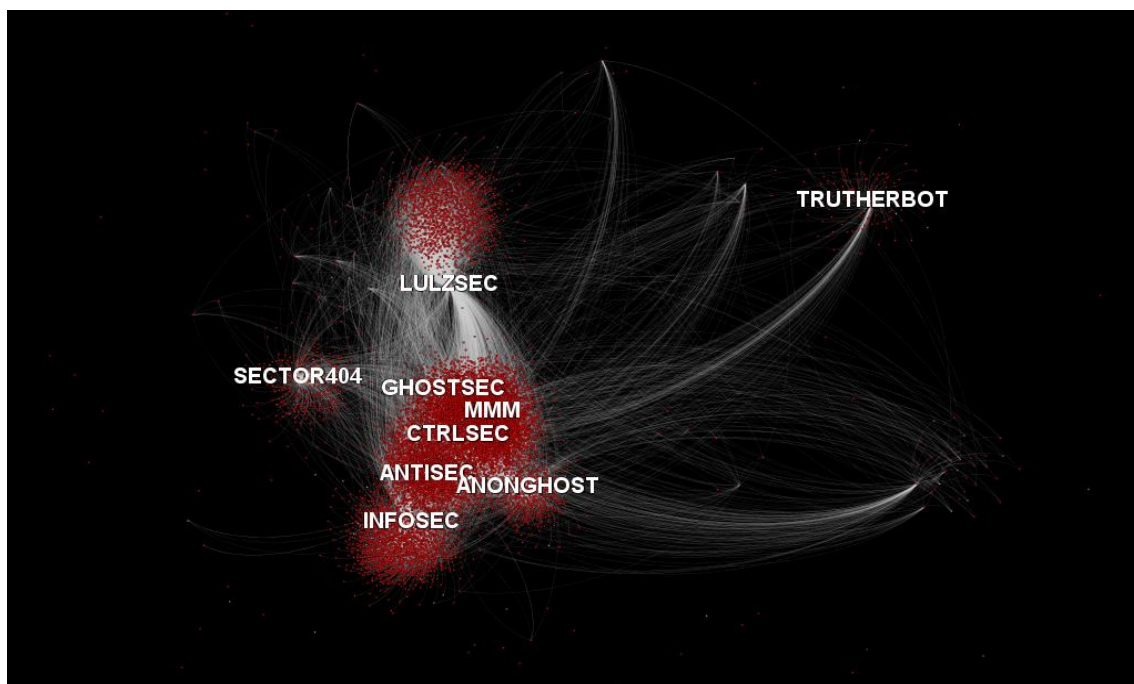


Fig. 34 – User-offshoot network (nodes are users, labels are offshoots). The network visualizations show the clustering of users around Anonymous' offshoots. Users seem to converge around certain offshoots (Sector404, Trutherbot), but also seem to share references with many of them (GhostSec, MMM, CtrlSec).

The resulting network presents some relatively disconnected clusters – in particular, Trutherbot and Sector404 – but also an overlapping core: for example, GhostSec and MMM are highly associated, despite the fact that the first is a counter-Jihadist group and the second is a protest network with rather distinct concerns. This leads to a quite counterintuitive inference: despite the process of differentiation that fosters the emergence of distinct offshoots with a specific branding, these offshoots are in reality still consistently embedded in the structural network of Anonymous as an entity as a whole, without clear differentiation among them.

Nonetheless, the network above considers users as an undifferentiated group, while it was already clear from the network among operations that some ‘super users’ act as brokers that account for much of the integration of the network. When filtering out the top fifth percentile of active users, indeed, the structure of the network changes dramatically, as shown by Figure 35.

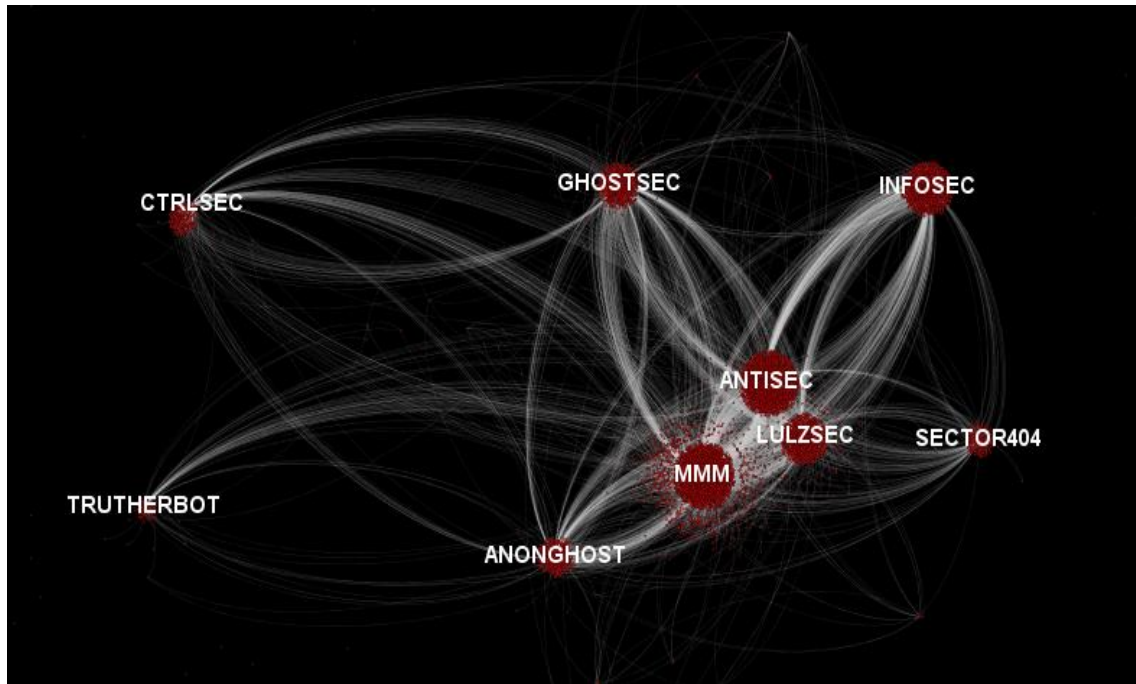


Fig. 35 – User-offshoot network, excluding top-5% of active users (nodes are users, labels are offshoots). The network visualizations shows the clustering of users around Anonymous’ offshoots when the layer of super-connectivity users is removed. Each offshoot presents a distinct constituency.

The comparison of the two network structures suggests that, similarly to what was observed in regard to the network of operations, each offshoot has a quite distinct constituency in general, but a layer of highly active users contributes to integrating the network of the various Anonymous offshoots. In order to obtain a better understanding of the relations between Anonymous as a whole and its offshoots, the following sub-section zooms in on one of these ‘sub-brands’.

#### 4.4.3 – Anonymous and the Million Mask March

This section focuses on one of Anonymous’ spinoffs: the Million Mask March, a network that has coalesced around a yearly event, often presented as the ‘offline manifestation’ of this digital collective. It will ask what structural relation exists, as observable on Twitter, between Anonymous as a whole and the Million Mask March as a particular event. Does the event uniformly affect the overall Anonymous network?

The Million Mask March started as a protest event staged simultaneously in several cities across the world on 5 November 2013. The day is the anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot, the failed attack on the British House of Lords, perpetrated in 1603 by a group that included Guy Fawkes, the conspirator whose stylized mask, popularized by the graphic novel and movie *V for Vendetta*, was turned into a universal symbol of protest and, more particularly, the icon most frequently adopted by Anonymous supporters. Since 2013, the march has been reiterated every year, bringing into the streets several thousand protesters in hundreds of cities around the world. Media reports often refer to this event as ‘Anonymous taking the streets’, while supporters make direct and indirect references to Anonymous as a whole.



Fig. 36 – Activists at Million Mask March London 2014, holding banners with Anonymous’ slogans (Source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-34721165>).

The following analysis assesses the overlap between a subset of the previously described Anonymous-related tweets and another dataset, related to the Million Mask March. The ‘MMM’ dataset comprises 322,282 tweets collected between 31 October 2013 and 9 November 2013, so as to include the day of the march and its eve and aftermath. The tweets were retrieved from the publically

available Streaming API, tracking keywords related to the march ('million mask march', '#MillionMaskMarch', '#MMM', '#OpNov5', '#Op5thNov').

The other dataset is a subset of the main corpus analyzed before, which refers to the date ranges between 24 September and 20 October 2013, and between 19 November 2013 and 17 December 2013. The choice to focus on the two 'tails', before and after the event, is meant to avoid biases related to the march being a 'hot topic'. Furthermore, in order to avoid default overlap, tweets containing the keywords related to the march have been excluded. This resulted in the 'ANON' dataset, including 264,448 tweets. The idea behind this analysis is to assess the degree of overlap between the Anonymous network in general and one specific offshoot, the Million Mask March.

The following visualization (Figure 37) presents the network of interaction among users belonging to the ANON dataset. Users that are also present in the Million Mask March network are colored in white, while users that have engaged with Anonymous but not with the Million Mask March are colored in red. Edges are not visualized, in order to increase the readability of the graph.

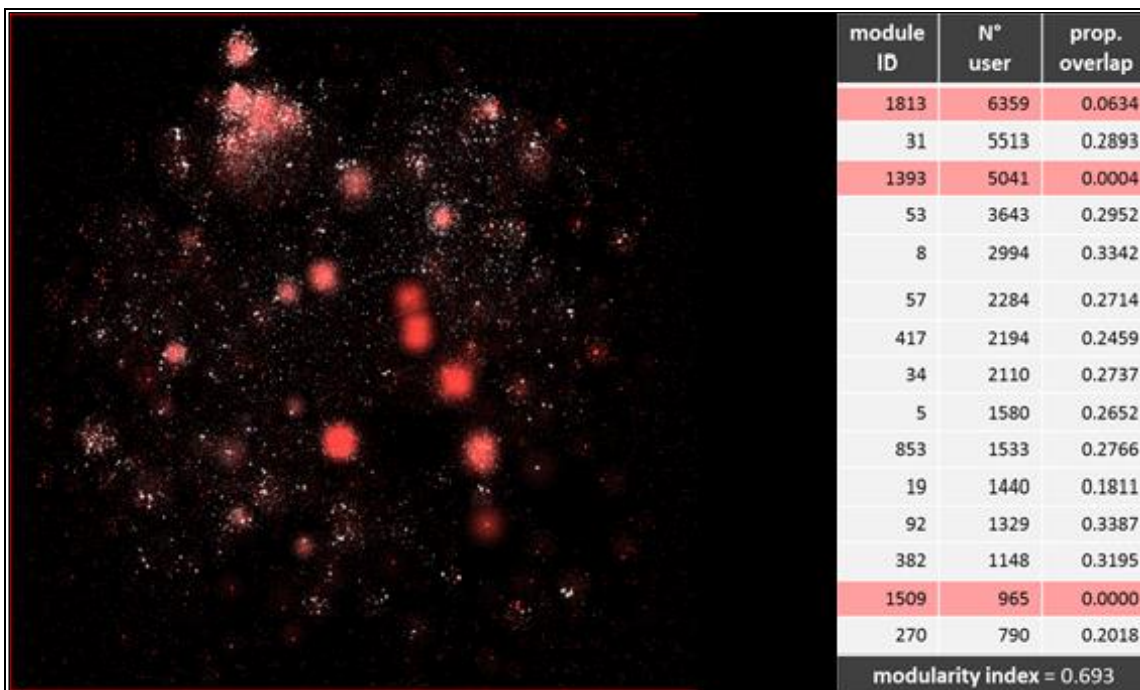


Fig. 37 - Interaction overlap ANON / Million Mask March (overlapping users in white). The network visualization shows the clustering of users related to the Million Mask March and of general Anonymous users not related, based on Twitter interaction. The table reports the proportion of overlap across modules detected with a community detection algorithm. As both data formats show, some clusters of Anonymous have been interested by the Million Mask Match, while some have not.

The first observation to make is that the proportion of users related to the overall Anonymous network who have also been involved with the Million Mask March is rather low: 11,641 out of 68,675, which

corresponds to 16.95% of the total nodes. It is possible to conclude that the event involved a minority of Anonymous as a whole.

Figure 37 highlights that the network is highly clustered; indeed, the modularity index is 0.69. It is possible to observe from the distribution of red and white dots, while some clusters of interaction concentrate a large share of users involved with the Million Mask March, there are also a number of important clusters that present very few overlapping users. The distribution of overlapping users among modules is extremely odd: some modules present a fairly high proportion of users also involved in the Million Mask March, while other modules (highlighted in red) include very few, or even no, overlapping users. This implies that while part of Anonymous has been highly influenced by this event, conversely, other structurally isolated sectors have had no involvement with it.

Considering that, from the perspective of interactions between users, the Million Mask March appears to be affecting only a portion of the overall Anonymous network, another point worth analyzing is whether modules that are highly involved in the march and modules not related to it share issues of concern. Do Million Mask March-related modules discuss different issues with respect to other Anonymous modules?

The socio-semantic network in Figure 38 tries to answer this question. The network is a bipartite graph linking users and the hashtags they included in their tweets. The graph has been spatialized in order to highlight the clustering structure, and hashtags have been hidden in order to better assess the ‘semantic distance’ between users: the more users share the same set of hashtags, the closer they will end up in the visualization. The same logic of analysis is also replicated on the basis of the results of a community detection.



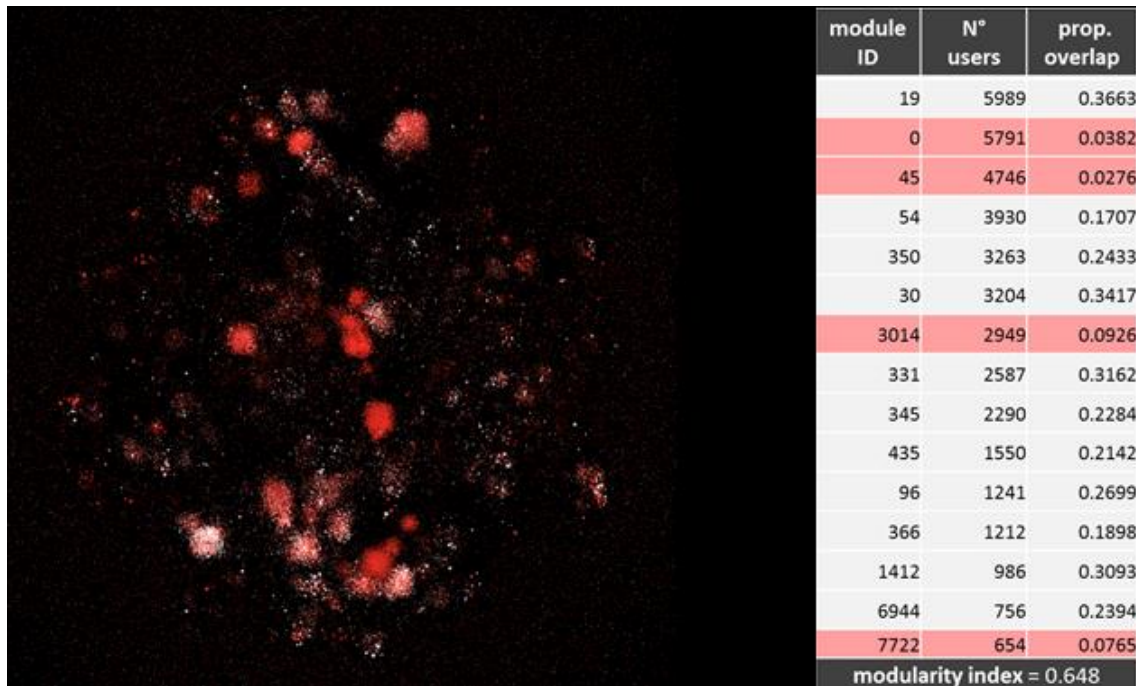


Fig. 38 – Socio-semantic overlap ANON / Million Mask March (overlapping users in white). The network visualization shows the clustering of users related to the Million Mask March and of general Anonymous users not related, based on hashtag adoption. The table reports the proportion of overlap across modules detected with a community detection algorithm. As both data formats show, some clusters of Anonymous have been interested by the Million Mask Match, while some have not.

Analogously to what was observed in the previous interactional network, users tend to cluster differentially in modules related and not related to the march, and do so also in terms of shared hashtags: some bigger clusters tend to concentrate users that have been involved in the Million Mask March, while some clusters are largely composed of non-related users. In terms of community detection, as listed in the table, whereas 36% of the users included in the biggest module have participated in the online activity related to the Million Mask March, this proportion drops to 3% in the second biggest module. This means that not only has part of the Anonymous network had almost no interaction with the Million Mask March event, but also that this pattern of differentiation holds even in terms of the issues mobilized by these different branches.

It can be concluded that the Million Mask March, despite often being reported by the media and some supporters as ‘Anonymous taking the street’, represents the initiative of a specific portion of the wider Anonymous network, while other sectors of the network have not been influenced by it.

#### 4.4.4 - Summary

This section has tried to assess the relation between Anonymous as a whole and its offshoots, and has made the following findings:

- a number of distinct offshoots are associated with Anonymous, which have a more specific focus of activity and an autonomous ‘sub-brand’ but which maintain references to the Anonymous symbolism;
- the offshoots analyzed have a largely independent constituency, though they are structurally connected by a minority of hub users; and
- there are modules of the Anonymous network that have not been affected by the event that is related to one important offshoot, the Million Mask March.

These findings seem to suggest that the relation between Anonymous and the entities analyzed is rather ambivalent: on the one hand, offshoots such as the Million Mask March are structurally autonomous from the generality of Anonymous; on the other hand, they are connected through few broker users and maintain strong symbolic references.

#### **4.5 – Anonymous is (more than) one, Anonymous is (less than) many**

This chapter has investigated a Twitter dataset delimited by the hashtag #Anonymous through a structural-relation perspective. The goal was specifically exploratory: to identify how Anonymous appears, when observed from a synoptic point of view, and to ask what this suggests about its ontological status. The first empirical section has shown that the network of interactions between users is erratic and in constant flux: tendencies toward stabilization, integration and centralization are regularly countered by opposing trends toward instability, fragmentation and de-concentration. The second part has unfolded the heterogeneous souls that emerge from the vast array of issues that are the targets of Anonymous’ operations: it made evident the considerable plurality of concerns lying behind the label Anonymous, and their ever-shifting nature. The third analysis has put into focus the ambiguous relation between Anonymous and its offshoots: on the one hand, they demarcate their individuality by ‘rebranding’ themselves and appear structurally rather autonomous; on the other hand, they are still tied up with Anonymous as a whole by a super-layer of connectivity and by persistent symbolic references.

The underlying thread that has been implicitly followed and unfolded, the results suggest, is the continuous tension between the ‘unit’ and the ‘multiple’, which characterizes the puzzling entity

known as Anonymous. Starting from a single analytical unit, the #Anonymous hashtag on Twitter, the analysis has revealed the coexistence of multiple trajectories that lie behind it. Despite that it lacks a stable constituency or a characteristic structure, that it condenses heterogeneous souls with a shifting focus on diverse issues, and that it gives rise to relatively autonomous offshoots, Anonymous nevertheless reproduces itself as ‘one’ entity with a particular nature.

Is Anonymous always one movement, despite the fact that its constituency continuously shifts, falls apart and re-aggregates, and that it concentrates and de-concentrates? Is Anonymous that fights to expose the existence of a pedophile ring involving influential British celebrities and politicians the same Anonymous that fights against the killing of dolphins in Taji bay? Is the Million Mask March taking the streets to protest against governments and corporations part of the same movement calling itself AnonGhost and hiding in cyber-space to bring a cyber-holocaust to Israel? This work argues that the current vocabulary of social movement theory is ill-suited to dealing with this puzzle. Consequently, it would be useful to recognize the autonomous ontological status of the branding of contention. Taking up a branding perspective means recognizing the existence of *intersecting contentious processes, resulting in the counterintuitive dynamics* observed at the level of the contentious brand as a whole.

Considering Anonymous’ rapidly shifting structure, its issue compositeness and the trends toward internal differentiation, altogether, it is difficult to conceptualize it as, for example, ‘a social movement for internet freedom’. It is not a definite network, with identifiable members, modules and key positions; it is not an actor involved in conflict for a certain purpose, promoting social change in a specific direction or concerned with definite issues; it is not just one entity in itself, but it is also a reference for other entities with a distinct identity and distinct trajectories. However, Anonymous is also not just a bunch of isolated and fragmented initiatives, without any connective layer: there are phases of higher stability, integration and concentration; there is interaction and recognition between different souls; its offshoots manifest a persistent reference to its symbolism. In other words, there is something that assembles what otherwise would simply fall apart or even never get together.

Following earlier conceptualizations of social movements in terms of organizational units (McCarthy and Zald 1977), social movement theory has increasingly recognized the loosely bounded character of social movements, especially by defining them in terms of networks (Diani 2003). The entity Anonymous, nonetheless, challenges both atomistic and relational definitions of social movements. On the one hand, Anonymous’ ‘multiple’ character seems to reflect general notions such as that of a ‘social movement family’ (Della Porta and Ruth 1995), that is to say a collection of distinct movements with a common, loose orientation. On the other hand, Anonymous presents a tension with



regard to ‘one-ness’ that is shared with the much more exigent notion of ‘social movement organization’ (McCarthy and Zald 1977): a proper name, a logo, a set of recurrent slogans—in other words, a brand identity.

However, whereas it should be obvious to acknowledge its loosely bounded character and its relational nature, a crucial point for this argument, that cannot be expressed with the current social movement theory vocabulary, is that Anonymous *is made up of porous, overlapping internal layers, wrapped in a smooth, clearly recognizable surface*: a shared semiotic repertoire. In other words, what binds this family together is, to a large extent, the reference to the Anonymous brand.

Anonymous has been the subject of increasing media attention for more than 10 years. Declared nearly dead many times, it displays a peculiar ability to reproduce itself, regenerating as an inexhaustible source of contention, despite the number of erosive processes and centrifugal tendencies it has to confront. Anonymous reproduces itself despite the fact that it consists in transient, volatile crowds, avoiding any transition toward a more structured entity. Anonymous reproduces itself despite being involved in rather distinct, sometimes incoherent or even conflicting, contentious issues. Anonymous reproduces itself despite the fact that it gives birth to quite autonomous offshoots that feel the need to mark their individuality through a process of brand variation. In other words: *Anonymous reproduces itself as a ‘one’ despite, as has been shown, the fact that Anonymous are ‘many’.*

It is possible to provide a preliminary interpretation of this puzzling reproductive success of an entity that, for many reasons, should be expected to fall apart in a rather short time. What this chapter has tried to show, indeed, is that instead of following a pattern of moving toward the institutionalization of its structure and subsequently declining, *the Anonymous brand maintains itself as a permanent repository of contentious potential*, open to re-coalescing with the emergence of new participants, new goals or new spinoffs. As a consequence of this process of continuous re-appropriation of the brand, the content continuously shifts, or consists of a weird mixture of heterogeneous elements, while *the form survives and maintains its ontological continuity*. In other words: the ‘semantic of contention’ is variable and multiple, the ‘syntax of contention’ is stable and unique. How this dual process of continuous flow and continuous reproduction on the edge of the boundaries between the ‘many’ and the ‘one’ is possible, involving as it does a resistance of the many existing entropic and schismogenetic tendencies, will be the argument of the following chapter.

## 5 – Dividing by Zero

### Schizophrenia and recursion in Anonymous' identity

*The paradoxes should not be taken as mere frivolities. They are serious attempts to pack meaning into the smallest possible space without betraying it with simplification. The meaning can always be unpacked, in precise and useful ways. A paradox is not a contradiction. A paradox abolishes contradiction. It does not negate, it compounds.*

(Brian Massumi, 'A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia', 1992)

*At any given time, when requested its identity, a collective actor (excluding the extreme, completely schizophrenic situation) is able to provide an answer through its many mouths in a definite way.*

(Alberto Melucci, 'Challenging Codes', 1996)

### 5.1 - Introduction

#### 5.1.1 – Overview

The previous chapter has highlighted the complex and at times counterintuitive articulation of the entity labeled Anonymous. It concluded by raising a crucial point: how can such an unstable, heterogeneous and differentiated entity reproduce itself as one, despite the many entropic sources to which it is exposed? This chapter tries to solve this puzzle by investigating the schizophrenic nature of Anonymous' identity, suggesting that its relation with complexity is key to understanding the reproduction of this brand beyond its apparent contradictions.

From the branding perspective introduced in this work, the previous question equates to asking how can the Anonymous brand be appropriated for such diversified purposes without losing its strength and appeal. Heterogeneity and incoherence are supposed to promote factionalism, ultimately leading to differentiation and fragmentation. The overstretching of the meanings associated with a signifier should be expected to dilute its connotation, weakening its ability to stand for any signified. The existence of divergent souls should be paired with the development of other brands to mark a specific identity more clearly. The Anonymous brand dismisses all these sound statements, reproducing itself as 'one' despite being 'many' (as has been shown). To resolve this puzzle, the aim of this chapter is to unveil the distinctive Anonymous identity by asking the following question: *who is Anonymous?*

This question is answered by analyzing a vast corpus of Facebook pages, mainly by digging into the massive textual data they provide.

The first empirical section of the chapter focuses on the composition of the various political orientations displayed by the array of Facebook pages collected and analyzed, reconstructing their plainly contradictory character. It radicalizes the implications of the findings of the previous chapter by proving that the Anonymous brand is not only adopted for disparate purposes, but also for directly conflicting ones. The schizophrenic character of Anonymous' identity is even more intriguing when considering that pages professing contrasting political opinions are sometimes not isolated one from each other, but on the contrary are linked within a page-to-page 'like' network.

The second empirical section unveils the controversies over the authenticity of actions and groups branded as Anonymous. It presents some of the most interesting dimensions among these recurrent 'inauthenticity claims', along with the many contradictions between statements defining the legitimate utilization of the brand and its concrete adoption, while recognizing the impossibility of discerning between the Anonymous 'original' and the Anonymous 'copy', and the continuously performative and contingent production of Anonymous' boundaries.

The final empirical analysis digs into the many self-definitions of Anonymous. Isolating paradigmatic declarations, it shows how these often consist of counterintuitive as well as complex self-referential ontological statements. The incoherent and at times contradictory character of this peculiar entity seems to be embedded in its very definition, fostering the emergence of an intriguing model of explicit 'essential inessentiality'.

This chapter's main contribution is to suggest that, from a cybernetic perspective,<sup>82</sup> Anonymous counterbalances schismogenesis<sup>83</sup> by explicitly defining itself in terms of tautologies and paradoxes,<sup>84</sup> thus embracing a radical pattern of recursion.<sup>85</sup> Anonymous' contentious brand, from this point of

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<sup>82</sup> The reference here is to cybernetic theories of social systems, according to which (in very general terms) the reproduction of social systems should be understood in self-referential terms. Social systems, indeed, are autopoietic, in the sense that they are capable of self-maintaining their organizational identity (see Luhman 1985; Maturana and Varela 1980).

<sup>83</sup> The term schismogenesis derives from the Greek *skhisma* and *genesis*, literally 'creation of division'. In cybernetic terms, schismogenesis is the self-sustained process that leads to the progressive differentiation of a system into more and more autonomous subsystems. If not counterbalanced by an opposing homeostatic process, schismogenesis ultimately leads the system to fall apart (see Bateson 1958).

<sup>84</sup> In logical terms, a tautology is a proposition that creates its own conditions of truth (e.g. 'This statement is either true or false'). A paradox is a proposition that creates the condition for its own displacement (e.g. 'This statement is false'). Both logical figures are self-referential/recursive, in the sense that their truth-value depends solely on their own configuration.

<sup>85</sup> In mathematical terms, recursion is the property by which a function is defined in terms of itself (e.g.  $Fib(n) = Fib(n-1) + Fib(n-2)$ ). In computer science, recursion is a programming technique in which an algorithm calls upon itself, creating nested environments at different levels of abstraction.

view, acts as a meta-level capable of integrating contradictory orientations by anticipating its own schizophrenic character, turning the conditions of its dismantling into the conditions of its reproduction.

### *5.1.2 - Who is Anonymous? Identity, logic and ontology*

Anonymous presents an explicitly multifaceted ‘personality’. Despite being closely tied to an emergent ‘geek culture’ associated with hackers, tech-savvies and creatives (Coleman 2013; 2015), radically different political (and non-political) worldviews coexist behind its mask (Fuchs 2013). For this reason, the idea of a collective identity understood as the ‘common traits of a group’ fails to capture this entity (McDonald 2015). A definition of collective identity that does not assume coherence and uniformity (Melucci 1995) can, however, still be employed as a prism through which to distill the cognitive orientations that, when taken altogether, connect distinct definitions (Fischer-Blaess 2016). Indeed, Anonymous presents a visible ‘sense of we’ (Kavada 2015). The category of identity can still be useful precisely because, within Anonymous, its contested character makes visible its performative elements through the omnipresence of ‘identity claims’ (Dobusch and Schoeneborn 2015). The goal here, consequently, is not to test the viability of Anonymous’ notion of collective identity (however defined).<sup>86</sup> Rather, it is to unveil the distinctive aspects of Anonymous’ identification processes.

From a philosophical point of view, the conceptualization of identity has undergone a process of historical redefinition (Donati 2003): from the idea of unmediated equivalence (i.e. A is A) via dialectical definitions (i.e. A is not (not A)) to a proper relational understanding (i.e. A is a relation between A and not A). Whereas the common view of the concept of identity relates it to traits such as coherence and stability, the relation between difference and repetition, in Deleuzian terms, is not of linear opposition, but of paradoxical mutuality (Deleuze [1967] 1994). Analogously, in subjective terms, the idea that the individual self is characterized by essential and coherent characteristics is a product of a historical process of the institutionalization of hermeneutic practices (Foucault [1980] 2015).

From a sociological perspective, the notion of identity has a dual character (Sciolla 1983). On the one hand, it is the result of the identification of the subjects with certain categories; on the other, it is based on a process of individuation in which the subjects recognize themselves as integrated and

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<sup>86</sup> For a brief discussion of this, see Chapter 6, Section 1.1 (‘Contentious branding and social movement processes’).

distinct. For the study of social movements, the notion of collective identity is crucial from many perspectives (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Collective identity can be defined as the answer to the question ‘Who we are?’: a process that entails the negotiation or co-construction of, or even the conflict between, a set of shared orientations (Melucci 1995). Again, it is the result of a dualist movement of differentiation from an environment and of the narrative integration of a sense of ‘we’-ness. The emergence of a collective identity is crucial for the reproduction of a social movement over time, since mutual recognition and the production of in-group/out-group boundaries are a logical premise for the rise of motivations for participation in movement activities (Pizzorno 1986).

In operative terms, this chapter investigates the identity of Anonymous by looking at three interrelated dimensions: identity as set of more or less coherent orientations collected by the brand; identity as boundaries between authentic/inauthentic utilizations of the brand; and identity as ontological self-definitions associated with the brand. Consequently, the following sub-questions are posed by each empirical section:

- who is *Anonymous*? Which orientations, ideologies, values lie behind the adoption of the label Anonymous?
- *who* is Anonymous? Which criteria make (or do not make) an individual or collective actor an ‘authentic member’ of Anonymous?
- who *is* Anonymous? What are the defining elements of Anonymous’ ‘essence’?

The first sub-question has already been partially answered in the previous chapter, which highlighted Anonymous’ highly unstable and heterogeneous character. Nonetheless, it remains unclear whether this heterogeneity of souls translates into proper incoherence or contradiction among them.<sup>87</sup> The second question involves what set theory would call the ‘extensional definition’ of a class, that is to say a definition based on listing all the cases belonging to that class. The third question implies providing an ‘intensional definition’ of Anonymous, one based on the necessary and sufficient properties that an item should possess to be part of a class.

It is necessary to anticipate that the interpretation of the results makes use of categories of logic to advance claims on ontological issues, in particular those of tautology and paradox. It is important to stress the pragmatic intent behind the adoption of these notions, understood as heuristic tools to hint at the complex character of the empirical phenomenon described. There is absolutely no temptation here to employ formal logic as a theory of reality, embracing an idealistic reductionism according to

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<sup>87</sup> Most of the (however heterogeneous) souls identified could well be integrated into a coherent, albeit multifaceted, identity: e.g. environmentalists and anti-authoritarians; anti-racists and anti-capitalists, etc. See Chapter 4, Section 3.1 (‘Anonymous’ heterogeneous souls’).

which reality might resemble the categories of thought; nor a specular naïve realism based on the idea that the representational level is a mere superstructure of the material (Hofweber 2004). Instead, categories pertaining to the domain of formal logic are employed as tools to describe morphogenetic processes. In post-structuralist and complexity literature, there are several examples of such an epistemological attitude. The category of tautology is key to Foucault's account of psychiatric power, where the asylum is understood as a 'tautological device', insofar as its power derives from its own definition of reality (Foucault [1973] 2006, 143-72). Conversely, Bateson founds his theory on the evolution of communication in social animals on the rise of 'paradoxes of abstractions' (Bateson 1955). He individuates the conditions for the development of schizophrenic personality in the existence of 'double binds', relations in which contrasting meta-communication levels create contradictory requests that cannot both be met by definition (Bateson et al. 1956). Building on this, Watzlawick introduces the notion of 'pragmatic paradox', referring to the specific configurations of communicative interactions exhibited by the schizoid (Watzlawick 1972). It is interesting to note that in the cases of applying concepts of tautology and paradox to the real configuration of certain processes, the arguments relate to madness and, more particularly, to schizophrenia – a condition which, as will be shown by means of empirical examples, accurately resembles the logic of Anonymous.

### *5.1.3 - Interrogating Anonymous through Facebook*

While the previous chapter was concerned with more structural elements, which can conveniently be reconstructed in an interaction-oriented medium such as Twitter, this chapter turns to Facebook as a repository of data, using Facebook's API as an extraction tool (Rieder et al. 2016). The logic of Facebook's public pages allows for the unfolding of the articulation of the Anonymous galaxy through this medium, as well as for the obtaining of massive amount of textual data for interpretative purposes. The methodology developed is inspired by approaches such as controversy mapping (Latour et al. 2012; Venturini 2012), digital ethnography (Caliandro 2014; Kozinets 2010) and interpretative content analysis (Ahuvia 2001).

The data collection and analysis consisted of three main steps: first, a set of Facebook pages related to Anonymous was collected; second, the network of 'like' relationships between these and toward other pages was built; and third, the posts, comments and replies contained in these pages was stored in a database for textual analysis.

The selection of Facebook pages relating to Anonymous exploited the following iterative crawling procedure. Facebook's Graph API was pulled for pages containing the keyword 'anonymous', which resulted in the retrieval of 500 pages.<sup>88</sup> Starting from this 'seeding sample', the API was queried to get 25 pages<sup>89</sup> that were 'liked' by each of the pages previously obtained, retaining all the pages containing the sub-string 'anon' within their name. In this way, it was possible to expand the initial sample and create a network based on page-to-page 'like' relations. The procedure just described was reiterated until the query did not return any new pages containing the substring 'anon' within its name. Subsequently, the list of pages was manually checked to filter out anything obviously off-topic. In so doing, a list of 5,777 Facebook pages relating to Anonymous was obtained, together with a relational dataset representing the network of 'like' relationships between these pages. Furthermore, a final iteration of queries to the API for the pages liked by each page within this 'Anonymous dataset', without any substring filter, allowed for the retrieval of the overall range of pages liked by Anonymous pages, resulting in another network of 59,768 nodes and 163,708 relations.

Facebook pages are commonly articulated around content posted by page administrators or users liking the page, sometimes generating chains of comments. This provides access to a vast amount of textual data relating to the activity of Anonymous activists and sympathizers. Facebook's Graph API was subsequently interrogated to retrieve posts, comments and replies associated with the list of Anonymous pages collected. A total of 1,328,714 strings of text were consequently collected. This massive corpus of data has been queried with an iterative interpretative procedure: first, a random sample of text was scrutinized to derive a first general impression; second, lists of keywords related to each dimension of interest were compiled; and third, for each list of keywords, other random selections were generated until a critical number of examples were collected according to a criteria of saturation. In general, text selection followed a logic of purposive sampling (Palys 2008), since the goal was not to describe representative characteristics but to provide evidence of extreme traits that make an interesting theoretical point.

Due to a number of critical aspects, this research strategy requires some important methodological disclaimers concerning the representative nature of the data and its interpretation. It must be stressed that the set of pages collected is by no means exhaustive nor statistically representative. API-based searches, indeed, are affected by completely unknown biases relating to the undisclosed functioning of Graph API algorithms. Nonetheless, for the purposes of the present analysis, this does not count as a significant concern. The goal is to detect and present interesting examples, not to provide a

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<sup>88</sup> This corresponds to the maximum number of items retrievable given the API's own limitations.

<sup>89</sup> Again, 25 is the API's limit at the time of collection.

complete or reliable description of certain distributions or of average characteristics. Another important limitation to be acknowledged in terms of sampling is a strong language bias, since only English, Italian and (some) Spanish content was consulted.

Another aspect that needs to be mentioned has to do with the ‘nature’ of the pages themselves. Digital communication is home to disturbing as well as intriguing practices such as trolling, infiltration and identity counterfeiting – and Anonymous associates are often masters in this art. Because of this, it is often impossible to distinguish between ‘authentic’ and ‘fake’ material. This impossibility can be of various natures. It can be methodological, since enough information is not always available to detect (for example) infiltration; it can be ethical, since it might be required to take sides in an open controversy; and it can be epistemological, in that the categories of authentic/inauthentic are not always adequate to deal with the topic. As the following discussion will show, however, these are not so much drawbacks as they are inherent characteristics of the object under analysis. To take up a branding perspective, from this point of view, means to suspend judgement on what is ‘original’ and what is a ‘copy’, focusing on the mere adoption of the brand itself.

An additional sensitive methodological point has to do with the interpretation of the meaning attributed by a user to ‘likes’ in the context of Facebook media ecology. Whereas the most common and obvious meaning of the ‘like’ function is to denote that a user likes the content of a page, different attributions of meaning are not an exception. A ‘like’ can sometimes simply indicate the interest of the user in following updates to a page, and does not necessarily imply endorsement of the opinions provided by its stream. In certain cases, the reason can in fact be that the user dislikes the page. Moreover, likes may not necessarily be the result of intentional acts performed by human users. The practice of buying ‘stocks’ of likes to boost the visibility of a page is a common one in digital marketing. This requires further caution when commenting on a ‘like’ relation, or when using the number of likes as an indicator of the relevance of a page. Wherever possible, the inferences presented have been evaluated through manual exploration. In other cases, the only remedy is linguistic caution in formulating claims.



## 5.2 - Who is *Anonymous*? Schizophrenic orientations

This section answers the question ‘who is Anonymous?’, focusing on the orientations that can be identified from the network of pages liked by Anonymous pages. It shows how Anonymous orientations are not only extremely heterogeneous, but also that they are often incoherent or even openly contradictory, manifesting a clear schizophrenic identity. To make this claim apparent, the involvement of Anonymous in the Ukrainian and Venezuelan political crises is briefly presented, showing how its brand is recalled from ‘both sides of a barricade’. To sustain this argument further, another section compares radical left-wing and radical right-wing manifestations of the Anonymous brand – Anonymous Patriots and RedHack – as well as the position allegedly expressed by Anonymous in support of, and against, the conservative and progressive US presidential candidates Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. The section concludes by presenting a radically counterintuitive aspect: not only are directly opposing utilizations of the brand documentable, but also the page-to-page network testifies that contradicting pages are indirectly connected through relationships of ‘likes’. The resulting ‘schizophrenic’ character of Anonymous orientations may be related to a ‘masking effect’ that the standard visual identity of the brand produces on the actual semantic content of its adoptions.

### 5.2.1 – *Overview of Anonymous Facebook pages*

Before initiating a systematic collection of Facebook pages through API calls, the investigation started with a phenomenological exploration of the Anonymous network, exploiting the recommender algorithm of Facebook. A Facebook user was created for the purpose, without any previous ‘like’ experience, and the strategy was simply to input the term ‘anonymous’ in the search bar and scroll through the suggested results, liking every single page bearing reference to the Anonymous brand. The result was a Facebook wall characterized by a cacophonous stream, in which reports on leaks against authoritarian governments alternated with new evidence on the involvement of Prince Andrew, Duke of York, in a ritualistic pedophile ring; Islamist propaganda against Jews and the ‘Holocaust-industry’ was followed by reports on the miraculous effects of Marijuana on brain tumors; and information on privacy loopholes in the latest Android update coexisted with proof of the contact between major world governments and alien entities.

The previous chapter has already explored the semantically heterogeneous nature of the assemblage of social movement issues mobilized in/through the Anonymous brand. These comprise an array of sometimes distant concerns.<sup>90</sup> Some of them are already incoherent – such as the Islamist branches and the anarchist ones – but in other cases, the movements may fit well together. For example, an activist might plausibly be concerned for the environment while simultaneously adopting the cause of opposing racial discrimination. The list of Facebook pages relating to Anonymous, and the list of the pages they like, allows for scanning the array of political orientations behind the Anonymous brand in more specific terms than the classification of the previous chapter. The network of ‘like’ relations among them, moreover, consents to test connectivity between them, i.e. to ascertain whether network paths indirectly connect them.

The following visualization (Figure 39) presents a snapshot of the overall network of page-to-page like relationships. It must be stressed that, since its goal is to highlight the main variation around the brand Anonymous, for reason of readability it reports a tiny fraction of the overall network (1.73% of the nodes and 0.85% of the links).

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<sup>90</sup> See Chapter 4, Section 3.1 (‘Anonymous’ heterogeneous souls’).



Fig. 39 – Visualization of the Facebook’s page titles collected with the keyword ‘anonymous’; top-100 for indegree centrality. The long distribution of 5,777 pages presents a vast number of syntactic variations around the brand Anonymous, which is also represented in this snapshot: various high-ranking are simply named ‘Anonymous’, some highlight a geographical provenience, others present a more customized variation.

There is a large number of pages (273) with a name including the ‘Anonymous’ label but without any further specification.<sup>91</sup> Each of this long list of identically-named pages thus somehow implicitly claims to represent Anonymous. 10 of these pages exceeded the threshold of 100,000 likes. This is already an indication of the empirical impossibility of identifying something as the ‘official Anonymous page’.

<sup>91</sup> This ‘page name’ corresponds to the modifiable name visualized on Facebook, not to the textual ID that univocally represents a page. The focus on the former makes more sense as its formulation reflects a deliberate decision not constrained by strict syntactic rules or the necessity of differentiation.

Besides this, there is an important trend of geographic variation, relating to pages which present themselves as national instances of the global collective. Again, for each national branch, several distinct pages exist. For example, in the dataset collected, there were at least 131 pages relating to Anonymous in Brazil, 51 pages claiming to be ‘the’ Italian branch of Anonymous, and 63 pages connected with activists identifying themselves as Venezuelan.

Considering the ambiguous status of Anonymous as a political entity born with purely recreational purposes, it is interesting to note that its political character largely prevails in our Facebook dataset. The original, ‘prankster’ spirit leaves almost no trace in this vast array of pages.

A few apolitical pages stake a claim to Anonymous’ pure brand status, as well as to its universal translatability’: for example, the page ‘Anonymous Flags’, devoted to selling merchandise of all sorts branded with the Anonymous logo;<sup>92</sup> the page ‘Anonymous DJs’, testifying to the adoption of the brand by a duo of DJs; and cafés exploiting Anonymous’ symbolism, as shown by the existence of an ‘Anonymous Cafe Bar’.

To make visible the extent to which this heterogeneity translates into a proper ‘political schizophrenia’, the following sections report just a few exemplificative cases of plain contradictions expressed on Facebook by the multiple manifestations of Anonymous.

### *5.2.2 - From both sides of the barricade*

Anonymous nowadays makes an appearance in almost every critical political scenario. Wherever and whenever people take to the streets to protest against corruption, abuses or misconduct of all sorts perpetrated by a government of any color, there is a good chance that one or multiple Anonymous operations will pop up. The following are two examples, among many, of the ‘schizophrenic’ behavior demonstrated by the Anonymous legion in crucial geopolitical contexts: the Ukrainian civil war and the post-Chavez Venezuelan political crisis.

In late 2013, a composite coalition of demonstrators began a protest in the central Maidan Square in Kiev, pushing for a closer integration of Ukraine with the European Union and against the mounting Russian influence on its government. The Euromaidan movement arose, quickly raising its bets and demanding for the resignation of the pro-Russian president Yanukovich. Dramatic events followed: harsh assaults perpetrated by protesters and the violent response of police forces led to many

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<sup>92</sup> The rise of a merchandise market around the Anonymous symbolism, and even the trademark registration of its symbols, is obviously at the center of fierce attacks by the Anonymous community. However, it clearly shows the ontological autonomy of the Anonymous brand from its exploitation for political purposes (see <http://www.webpronews.com/will-anonymous-allow-their-logo-to-be-trademarked-2012-07/>),

casualties on both sides. The country precipitated into a civil war: the government was controversially forced to resign and was replaced by a pro-European coalition, while Russian intervention led eastern regions to declare their independence from Kiev. Ethnic tensions involving the Russian minority in certain regions mixed with geopolitical clashes between Russia and NATO to create an explosive and bloody mix. How did Anonymous respond to this complex scenario?

Looking at the list of pages liked by Anonymous pages, it is evident that the Anonymous brand was taken up both in support of the 'legitimate revolt of a people against the corrupted puppets led by Moscow' and to 'fight back against the NATO-backed para-fascist coup'. Among the liked items, pages like 'Maidaners' or 'Virtual Maidan: 1 Million Supporters for Ukraine's Euromaidan' coexisted with pages such as 'AntiMaidan I Say NO to fascism' and 'Antimaidan International Brigades'. The following opposing declarations, both claiming to represent Anonymous' voice on the issue, speak for themselves:

Greetings Citizens of the World, We are Anonymous Ukraine. The Anonymous Hactivist Collective worldwide is partially divided on the issue of Ukraine. This has to do with the western mass media propaganda and the conflicting reports that are coming out of the country. This is sad as some Anons are unknowingly supporting the dark forces at work in Ukraine. Members of Anonymous Ukraine are aware of the internal meddling by the United States, NATO and the European Union into the internal sovereign affairs of Ukraine. Anonymous Ukraine supports peace and the right of the people to self determination. The Bandera Nazis and fascist thugs that are beating and killing police and members of the security services of Ukraine do not represent the will or the wishes of the people of Ukraine. The people of Ukraine do not want European Union integration. The people of Ukraine do not want NATO on their territory. The people of Ukraine voted for President Yanukovich to lead them in fair and just democratic elections. The people of Ukraine plea to the President and to Russia for help in stopping the siege of Ukraine by Nazi thugs and murderous gangs.

(page name: Anonymousarmy, page ID: 444851598955819, post ID: 701338436555383, date: 10 March 2014)

To People of the Ukraine, we are anonymous. To politicians, police, and the government of Ukraine as an entity, Anonymous, is watching the revolution in your country unfold. We are paying close attention to the brutal & barbaric police suppression with which these demonstrations are met, with ever growing concern and rising anger. When politicians make decisions based on their own interests, divorced from the desires or will of the people they claim to represent, conflicts, is inevitable. What we see unfolding in Ukraine is not simply a conflict over whether the nation should have closer links with the European Union or Russia, it is a struggle to hold a corrupt government accountable for shady backroom deals and their flagrant disregard for the interests of the Ukrainian people. When President Viktor Yanukovych caved in to pressure from Russia and abandoned the EU agreement a week before it was to be signed, he showed contempt for Ukrainian voters and a craven inability to stand up for himself, his government, or the democracy he claims to represent. We see on the streets of Kiev and other cities a population angered by government deceit, exercising their democratic rights.

(page name: Anonymous - EU Bulgaria, page ID: 422706107791268, post ID: 612201268841750, date: 6 December 2013)

Venezuela's political and social system represents another interesting test for dissecting the contradicting character of Anonymous. Following the rise to power of the charismatic leader Hugo

Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution, the country incarnates (in the imagination of many contemporary leftist movements) the paradigmatic way toward a ‘21<sup>st</sup> century socialism’. Successfully implementing a number of social and economic reforms, the president gained the support of a vast sector of the lower class. The growing concentration of power, the crackdown against opposition leaders, a difficult economic situation and a serious crime emergency, however, were perceived by the middle class and global human rights activists as a threat to democracy and freedom in the country. After Chavez’ death (having resisted a coup and maintained power through democratic means as a result of his popularity), the ‘Bolivarian revolution’ grew increasingly contested as his designated successor, Nicolas Maduro, confronted a wave of massive street demonstrations in 2014, with violence on both sides.

Again, the Anonymous brand was evoked by both supporters of the Venezuelan government, loyal to the ideals of Chavism and ‘defending the Bolivarian revolution against the infiltration of US-backed wealthy classes’, and by activists supporting the cause of freedom ‘against an authoritarian regime leading the country toward a disaster and fighting its own people’. The list of likes included pages such as ‘99 Reasons why we vote for Chavez’ as well as ‘5,000,000 de Fans para que Chavez se vaya de Venezuela’. Analogously, distinct Anonymous pages ‘liked’ both the page of the ruling ‘Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela’ and the page of the incarcerated opposition leader ‘Leopoldo Lopez’. The following pictures (Figure 40) – retrieved from two pages self-proclaiming to represent ‘Anonymous Venezuela’ – vividly express this point.



Fig. 40 – Contrasting pictures posted on two Anonymous’ Facebook pages: one mocking and the other one praising Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro.

(Sources: <https://www.facebook.com/AnonVenezuela/photos/pb.442260652525708.-2207520000.1460666341./698040870281017/?type=3&theater;>

<https://www.facebook.com/815593175142510/photos/pb.815593175142510.-2207520000.1460666266./884545088247318/?type=3&theater>).

### 5.2.2 - *Beyond and between the left and the right*

Anonymous generally professes itself as beyond conventional ideologies, and as an alternative to any political party or candidate. As Anons themselves directly put it:

THE IDEOLOGY OF ANONYMOUS: Anonymous does not have a political agenda and no political ideology party. ANONYMOUS HAS MORAL IDEOLOGIES: The moral ideologies are freedom

(page name: Anonymous #OpStopCorruption; page ID: 172486642949943; post ID: 284396548425618L, date: 5 November 2014)

The concrete adoption of the Anonymous brand, however, often contravenes this rule. Anonymous, implicitly or explicitly, does take sides on political issues and positions. Scanning the list of pages liked by Anonymous pages, indeed, we find a vast array of references to specific political ideologies such as anarchism (264 entries), libertarianism (85 entries) and communism (58 entries). Two specific examples highlight how this brand can adapt to radically different political orientations.

Whereas some European branches of Anonymous, such as the Italian one, openly adhere to a clearly left-wing declination of anarchism (engaging with traditional leftist issues such as anti-fascism, migration rights and anti-capitalism), in the United States the brand has also become intertwined with the well-established right-wing libertarian culture associated with the patriotic activism of the so-called ‘militia movement’. These two movements share concerns about intrusive governments and big corporations, though their world vision could not be more divergent. An interesting case is that of ‘Anonymous Patriots’ and other related pages, juxtaposing the symbolism of Anonymous with themes associated with a strong American nationalistic rhetoric, for example the right of individuals to arm themselves to defend their properties, the fear of a socialist degeneration of US big government, and the call to stop a migrant invasion. Among the pool of liked pages, 90 of them referenced Ron Paul, the libertarian-conservative Republican politician, and star of the Tea Party movement, with his beliefs in radical economic liberalism, anti-abortionism and restrictive migratory policies.

Another peculiar case allows to move to the opposite pole of the political spectrum. For years, Anonymous has been collaborating with the Turkish hacker collective Red Hack in a number of actions against the Turkish government in particular. This highly active hacker crew openly professes a Marxist-Leninist ideology. To be sure, Red Hack is not ‘part’ of Anonymous: its organizational



logic is different from the chaotic and unbounded character of the latter, and its identity is clearly recognizable and preserved. Nonetheless, the association with Anonymous has become so strong that Anonymous symbolism has partly penetrated the group, and the alliance between the two is often openly evoked in joint press releases or propaganda material. In the dataset of liked pages, indeed, Red Hack appeared 39 times.

The contrast between the following pictures (Figure 41), propaganda material of the Anonymous Patriot and Red Hack – both sporting the Anonymous iconic mask – can hardly be more evident.



Fig. 41 – Contrasting pictures showing Anonymous contradictory ideological references. The Guy Fawkes' mask is associated with both United States and Soviet symbolism.

(Sources: <https://www.youcaring.com/other/help-anonymous-patriot-editoria-staff-continue-the-fight/242472>; <https://www.hackread.com/anonymou-threatens-turkey-for-putting-redhack-on-the-list-of-terrorist-organizations>).

This collocation of Anonymous on both sides of the political continuum is partly an effect of contextual factors, which could be understood as the adaptation of a global brand to local social movement cultures. Nonetheless, it is worth noticing that contrasting political positions also often manifest in the same national political arena. The 2016 rounds of primary elections for selecting the US presidential candidates exemplifies this point.

An operation that has attracted much media attention is #OpTrump, risen against the controversial front-runner for the Republican nomination. The notorious tycoon has attracted criticism for his provocative statements, especially on migration policies, such as the proposal to build a wall between the United States and Mexico, or calling to ban all Muslims from America. In response to his extremist position, Anonymous has declared a cyber-war against him, allegedly leaking his private information and flooding the web with anti-Trump propaganda material. Interestingly, however, a



parallel campaign denominated #OpFreeSpeech has been launched to defend Trump's right of expressing his opinion against what is perceived as an act of censorship.

The following opinions expressed on different Anonymous pages show that Anonymous supporters occupy every possible position on the issue.

you will see why Trump is our last hope and its for real. #Trump2016

(page name: VOX Populi The Anonymous Party; page ID: 1396875643884466; post ID: 1670226379882723; date: 22 December 2015)

If Trump wins, we'll need another planet as a refuge, as Trump will destroy this one.

(page name: Anonymous Patriots; page ID: 129548863920635; post ID: 516965145179003; date: 29 December 2015)

Better trump than hillary. If bernie wins america will be great again.

(page name: Anonymous; page ID: 190759221080032; post ID: 625597977596152; date: 27 February 2016)

It should then not come as a surprise that pages related to Anonymous have expressed their 'like' for both anti-Trump (e.g. 'Telling Donald Trump He's Full of Crap (by LeftAction.com)') and pro-Trump Facebook pages (e.g. 'US Veterans: Donald Trump for President'), as well as in support of the 'socialist' candidate for the Democratic Party Bernie Sanders, and even for pages rejecting both (e.g. 'NO to Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump').

#### 5.2.4 – *Schizophrenic identity*

The sections above have already provided abundant evidence to support the previous chapter's assertion that Anonymous is not only an incoherent assemblage of souls, but also a collection of outright contradictions. Scanning through the Facebook likes expressed by Anonymous pages, indeed, openly conflicting visions of the world, political endorsements and ideological orientations are the norm rather than the exception. An even more counterintuitive possibility than what has been suggested before arises when checking the connectivity of pages related to contrasting causes. Considering the 'extended like network', including Anonymous-related pages and the pages they like, all connected by 'like' relations, it is possible to observe if a path exists between any two pages and the length of the shortest path.

Taking the page 'Donald J. Trump' and the page 'Bernie Sanders', two directly contrasting political figures, it resulted that the two pages are connected, and the shortest path between them is the shortest

meaningful possible.<sup>93</sup> The page ‘Anonymous Freedom From Government Control’ seems to support the latter candidate; the page ‘Anonymous Patriots’ openly supports the former; the page ‘Anonymous Freedom From Government Control’, however, likes the page ‘Anonymous Patriots’. Analogous examples are not an exception: the page ‘I Need Allah In My Life’ is connected to ‘Religions Poisons Everything’, via ‘Anonymous Kelantan’ and ‘Plataforma Anonymous Brasil’; ‘Anonymous Arab and Muslims’ is related to ‘Educate children about the evils of Islam’ through ‘Anonymous International’ and ‘Anonymous Sikhs’. Those mentioned are only a few examples of dozens, presumably hundreds, of ‘schizophrenic connections’ retrievable in the ‘like’ network of pages.

The disclaimer mentioned in the methodological section deserves to be restated in the light of these extremely counterintuitive results: the existence of a ‘like’ relation is not always a valid indicator of endorsement from the liking page toward the liked page. However, the cases reported have been manually inspected and the ‘honest’ intention behind the like seemed sound.

Moreover, a peculiar case provides evidence for the actual existence of ‘misunderstandings’ in the decoding of the semantic content of pages associated with Anonymous. The previous chapter has illustrated how one of the numerically outstanding causes supported by Anonymous is the fight against the state of Israel, in solidarity with the Palestinian people. A galaxy of international hacktivism, going beyond the boundaries of the Anonymous brand, developed around the so-called #OpIsrael, leading to the emergence of a sub-brand called AnonGhost, which – despite often claiming a distinct identity from Anonymous – still makes reference to its visual identity and is undoubtedly one of its many direct offshoots. Indeed, it appeared 115 times in the list of liked pages. In the aftermath of the 2015 shootings in Paris, a widely reported Anonymous campaign of anti-jihadism around the operations #OpIshis, #OpParis, #OpBrusselles exposed its contradictions with the anti-Zionist soul. The AnonGhost brand was then reportedly employed in both anti-ISIS and pro-ISIS operations,<sup>94</sup> resulting in open confusion among Anonymous associates.

#AnonGhost on #ISIS: We are their teacher and their boss

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<sup>93</sup> The minimum path length possible is 3, since two non-Anonymous pages liked by Anonymous pages cannot be directly related by definition. Nonetheless, such a shape would most likely imply a non-valid operationalization of the ‘like relation’ into endorsement.

<sup>94</sup> The fellowship between AnonGhost and the ‘Cyber Caliphate’ resulted in the emergence of the joint brand ‘GhostCaliphate’ (see <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-cyberwar-anonymous-hots-daesh-hackers-team-palestinian-group-anonghost-1537571>).

(page name: Anonymous Saudi Arabia; page ID: 195911390514375; post ID: 641933255912184; date: 3 April 2015)

We're with you Anonymous. Please hunt down bloody ISIS ! #Anonghost

(page name: Anonymous BlackOps Guerrilla; page ID: 520233138113057; post ID: 698355073634195; date: 16 November 2015)

But Anonghost helped to shutdown many isis twitter accounts and websites ?? Then why they doing this :/

(page name: Ghost Security Anonymous; page ID: 540119149427638; post ID: 793821724057378; date: 23 January 2016)

In at least one case, this confusion resulted in open misunderstanding.<sup>95</sup> On 27 February 2015, an important Turkish-based Twitter account associated with Anonymous asks its followers to join the #OpISIS campaign by reporting ISIS-related accounts. On the very same day, the same account cheered for a successful #OpIsrael cyber-attack. This attack consisted in the ‘defacement’ of an Israeli website: the homepage of the target was replaced with a banner showing (alongside the notorious Guy Fawkes mask symbolizing Anonymous) an eloquent slogan: ‘Khilafah [Caliphate] will transform the world’.

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<sup>95</sup> The episode was reported by the Italian journalist Bruno Ballardini on the newspaper ‘Il Fatto Quotidiano’ (<http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2015/03/01/anonymous-colto-di-sorpresa-dallisis/1463946/>).



Fig. 42 – Defaced home page of an Israeli website. The graphic puts together the Guy Fawkes’ mask and an ISIS slogan.

(Source: <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2015/03/01/anonymous-colto-di-sorpresa-dallisis/1463946/>).

This case exemplifies the misunderstandings that the adoption of specific signifiers for a variety of contrasting meanings can potentially generate. The suspect is that an analogous process may be to various extents at play in everyday online interaction, accounting for the contradictory structure of the page-to-page ‘like’ connections presented above. The smooth, standardized format of the brand, indeed, could be contributing to the factual integration of radically heterogeneous semantic elements, precisely because of the non-transparency of the syntax.

### 5.3 – *Who is Anonymous? Controversies of (in)authenticity*

The turbulent existence of Anonymous has been constellated by continuous infights between branches, accusations of inauthenticity and a pervasive atmosphere of suspicion. This section focuses

on the recurrent controversies present in the textual corpus, connected with the question of who – individual or collective actor – is ‘really Anonymous’ and can thus legitimately claim its identity, according to Anons’ own words. This means observing cases of discursive production of the boundaries of Anonymous. The following pages list a number of dimensions that are frequently mobilized when making ‘inauthenticity claims’ and when trying to express how to become Anonymous.

The first, oldest divide is between ‘oldfags’, loyal to a purely recreational adoption of the brand, and ‘newfags’, which redefined Anonymous’ mission as a fight for the good. Second, in order to be part of Anonymous, many Anons would say, you have to give up your personal identity; but many Anonymous activists do not conceal their names and faces anymore, and temporary leaders have always emerged in Anonymous’ history. One of the recurrent (non-)rules defining authentic Anonymous actions is to never attack the media, despite the media being a primal enemy and, indeed, often a target. Anonymous, for its own definition, does not have a fixed character; rather, it takes the emergent form that those who join wants it to take. Analogously, there are no standard procedures for joining: anybody can be Anonymous, without the need for approval or specific knowledge or skills. In a sense, thus, everybody is Anonymous and, at the same time, nobody is really Anonymous. The continuous allegations show, however, that sometimes someone is not Anonymous. For these reasons, nothing can be an ‘official’ manifestation of Anonymous, but the need to mark the authenticity of a group surrounded by dozens of ‘imitations’ leads many to adopt this label, with the paradoxical effect of attracting accusations of inauthenticity. The third and final part of this section, alongside presenting exemplificative cases, pulls the threads of the argument: it is the distinction between the authentic and the fake, the original and the copy, which fails when applied to an object like Anonymous.

### *5.3.1 - The internet hate machine, for the good of humanity*

Chronologically speaking, the first and most evident line of division that has generated a contraposition between real and fake Anons is that between the original ‘lulz’ character of earlier Anonymous activity and the subsequent emergence and prevalence of political activism. As a user puts it:

there's ethical fags [or] moral fags etc...Anonymous did not start to be the peoples voice of the internet that's just what it seems to be more recently [...] the amount of infighting amongst anons would make you question if there were even a group to begin with

(page name: Anonymous; page ID: 190759221080032; post ID: 625821524240464; date: 27 February 2016)

The difference between old-school Anons, called ‘oldfags’ or ‘lulzfags’, and new-school Anons, called ‘newfags’ or ‘moralfags’, could not be more radical. The former, an ‘Internet hate machine’, pursue ‘the lulz’, especially at the expense of the weak. The latter consider themselves as ‘cyber-vigilantes’ fighting for the good of humanity. The following opposing self-descriptions speak for themselves.

We all know how fucked this world has become [...] We can change the system, we can end war, we can fight for the good of humanity. [...] The pride we feel in changing the inequities of this world must not be limited to our digital identities but must be backed up in person. The tactics used can vary; while I personally believe in non-violent, peaceful protest in some situations police/military provocation makes this impossible. In those situations many resources are available regarding mitigation of tear gas, non-lethals, etc. In these situations we need to embrace each other whether one is Black Bloc, peaceful, etc we are all on the same side. [...] We will stand and fight for basic human rights. We will no longer tolerate the status quo.

(page name: Anonymous Legion Ground Forces; page ID: 407731895951175; post ID: 455627187803701; date: 8 August 2012)

We are the little voice in the back of your head that wants to fuck your hot sixteen year old daughter. We are the father who beats his six year old child simply because he spilled his beer. We are every chef that's ever spit in some random person's food for the hell of it. We are the pyromaniac who burns down the homeless shelter for shits and giggles. We are the person who rapes the same girl twice. We are that feeling you get when you beat your pets; and enjoy it. We see some guy hang himself live, we laugh. A wrestler kills his family, we laugh. Some maladjusted Asian shoots up his university, we laugh. Fifty-thousand die in North Korea, we laugh. AIDS ravages a continent, we laugh. An Austrian man locks his daughter in his basement for 24 years and fathers 8 children with her, we laugh. [...] We are human nature unencumbered by pointless ethics, foolish moralities or arbitrary laws and restrictions. We are every dark impulse you have; unrestrained and fully realized. We are what deep down, you wish you were. We exist as a means for instant gratification, purely at our own whim.

(page name: Anonymous died in 2011: Your AIDS mask is invalid, cause potato; page ID: 562339123779776; post ID: 2016905; date 6 December 2012)

The distinction between the political and the irreverent uses of the brand often accompanies inauthenticity claims, especially by oldfags regretting the old days when Anonymous was the original Anonymous.

This is the real anon. All the newfags that don't comprehend this; GTFO off this anon page, go like one of the newfag pages. [...] the only thing not legit is anon in it's current form.

(page name: Anonymous; page ID: 149062061842666; post ID: 3058652; date: 29 July 2012)

I love how all you newfags are coming to whiteknight for Anonymous. All the while too stupid to realize you are what killed it.

(page name: Anonymous died in 2011: Your AIDS mask is invalid, cause potato; page ID: 562339123779776; post ID: 566950299985325; date: 6 December 2012)

There is nothing political in what we do, we do it for the lulz anything else is just fail. You'll never change to politics of the world no matter how many hippie occupiers you have. Just fuck shit up for the lulz.

(page name: Anonymous; page ID: 389916374410483; post ID: 3928809; 5 July 2013)

Although at the beginning of its career Anonymous was all about irreverent and outrageous pranks, without any obvious political commitment, this original character has left very few traces in the dataset of Facebook pages.

### *5.3.2 - In order to be Anonymous, you first have to be anonymous (or not)*

In order to be Anonymous, quite straightforwardly, one needs to be anonymous: that is to say, one's individual identity should not be revealed. This practical aspect lies at the basis of the emergence of Anonymous itself: the 'anonymous' standard nickname in the 4chan board forcing individual identities to give away in favor of a single collective one.

Anonymous = to hide your identity the costumes were just an idea to further the meaning the government made that propaganda up about it being a group it is not it is a right to be anonymous.

(page name: Anonymous; page ID: 762731243787352; post ID: 763402467053563; date: 30 October 2014)

it is time to leave your names behind. it its time to once again become anonymous. individuality is a weakness and a curse when used in the name of anonymous. [...] any work done that includes any name besides anonymous, its not anonymous but rather a contradiction to our philosophy. to our idea. to everything that we stand for and everything that has made us as strong as we currently are.

(page name: We need Anonymous; page ID: 240935649340132L; post ID: 489456054414218; date: 29 June 2012)

The idea, however, that to be Anonymous one must literally be anonymous has been implicitly rejected by the many 'real world' manifestations taking up the Anonymous brand, judging from the fact that on many Facebook pages people contributing to the discussion openly reveal their real names and identities.

Despite the strong anti-leader rhetoric, moreover, Anonymous history has been constellated by emerging leaders or wannabe-leaders, often attracting fierce criticism, but objectively collecting groups of followers and supporters around them.<sup>96</sup>

Finally I would like to point out that we lost so many members was because of leaderfagging. The whole idea of Anonymous is that there is no leader, so why should I person control the forums, arranging the raids, announcing at the raids and so on... Ideally I will attend more raids from now on, but will do my best to speak up aswell.

(page name: Melbanon - (Anti-Scientology Protests); page ID: 199725416704594; post ID: 351238744886593; date: 26 January 2012)

Anonymous has had a break out of want to be leaders... They seem to have forgotten that we are not a membership nor are we a group. Anonymous is a lifestyle.. Stop trying to be a leader and start being the idea.. If you are Anonymous.. then you must have anonymity... If you are on the web claiming to be an Anon Operative with real information.. You are not legion... That is like a christian being a hypocrite for not acting like one..

(page name: ANONYMOUS; page ID: 381106671980643; post ID: 438910266200283; date: 15 April 2013)

### 5.3.3 - *The media are the enemy. Never attack the media*

Since one of the (pseudo-)core-missions of Anonymous is to fight censorship and preserve information freedom, a widespread (un)written rule often recurred to by Anonymous affiliates is not to attack the media, no matter what reasons there may be to do so. This golden rule is often mobilized within inauthenticity claims: whatever group that has made the media a target, has either ignored the rules and thus proven it was not Anonymous in the first place, or distanced itself from the Anonymous standards and thus quitting to be really Anonymous.

@EuropeAnonymous ! You are not Legion ! Never Attack the Media Faggot ! #Gulli.com #Anonymous

(page name: Anonymous Bayern; page ID: 381106671980643; post ID: 438910266200283; date: 11 October 2012)

This rule often contradicts the recurrent rhetoric against the corrupted mass media brainwashing the people and censoring the truth. It does, however, resonates with the ethic of Anonymous as a champion of radical information freedom.

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<sup>96</sup> In particular, see the role of single individuals, such as Sabu or Barrett Brown, in the evolution and popularization of Anonymous (see Coleman 2015; Olson 2012).



The history of Anonymous' actions, though, is filled with violations of this rule. One of the most notorious cases was so-called #OpFacebook, threatening to shut down the popular social networking site.

Attention citizens of the world, We wish to get your attention, hoping you heed the warnings as follows: Your medium of communication you all so dearly adore will be destroyed. If you are a willing hacktivist or a guy who just wants to protect the freedom of information then join the cause and kill facebook for the sake of your own privacy.

(page name: The Anonymous; page ID: 16167528389853; post ID: 18931749446764; date: 15 August 2011)

This widely-advertised operation, indeed, attracted many accusations of inauthenticity.

#OpFacebook is being organised by some Anons. This does not necessarily mean that all of #Anonymous agrees with it.

(page name: Anonymous Hacker Gurubunu Kınıyoruz ve Buna Karşı Gelmek İçin Toplanıyoruz; page ID: 22409063763716; post ID: 22413046763318; date: 11 August 2011)

"Today, @anonops wrote: TO PRESS: MEDIAS OF THE WORLD... STOP LYING! #OpFacebook is just ANOTHER FAKE! WE DONT KILL THE MESSENGER. THAT'S NOT OUR STYLE #Anonymous"

(page name: Anonymous Op FB Fake; page ID: 27445354592627; post ID: 27446694925827; date: 5 November 2011)

#### 5.3.4 - *Anonymous is what Anonymous wants*

Despite the fact that the modality in which an Anonymous operation emerges are most likely multiple, there is a distinctive model of decision making inherited from the logic of 4chan and in line with the idea of Anonymous as an affinity group with an orientation which can be redirected according to contingent factors. The legitimacy of an appropriation, as the following statement makes explicit, depends on whether Anonymous agree among themselves that the appropriation is legitimate.

[...] anyone can launch a new ideological message or campaign under the banner of ANONYMOUS. Anyone can take up a leading role in the spreading of the ANON-consciousness. Whether or not these appropriations are legitimate is decided by the rest of the internet citizenry. If the majority of the public agrees with a proposed appropriation, then the public will act. If the majority of the public disagrees with a proposed appropriation, then the public will protest and label the message in question as not legitimate and thus not representing the values of ANONYMOUS. [...] This does not mean there can't be 'bad' actions presented as coming from ANONYMOUS, but if the people do not agree with these actions, then these actions are - by definition - not undertaken by ANONYMOUS.

(page name: We need Anonymous; page ID: 24093564934013; post ID: 41353201867745; date: 22 May 2012)

Disagreements, however, are the norm rather than the exception. This often leads Anons to admit that ‘Anonymous is not unanimous’:<sup>97</sup> Anons can disagree among themselves, and there is no need for Anonymous to have a coherent opinion.

its called Anonymous not unanimous the amount of infighting amongst anons would make you question if there were even a group to begin with

(page name: Anonymous; page ID: 625777917578158; post ID: 625821524240464; date: 27 February 2016)

This gives Anonymous its distinctive dynamic character and the peculiar ability to reproduce itself as many things at once, escaping attempts of annihilation perpetrated by its enemies.

Anonymous constantly evolves and changes to how people want it to be. In the end, Anonymous can only be constructed or dismantled within our own imagination, not through arrests and/or threats.

(page name: Anonymous College of Hacktivism; page ID: 19163062091025; post ID: 441657; date: 27 August 2013)

### *5.3.5 - You cannot join Anonymous. You are Anonymous*

Fascinated by its growing popularity and attracted by one of its missions, but confused by its shady nature or mistaken by simplistic media reports, a number of people manifest their intention to embrace Anonymous’ cause and thus ask the crucial question on IRC channels or Facebook pages: how can I join Anonymous?

How to join and work with anonymous? I don't understand.. Please help me.. I love to work with anon..

(page name: Anonymous; page ID: 19719280700786; post ID: 208636; date: 23 April 2014)

As often explained by Anons, however, there is not only no official procedure to become a member of Anonymous: there is no such a thing as a membership of Anonymous.

You can not join Anonymous. Nobody can join Anonymous. Anonymous is not an organization. Nobody can speak for Anonymous. Nobody could say: you are in, or you are out. Do you still want to join Anonymous? Well, you are in if you want to.

(page name: Anonymous Germany; page ID: 201170586586592; post ID: 129862327089030; date: 9 May 2011)

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<sup>97</sup> See <http://pastebin.com/4vprKdXH>.

Nonetheless, websites and Facebook pages often present instructions on how to get into the ‘hive’. A widespread, general-purpose operation, #OpAnonBlood, states its mission to be the creation of protocols and procedures to introduce interested people into the logic and practices of Anonymous.

#OpNewBlood initialized. #OpNewblood Guide for IRC Chat Setup & Anonymous Interneting  
<http://migre.me/b6fy0> #Anonymous #AntiSec

(page name: Anonymous Grupo; page ID: 21788375834254; post ID: 25514764461615; date: 2 January 2013)

This often includes the elucidation of technical skills related to anonymous browsing.

**\*\*How To Join Anonymous\*\***<http://anoninsiders.net/how-to-join-anonymous-1527> **\*\*Anon Starters Kit\*\***This is a guide with which even a total noob can get high class security for his system and complete anonymity online. But its not only for noobs, it contains a lot of tips most people will find pretty helpful. It is explained so detailed even the biggest noobs can do it. <http://school0fanon.tumblr.com/AnonStarters>  
**\*\*How to Hide Your Digital Communications from Big Brother\*\***<http://www.blogtips.com/2013/06/bitmessage-anonymous-digital.html> **\*\*Upload your files anonymously and free on AnonFiles.com\*\***<https://anonfiles.com/>

(page name: Dutch Anonymous Legion - Million Masks March; page ID: 52008689805752; post ID: 52020145471273; date: 16 June 2013)

Nonetheless, many argue that computer skills are not a precondition for becoming Anonymous.

please keep in mind that you don't have to be a hacker or a computer literate to become anonymous.

(page name: Anonymous Philippines; page ID: 87625219572475; post ID: 123243548677308; date: 29 November 2015)

### 5.3.6 - *Everyone is Anonymous, someone is not Anonymous, no one is Anonymous*

It should be already clear how unclear is the membership logic of Anonymous. Despite the existence of ‘inauthenticity claims’ as a constant, Anons often state that everyone can be Anonymous – or even that no one is Anonymous.

We do it because we can! We do it for the future of our children and all life on this planet. We do it because we see the lies and deceit. Anonymous is everyone. Everyone is Anonymous. Now! you can be Anonymous. Join us, Anonymous!"

(page name: Anons Djab; page ID: 45972478409486; post ID: 46874045319329; date: 17 March 2013)

we haven't stable members. everyone can be a member. and every one can leave it. there is no conditions. there is no rules. I am anonymous. you are anonymous

(page name: We Are Anonymous Expect Us; page ID 520069334686431; post ID: 555530771140287; date 11 November 2012)

anonymous is no one. anonymous is everyone.

(page name: We need Anonymous; page ID: 24093564934013; post ID: 48945605441421; date: 29 June 2012)

The criteria occasionally mentioned for defining who is part of Anonymous are extremely general, allowing for potentially anybody, without any predefined characteristic, to identify as part of the family.

Anonymous is NOT an Organization, everyone is Anonymous. There is no group to join, If ur questioning a corrupt government. .u r legion. ..if u defend the defenseless. .u r legion. ..if u still have a heart and soul ..u r legion..if u believe in a better world..u r legion. .if u talk to others about ur doubts. .u r legion..no joining a club. .or following a leader..for u r the club...and the leader...anonymous is an idea..and u cant kill an idea. EXPECT US.

(page name: Anonymous Germany; page ID: 20117058658659; post ID: 12986232708903; date: 9 May 2011)

The fact that everybody can potentially be Anonymous paradoxically implies that nobody can claim to be ‘more Anonymous’ than others. In some cases, indeed, claiming to be really Anonymous creates the conditions for not being really Anonymous.

Anyone can be Anonymous, yet not everyone is Anonymous. [...] True #Anons are ready to welcome you with open arms, we look forward to marching with you at our many active protests, marches and rallies around the world. [...] However, we do have a warning, you must be aware of fake Anons, who profit from the name of Anonymous, those who call themselves \OFFICIAL\

(page name: We Are Anonymous; page ID: 27392591608998; post ID: 57939729554284; date: 5 February 2016)

Anonymous does not have members or leaders. there is no way to get into Anonymous. Anyone who believes in the motto is Anonymous. Period.

(page name: Anonymous; page ID: 22011355801277; post ID: 381097; date: 28 December 2011)

### *5.3.7 - Official announcement: There are no official announcements*

All the points raised above make it really complicated to discern what is official and what is fake within Anonymous, and it is not in the spirit of this work to make such a claim. Indeed, Anons often reject the idea that something in Anonymous can be official at all.

No one speaks for Anonymous. Nothing is official. No videos. No operations. Not even this press release, even though it was created by an Anonymous number of Anonymous at an Anonymous time in an Anonymous place and uploaded Anonymously, it does not speak for Anonymous.

(page name: Anonymous Croatia; page ID: 39344785401472; post ID: 53610232308260; date: 10 October 2012)

There are no official messages from Anonymous. There are no official videos from Anonymous. There are no official representatives of Anonymous. There is no official gathering point of Anonymous. There is no official goal of Anonymous.

(page name: Anonymous; page ID: 14033595149; post ID: 122409335770; date: 19 September 2009)

However, many Anonymous pages resort to the appellation ‘Official’, seemingly because of the practical need to underline their authenticity among a vast population of other pages.

Welcome to the official Melbourne Anonymous facebook fan page.

(page name: Melbanon - (Anti-Scientology Protests); page ID: 19972541670459; post ID: 18849042451852; date: 15 February 2011)

It is needless to say that pages explicitly claiming to be the official page of Anonymous abound, attracting claims of inauthenticity precisely for their claim of authenticity:

Every time you see something saying 'Official Anonymous', or 'Anonymous Official', or 'Headquarters', you are dealing with real fakes, aka greedy ones, infiltrators, and all things described by us.

(page name: Anonymous Brabant Operations; page ID: 162071183150518; post ID: 170849238939379; date: 11 February 2016)

### 5.3.8 – *Copies without originals*

This section has made evident how Anonymous’ identity is continuously at the center of controversies made visible by recurrent inauthenticity claims among their (non-)members. The logic of authenticity is often either paradoxical or tautological; moreover, for almost every authenticity rule deemed as essential, there are many cases of violation.

The practical effect of all this is the recurrent impossibility of discerning between real and fake appropriations of the brand. This impossibility is not only methodological, but also epistemological: the categories of authentic and inauthentic fail to delimitate the boundaries of who is really Anonymous; everything can be either official or fake, according to the unfolding of contingent controversies.

This cross-fire between sections reciprocally accusing each other of being inappropriate or inauthentic expression of the Anonymous identity does not only involve single individuals or minor appropriations of the brand. An emblematic example is provided by the case of AnonHQ

(<http://www.anonhq.com>), a website vigorously accused as being a dangerous threat to the real Anonymous.

To all, please watch this video concerning AnonHQ's fake Anonymous attempt to distract attention of the masses away from real anons. AnonHQ is a false flag created by the government. Anons do not urge others to sign petitions endorsed by the White House. Anons do not endorse presidential candidates. Anons do not endorse governments. Anons are non-profit, decentralized. There is no HQ. They do not get paid, they do not buy busses. Please stop sharing articles from AnonHQ, AnonHQ generates money from the articles that gets shared from their Facebook fan page and website. They are abusing Creative Commons as well. Please share this youtube video as much as possible. AnonHQ is a much bigger threat than most realize. Thank You

(page name: OpCyber: The Voice Of Humanity #AnonymousWorldwide; page ID: 45335326482683; post ID: 53270144022534; date: 17 February 2016)

It is worth noting that the Facebook page associated with the website, simply named 'Anonymous', with 4,125,963 likes at the time of data collection, is by far the most popular page related to Anonymous on Facebook. It also ranks fifth in terms of its number of connections, being liked by 411 Anonymous' pages.

The following example (Figure 43) represents another extreme case useful to mention.

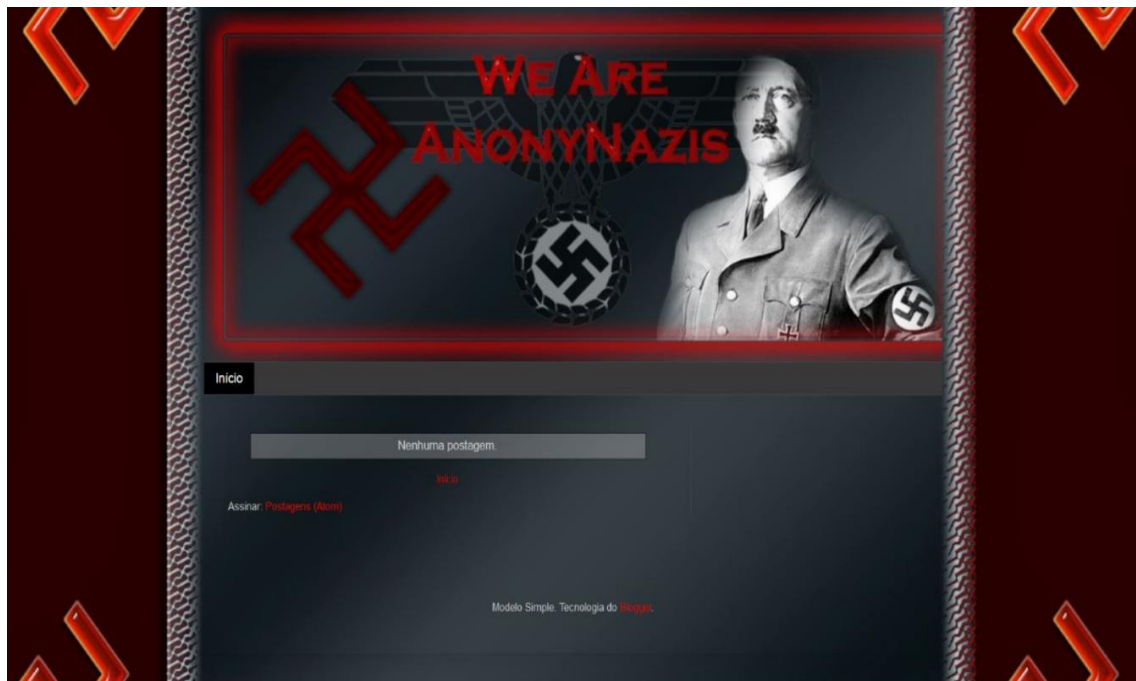


Fig. 43 – 'AnonyNazis' BlogSpot page. Beside the authentic intention of such a page, this example shows the universal adaptability of the Anonymous brand. (Source: <http://anonymnazi.blogspot.com>).

From a quick investigation, it was not possible to understand the real nature of this juxtaposition between the Anonymous and Nazi brands. Mere speculation, however, is enough to make a fundamental point. We can be safe in stating that this website does not reveal the existence of a Nazi

branch of Anonymous: it most likely represents a parody. Even in such an extreme case, however, it is difficult to understand whether this parodist adoption of the Anonymous brand is a joke without a specific purpose, a fake aiming to discredit the collective, or an ironic exploitation of the brand by real Nazis. It could even reasonably be an ‘authentic expression of the real Anonymous’, if it was the idea of some ‘oldfags’ interested in getting some ‘lulz’ pissing off ‘moral fags’.<sup>98</sup>

Any definition of in-group boundaries is to some extent subjected to contestation and generates accusations of false attributions. However, the level, intensity and articulation of inauthenticity claims within Anonymous are almost unique in their character and can be understood as a constitutive element of Anonymous’ identity.

#### **5.4 - Who is Anonymous? Essential inessentiality**

This section intends to ‘ask’ the corpus of Anonymous’ posts and comments for spontaneous declarations concerning its own ontological nature: who is Anonymous, in the sense of what are the constitutive elements of Anonymous’ identity? Anonymous, first, is a legion: it is not properly one unified entity, nor simply the juxtaposition of many groups; rather, it manifests as the co-presence of different souls that refuse to be captured. Anonymous, however, is also a family: the many diverging opinions and the recurrent infights do not compromise a strong sense of ‘we’-ness and unity, which is actively pursued and deemed as vital. Anonymous, in Anons’ own words, has a peculiar ontological character, since it is not a group in the conventional sense, nor even something that really exists: it is an abstract idea that can be incarnated in different forms. Anonymous is, moreover, an incoherent machine: the heterogeneity and contradictions between its manifestations, as well as the systematic mismatch between its declarations and its behavior, are anticipated in its own definition. These dimensions altogether make evident how the essence of Anonymous lies in its inessential character.

##### *5.4.1 – My name is Legion, for we are many*

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<sup>98</sup> The recourse to swastikas as a means of generating outrage is not new to Anonymous, as the famous ‘Habbo Hotel’ raids show (see Olson 2012).

One of the leading threads of this work is to understand whether an entity such as Anonymous should be better understood as one or as many. Speculation on this issue normally requires accurate empirical reconstruction and fine-grained theoretical reflection. However, Anons already provide an answer to this question.

IT IS IMPORTANT FOR YOU TO REMEMBER WHAT IS AND WHO IS [Anonymous] [...] anonymous is not one single person. anonymous is not one single group. anonymous is hundreds. anonymous is thousands. anonymous is millions.

(page name: We need Anonymous; page ID: 24093564934013; post ID: 48945605441421; date: 29 June 2012)

Being simultaneously one and many allows Anonymous to be nothing and everything, to endorse any cause and not to have to endorse any cause, to fight for something and its opposite. Thus, it allows Anonymous to escape any definition or classification:

We are one. We are many. One does not speak for many. Many do not speak for all. No one speaks for all. We come from all walks of life. All age, race, sex, places. We have no ideologies. We have every ideology imaginable. We have no goals. We have every goal imaginable. To understand Anonymous would be to understand our universe. Anonymous cannot be labeled, blamed or made a scapegoat.

(page name: Anonymous News And More; page ID: 48742004463265; post ID: 49110648759734; date: 18 January 2013)

In other words, as its notorious slogan states, Anonymous ‘is legion’.

Anonymous is Legion, for we are many

(page name: Anonymous; page ID: 27893179991; post ID: 29466973573; date: 31 January 2010)

This expression comes from the Gospels, where Jesus confronts a man possessed by demons: “And he asked him, What is your name? And he answered, saying, My name is Legion: for we are many”.<sup>99</sup> This passage highlights how a stable, coherent identity in the pre-modern era was not so much an assumption, something given for granted, as a request, a normative accomplishment: to be a legion is to be demoniac. Anonymous explicitly refuses to meet this ‘modernist’ request, becoming the omninclusive, ungraspable identity that it proves to be.

#### 5.4.2 – *United as one, divided by zero*

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<sup>99</sup> See Mark 5:9.



The fact that Anonymous is a legion crossed by continuous conflicts, however, does not mean that it does away with a sense of unity. On the contrary, references to its ‘we’-ness are extremely frequent, and the unity of the Anonymous family is often emphasized:

Fellow Anons, Greetings! One great thing from our previous attacks was successful because WE speak as one. [...] WE are doing this to hear our voice. Show them the truth and show them what is right and just. WE are one, like our Mask represents. No colors, no heights, no religion and no regions. WE are all the same. WE speak as one. WE are family, my brothers...sisters... let us respect each other; WE must unite and meet our common goal and deliver our message. The more WE used WE, the stronger WE are, the weaker they become. WE are Anonymous and WE are family.

(page name: Anonymous Pangasinan; page ID: 14124528270273; post ID: 26199480396111; date: 24 February 2014)

The contradiction in terms that follows the incredibly conflictual character of Anonymous and its emphasis on unity is sometimes interpreted in the sense that Anonymous is the one voice of many voices:

we are not a group, are all Group .. we are not in favor of some, we are in favor of all .. we are not an entity, we are the union of all .. do not fight for a cause, fight for the cause of all

(page name: Anonymous Grupo; page ID: 21788375834254; post ID: 27858206893937; date: 8 February 2013)

In this way, Anonymous can fit divergent position and empower all of them: it gets stronger and stronger precisely by incorporating any aspect of the world, by collecting many voices under the same name, and providing them with an element of unity beyond the differences. In this way Anonymous generates the strength required for any voice to be heard.

Anonymous is a collective of souls with a single thought, hearts that beat as one, with the common idea that people can be truly free, that there can be justice and peace and that truth will always win. [...] It is not about what I can do or what you can do but rather what we can accomplish together for the good of many. For only together, united, are we indestructible.

(page name: Christchurch Anonymous; page ID: 39637229384805; post ID: 55112919503903; date: 30 October 2015)

#### *5.4.3 – You cannot cut off that which does not exist*

Looking for the essential traits defining Anonymous’ identities means to elucidate the ontological status of Anonymous. This question, commonly delegated to philosophers, has actually already been answered by Anons:

we'd like to take this opportunity to elucidate our goals, ideology and ontological status. First and foremost, it is important to realize that ANONYMOUS - in fact - does not exist. ANONYMOUS is nothing but an idea, an internet meme, that can be appropriated by anyone, anytime to rally for a common cause that's in the benefit of humankind.

(page name: Anonymous Ohio; page ID: 48464697490774; post ID: 48465072157403; date: 6 January 2013)

Anonymous, no matter how counterintuitive this sounds, does not exist: Anonymous, in other words, is nothing. The fact that Anonymous is nothing, however, implies that Anonymous can be everything.

\* Who is Anonymous tn ? \* We are no one, yet we are everyone. We are you, yet we are nothing. We are the voice, yet we are silence. We wear a mask, but there is nothing behind it.

(page name: Anonymous/ Vendetta/ Guy Fawkes Mask For Sale (Malaysia); page ID: 10972925917491; post ID: 12808762733908; date: 11 October 2012)

When Anons have to concretely define what Anonymous is, they often say it is not a group or organization but an idea, something more abstract than anything that really exists:

Anonymous is nobody. Anonymous is nothing. Anonymous is an idea. Ideas cant be killed

(page name: Anonymous Nation; page ID: 44666233209313; post ID: 45043579171578; date: 24 April 2013)

For this very reason, Anonymous is immortal, because ideas do not belong to the actual world, but resist in a state of virtuality. They cannot be annihilated, because they really are without actually being.

Anonymous has no face, no race, and no origin. Anonymous is a force and as such, simply is. Anonymous is not I, you, or we. Anonymous is all without name, blame, and restraint. Anonymous cannot be hurt, damaged, or stopped.

(page name: The Anonymous; page ID: 16167528389853; post ID: 43026329370639; date: 2 November 2012)

#### *5.4.4 – The incoherent machine it is intended to be*

Anonymous has no will, no purpose, no predefined direction towards which it is operating. This, however, instead of representing a weakness or a lack of personality, is converted into the very same conditions of its indestructability: you cannot chase that which does not follow a route.

The will of Anonymous is unclassifiable and therefore is unconquerable. This is the root of its purpose. For kingdoms and armies whose objectives and goals are obvious are easily manipulated and destroyed. When you know what your peers want or need, you know exactly how to control them. Anonymous needs nor

wants anything. It has no moral brackets that one could use to predict it's behavior. Its transparent unpredictability is an impenetrable shield which no manipulative force can hinder or tame

(page name: Anonymous; page ID: 1700443796880455; post ID: 1740079076250260; date: 30 May 2016)

Anonymous is never the same, as Anonymous is constantly evolving and redefining. Its dynamic character is not just a matter of natural motion of everything, but a productive flow which is endorsed to access a source of constant energy.

Chaos is change and change is life. Anonymous is in constant flux. It is the embodiment of change. When Anonymous demands justice, it asks not for stagnant order, but disarray and destruction. Anonymous seeks to set fire the overgrown fields of the social order so that their ashes may nutrient the growth of healthy plants.

(page name: Anonymiss Germany; page ID: 36643559355774; post ID: 46056295747833; date: 28 February 2016)

The possibility of negating its own propositions and attending to any conflicting goal, according to some Anons, is not an expression of disfunction, but rather the result of a deliberate plan: Anonymous is incoherent by definition.

Once an individual attempts to act as, or act for, the many, Anonymous is no longer the incoherent machine it is intended to be.

(page name: Anonymous; page ID: 14033595149; post ID: 122409335770; date: 19 September 2009)

Anonymous continuously contravenes its own rules and contradicts itself. This should be evident from the many examples reported above, since almost every constitutive statement expressed by Anons is paired by many examples that goes against it. However, this is nothing that Anons themselves have not embedded in their self-representations. What can be seen, on a certain level, as a fake manifestation of the real anonymous, or as a negation of what Anonymous really is, on another level of abstraction is explicitly recognized as a constitutive element of Anonymous' own definition. This point gets back to the original divide between 'oldfags' and 'newfags', between 'Anonymous for the Lulz' and 'Anonymous for Justice': who is the real Anonymous? The white knights supporting the cause of the good of humanity or the amoral pranksters seeking some 'lulz' at the expense of any 'faggot'? From the branding perspective here adopted, the answer is undoubtedly 'both'. For some Anons, the first definition is the authentic, while for others it is the second; for others, the true answer would probably be 'neither', because Anonymous is undefinable by definition. The sudden transition from the totally amoral to the radically panmoral exploitation of its brand, consequently, is the key to understanding its essential inessentiality. Anonymous, at this level of abstraction, is an agent of chaos,

and its internal contradiction is the lymph of its schizophrenic body, the oil that greases the gears of the incoherent machine it is intended to be.

### **5.5 - Complexity unveiled: Radical recursion versus schismogenesis**

The first analysis has shown that Anonymous, when taken as a whole, presents an apparently schizophrenic character. The Anonymous brand is not only adopted for disparate goals, but also for directly contrasting ones: plain contradiction is almost a constant in Anonymous identity. The network connectivity between contrasting issues within Anonymous' political orientations is sometimes mediated by the existence of broker issues (e.g. the Palestinian cause is supported by both Islamists and communists), but, at least in some cases, evidence suggests that the broker of the network is nothing but the brand itself. This is interesting because it may imply that the preeminence of the branding dimension itself has the potential to integrate incoherent and even contradictory orientations into the same collective identity: *acting as a standard interface, the brand would obfuscate and, consequently, surpass semantic heterogeneity*. Anons, to be sure, are well aware of the conflicting composition of Anonymous; however, the practical effect of adopting a common semiotic repertoire by radically different souls could precisely be to let connections, solidarity or, simply, visibility flow directly between groups that would otherwise have nothing to share. The original puzzle, however, remains unanswered: what allows such a schizophrenic system to survive such centrifugal tendencies? The findings of the second and third sections of this chapter may help in sketching an answer to this puzzle.

The analysis of Anonymous' recurrent inauthenticity claims shows that there is no such a thing as an official page of Anonymous, nor an authentic Anonymous member. What is authentic, and what is not, is both methodologically and epistemologically difficult to assess. Still, authenticity and inauthenticity claims are widespread: this impossibility, consequently, appears to be ontological. The original and the copy are sometimes indistinguishable because, like simulacra in contemporary mediatized society (Baudrillard 1980), each copy has no reference to any real original. You cannot join Anonymous, for Anonymous has no members. In other words, this implies that the distinction between 'who is in' and 'who is out', the boundaries between the in-group and the out-group, are undefined; but still they are continuously defined, whereas, in classical collectives, they are usually

reified, taken for granted. They are in a continuous process of ‘grouping’ (Latour 2005), which is to say they are the situated and contingent accomplishments of the unfolding of controversies. More explicitly, Anonymous could be described in Deleuzian terms (Deleuze [1967] 1994; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; DeLanda 2002). Anonymous defines itself as an idea, something that does not exist. Translating this into the Deleuzian vocabulary, Anonymous exists as a ‘virtuality’: something that is not actual, but is still real, because it can be actualized in different forms. The possibility to re-actualize a pure virtuality in radically different assemblages is what makes Anonymous, in Anons’ own words, a legion; in Deleuzian terms, Anonymous is a multiplicity, an entity that is neither a unit, nor a multiple of a class.

The paragraphs above report epistemological statements that have already been widely acknowledged by post-structuralist theories reflecting on the complexity of society. However, they also show the *correspondence between these complex propositions developed by intellectuals to deconstruct the appearances of reality and analogously complex propositions developed by social movement participants in the act of self-description*. The claim here is that the complexity-oriented self-definitions expressed by Anonymous are crucial to understand its capacity to fight entropy.

Trying to provide an extensional definition of Anonymous, to enumerate its instances, is challenging, precisely because the adoption of the Anonymous brand is constellated by continuous accusations of inauthenticity. Providing an intensional definition, based on shared essential properties, is alike extremely problematic, since no essential traits exist that could be made explicit to explain who Anonymous is. However, following Anonymous’ own answers to these questions, many definitions of who is Anonymous (and who Anonymous is) are implicitly or explicitly stated. The counterintuitive aspect, though, is that *these definitions are often expressed in terms of tautologies* (everyone is Anonymous, Anonymous is everything) *or of paradoxes* (everyone is Anonymous, because no one is Anonymous; Anonymous is everything, because Anonymous is nothing). This argument would be immediately clear when scanning the titles of each paragraph in the second and third empirical section. The systematic mismatch between what Anonymous says and what Anonymous does is a further element of contradiction: coupled with the deliberate mission of being an incoherent machine, however, this mismatch generates chains of pragmatic tautologies and paradoxes (Anonymous does not what Anonymous says; Anonymous says that Anonymous does not what Anonymous says; Anonymous does what Anonymous says, etc. ...).

The fact that Anonymous identity is unidentifiable appears to be key to its reproduction. By deploying a consciously schizophrenic behavior, by enacting chaos as its mission, Anonymous creates the conditions of its own success, escaping any ‘apparatus of capture’, which precondition operates on

an identifiable identity (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Anonymous, in other words, lies in an ontological paradox, which allows it to *convert the very same conditions of its dismantling into the conditions of its existence*. In this sense, paradoxically, Anonymous is also a tautology: by incorporating the possibility of negating itself into its own identity, it neutralizes schismogenetic tendencies and reproduces its identity by definition.

Trying to assess whether the paradox comes before the tautology, or vice versa, would easily lead to an inescapable loop for the very same properties of these logical forms.<sup>100</sup> Both, however, share the property of being self-referential and recursive. Recursion is a property acknowledged in any autopoietic system (Maturana and Varela 1980), which are systems that define the conditions for their own reproduction. Paradoxes and tautologies, according to such a perspective, are inherent parts of the self-definition of modern societies (Luhman 1988); but the interruption of self-reference at the representational level through means of linear configurations (i.e. ideologies) is generally a precondition for their integration. The ontological paradox of the definition of social systems has to be ‘deparadoxized’ for the concrete functioning of these systems. Anonymous, instead, seems to generate a further meta-level of abstraction in this cybernetic process, thus representing a case of ‘radical recursion’ (Rosen 2004): *its recursive character is not confined to its implicit constitution, instead is brought to the surface being incorporated in its representational level*; consequently, the loop is not cut, because complexity is made explicit rather than hidden.

As already stated in the previous chapters, the idea behind the adoption of branding as a level of observation is related to the idea that a case like Anonymous represents the reassessment of the relation between the form and the substance of social movements. The form seems to replace the substance, again in a paradoxical and recursive move. This observation suggests that following the trace of complexity thinking is key in constructing a theory of contentious branding.

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<sup>100</sup> Luhman, however, observes that tautologies should be understood as functionally subordinate to paradoxes, insofar as tautologies can always be reversed into paradoxes: a tautology asserts itself by logically negating the conditions of what negates it, but not vice-versa (Luhman 1987, 34).

## 6 - Conclusions

*Every real signifier is, as such, a signifier that signifies nothing. The more the signifier signifies nothing, the more indestructible it is.*

(Jacques Lacan, 'The Seminar. Book III. The Psychoses', 1955)

*In order to understand recursion, one must first understand recursion.*  
(Programmers' joke)

The original motivation behind this dissertation was to study 'one new digital movement'. But what was 'one', what was 'new', what was 'digital' and what was 'movement' turned out to be far from self-evident. The research thus unfolded via an epistemological critique of each of these apparently banal notions.

This conclusion pulls together the arguments advanced in the previous chapters in three lines of reasoning:

- the analytical autonomy of branding from other social movements processes and its role in supporting a non-essentialist, material-semiotic understanding of social movements;
- the role of contentious branding in older, pre-digital mobilizations and the specificity of digitally-mediated contentious branding
- the relation between the connective and collective levels of organization and identity, and the recursive relation between the means and meanings of contention.

The concluding chapter's first section tries to bring conceptual clarity. It first assesses the relation between branding and various social movement processes studied in the literature and then ventures a definition of branding based on the idea of movements-as-multiplicities and a material-semiotic understanding of social movements.

The chapter's second section asks whether branding is distinctive to the digitally-mediated contentious entities studied in this dissertation or more generally a part of social movements as such. It argues that Occupy and Anonymous foreground properties that, with a reflexive epistemology, can be seen in classical, pre-digital mobilizations as well. The role of digital media in foregrounding the branding process should not only be sought in the remediation of social movement dynamics but also, following a principle of epistemological symmetry, in the research affordances that digital tools

provide to social movement research. The focus on branding generates two hypotheses that bear on the media-movement debate, to be developed and assessed in future work.

The chapter concludes with a reflection on how social movements are reassembled in the network society. Enabled by the affordances of digital media to bring their complexities to the surface, Occupy and Anonymous, I argue, abstract a meta-level of contention to compensate for their ideological fragmentation and the non-intelligibility of contemporary forms of domination.

## **6.1 - Towards a material-semiotics of contention**

In order to bring analytical clarity to the process of branding within social movements, this section examines the relation between contentious branding and the organizational, network, framing and identification dimensions of contentious processes that have been emphasized in the literature. It subsequently provides a definition of contentious branding, outlines its distinctive properties, and clarifies its relationship to a non-essentialist idea of social movements.

### *6.1.1 – Contentious branding and social movement processes*

Whereas this overview of different aspects of social movements could be seen as a conflation of different processes, the goal here is to analytically delimit the notion of contentious branding by comparing it to ‘classical’ processes. We need to remember that the relation between analytical concepts is not one of mutual exclusion. On the one hand, this section aims to show that contentious branding is a specific process that partially overlaps with other social movement processes treated in the literature. On the other hand, at least for Occupy and Anonymous, contentious branding subsumes part of their organizational and identitary dimensions.

Organizational approaches to social movements have made use of concepts derived from economic and organization theory (McCarthy & Zald 1977). But because ‘social movement organizations’ generally have well defined boundaries, structures and goals, the approach seems poorly fitted for understanding phenomena such as Occupy and Anonymous. As we saw in chapters 4 and 5, the authenticity of actions that fall under the Anonymous umbrella is constantly challenged, the network structure is erratic and unpredictable, and the spectrum of goals is virtually infinite. But despite this



range of causes, ‘social movement sector’ fails to describe entities with definite (proper) names, recognizable logos, standardized slogans and common imaginaries.

The organizational dimension of branding reveals itself in how standardized repertoires of contention (Tilly 1986) are transmitted across locales – not so much through inter-organizational contacts or complex isomorphic processes, but through the spread of organizational packages, forms of ‘cloud protesting’ (Milan 2015b) condensed by symbolism flexible enough to adapt to heterogeneous circumstances. While the idea of the modularity of repertoires is not new (Tarrow 1994), contentious branding considers the roles of syntax and packaging – more or less beyond the content – in fostering trans-local spill-overs. As we saw in chapter 3, Occupy presents a vivid example of this spill-over effect. The tactic of occupying public space for extended periods, the ‘We are the 99%’ slogan used to express identity, the opportunities presented by hooking up to the #Occupy (meta-)hashtag: all spread to hundreds of local contexts around the world. But the sudden, far-reaching scale-shift of Occupy was not due to a linear process of diffusion (Tarrow, McAdam and Tilly 2003).<sup>101</sup> The synchronous branding strategies of local choreographers – coevolving with the growth of a public of supporters (Gerbaudo 2014; Kavada 2015) – fueled the recognizability and success associated with the Occupy brand, the emergence of the 2011-2012 global protest wave, and the reiteration of the brand over the following years in mobilizations such as Occupy Nigeria and Occupy Central.

Network approaches to social movement studies have contributed greatly to our understanding of their relational nature (Castells 1997; Diani and McAdam 2003). In particular, social network approaches have shed light on the fluidity and unboundedness of movements as well as on how network structures affect movement dynamics (Diani 2003; Passy 2003). Chapter 4 showed that approaching Anonymous as an interactive network of individual Twitter accounts reveals its continuously unstable, fragmented and shifting character, with indexes of stability, compactness and centralization constantly fluctuating without following specific trends. And when we examine how users aggregate around specific operations and offshoots, different layers of connectivity emerge: seemingly independent clusters of interaction, growing around distinct operations and offshoots, are brokered by general-purpose hubs, often without specific goals other than integrating otherwise independent clusters, thus perpetuating the Anonymous brand. It was impossible to define a common semantic, a shared mission that explains the networking between these diverse souls, suggesting that we should view the Anonymous brand as a connective device in itself, a proper broker, among others, of the Anonymous network. The material heterogeneity of these networks (Calhoun 1986a; Latour

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<sup>101</sup> The distinction between ‘relational’ and ‘mediatized’ forms of diffusion appears obsolete with the digital mediation of relations.

2005; Law 1992) thus cannot be ignored when assessing their structuration. Any definition of Anonymous must refer to its semiotic repertoire, how it is used and the rhizomatic connections it creates among causes as different as defending dolphins and hunting Jihadists.

The perspective of contentious branding shares with framing approaches to social movements the focus on processes of signification (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow and Benford 1988). The similarities are clear when we consider that frames are interrelated and sometimes combine in 'condensing symbols' (Gamson and Modigliani 1989) that act as short-cuts to invoke chains of associations. Nevertheless, there are differences between the two processes (Poell et al. 2016, 1001): whereas framing is a matter of semantic convergence, branding is a matter of syntactic convergence, thus leaving room for extreme levels of semantic incoherence (Mumby 2016). As we saw in chapters 3, 4 and 5, Occupy and Anonymous are floating signifiers that do not necessarily provide shared orientations and meaning, which are constitutive elements of framing, commonly understood. The Occupy signifier has fluctuated between radical, progressive and libertarian orientations, while Anonymous symbolism has been invoked to fight for and against the same cause. The role of a symbol condensing struggles as different as defending internet freedom and exposing the Illuminati conspiracy cannot convincingly be interpreted in terms of 'frame alignment', a process that assumes a link between diverse interpretative frameworks (Snow et al. 1986, 464).

Whereas Occupy is commonly linked to the 'master-frame' (Snow and Benford 1992) of protesting inequality, chapter 3 showed that this frame has itself been *framed* with distinct connotations. Chapter 3 also revealed that the range of mobilizations adopting the Occupy brand quickly moved beyond this frame, ultimately losing reference to it. The presence of the marker Occupy simply denotes that 'a protest is going on' – hardly a 'master-frame' but a 'meta-frame'. Whereas a master-frame is a matter of degree of generality, *a meta-frame is a matter of degree of abstraction*. The same applies to the Guy Fawkes masks currently appearing at many street demonstrations. A branding perspective examines the original, nested, recursive understanding of framing processes (Bateson 1955; Chesters and Welsh 2006).

A crucial debate over digitally-mediated movements concerns the applicability of the concept of collective identity, a construct adopted by social movement theory with rather different connotations (Polletta and Jasper 2001). The relation between Occupy and Anonymous and this notion is ambiguous. According to some interpretations of highly diverse social movements, incoherence questions their collective dimensions (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; McDonald 2002). But these same entities can also manifest a strong sense of unity and 'we-ness' (Gerbaudo 2015; Kavada 2015), not only implied by their adoption of a standardized set of semiotic tools, but explicitly seen in their

documents and slogans. ‘We are the 99%’, ‘Occupy Together’, ‘We are Family’, ‘United as One’ – the pervasiveness of such rhetorical devices shows the relevance of collective identification processes.

Whereas collective identity is often associated with homogeneity and coherence, its proper definition specifies that identity is to be understood as the processual outcome of negotiation and even conflict (Melucci 1995; 1996, 68-77). I contend that contentious branding operates on a different degree of abstraction than that of identity: whereas identity is a matter of recognition, *branding is a matter of conditions of recognizability*; it refers to the semiotic materials that allow for different layers of collective identification to emerge, some of which are ‘more collective’ than others. Again, in the analyzed cases, this process relies less on semantics and more on syntax. As chapter 5 argued, ‘who is Anonymous’ is not just the performative co-construction of interacting definitions, but also an explicitly underdetermined property of this entity. The identity of the ‘collective’ Anonymous is thus inherently contingent and paradoxical. The tension between the poles of unity and diversity was clear in the analysis of Anonymous’ counterintuitive self-definitions,<sup>102</sup> oscillating between the open recognition of diversity and its constant denial, the recurrent attributions of inauthenticity and persistent references to unity. Processes of differentiation among its offshoots<sup>103</sup> – such as the Million Mask March movement with its largely segregated network, idiosyncratic concerns, but persistent references to the Anonymous identitary repertoire – constitute Anonymous as a sort of ‘umbrella-brand’, a meta-layer of identification among largely independent sub-identities.

The point of the branding perspective, then, is not to ask whether weaker forms of association are replacing collective identities, but to recognize that identification processes are deployed at different degrees of abstraction, some relying on distinct symbolic elements without much reference to the meanings contingently associated with them. Anarchists clashing with the police as well as patriots denouncing the usurpation of the sacred American constitution can identify with the ‘Anonymous movement’. The shared orientations constituting a ‘sense of we’ are largely drawn by the syntax of the Anonymous brand rather than from the cacophony of its semantic.

Branding can be seen as both a finalistic / conscious strategy or a spontaneous / affective process, as a matter of organization and identification.<sup>104</sup> The branding perspective is thus well-suited as a base from which to reassemble social movement theory beyond the means / meanings divide of social movement theory. But in order to analytically delimit and frame its contribution, we must keep in

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<sup>102</sup> See Chapter 5, Sections 3 and 4 (‘Who is Anonymous? Controversies of in/authenticity’ and ‘Who is Anonymous? Essential Inessentiality’).

<sup>103</sup> See Chapter 4, Section 4 (‘Anonymous as an “umbrella-brand” and its offshoots’).

<sup>104</sup> See Chapter 2, Section 4 (‘The proliferation of branding’).

mind the notion's ideal-typical character: branding should not be understood as a distinct empirical process divorced from other 'classical' processes, but as an analytical distinction suggested by the counterintuitive properties of Occupy and Anonymous. Whereas contentious branding overlaps with organization, networking, framing and identification processes – just as they overlap one another – in Occupy and Anonymous we see that branding detaches itself from these other dimensions while subsuming their function, bringing to the surface their inherent complexity.

### 6.1.2 – *Affective devices and movements-as-multiplicities*

The puzzle introduced by Occupy and Anonymous lies at the intersection of semiotic and ontological considerations: phenomena connected through / collected under<sup>105</sup> a singular set of signifiers showcase radically heterogeneous properties that challenge their attributed individuality. Social movements, in other words, are not essences but multiplicities, while movements-as-multiplicities are continuously differentiated by the material-semiotic process of branding.

The initial challenge posed by Occupy and Anonymous is largely a linguistic one, as can be seen in the plethora of expressions adopted by commentators to describe these phenomena: 'global initiatives arisen in solidarity with Occupy Wall Street' and 'loosely associated international network of hacktivism'. By now it should be clear that talking about 'the Occupy movement' or 'the Anonymous movement' is nothing more than a comfortable simplification. And although it is sometimes unavoidable to rely on simplifications to develop meaningful theory, we need to appreciate the relative autonomy of the branding process in order to account for such complex phenomena. The other key challenge, which immediately follows, is one of internal diversity and heterogeneity. When conceptualized as social movements *tout court*, Occupy and Anonymous suggest the existence of a substantial core with coherent traits: a mobilization against economic inequality or a collective of hackers sporting internet freedom. But the empirical analysis has shown how these supposed cores represent very partial accounts of the overall assemblage of the contentious instances mobilized by / through the Occupy and Anonymous brands.

Contentious branding is defined here as *the material-semiotic process by which the ontological multiplicity of a social movement is differentiated into one recognizable entity*. Social movements are multiplicities in the sense of non-essential entities (Chesters and Welsh 2006; Melucci 1996), not subjected to the metric of the one and the multiple (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; DeLanda 2002).

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<sup>105</sup> The indecision between these two expressions, we will see below, is relevant.

Nevertheless, these multiplicities are quantified by means of branding, a process of assembling meanings (Mumby 2016; Lury 2009) that produces the objective conditions for their recognizability as units or multiples. It is semiotic in the sense that it is based on the articulation of floating signifiers in chains of equivalence (Laclau and Mouffe 1985); it is material because any historical sign system is coupled with a technological environment (Chandler 1994) which provides it with affordances that constrain and enable. In order for recognition to operate as a precondition for collective action (Pizzorno 1986), *the movement-multiplicity needs to meet certain conditions of recognizability.*

To focus on the branding of social movements means bringing to the surface the process by which an unbound, relational, complex assemblage comes to be perceived as ‘one social movement’. As a conceptual device, contentious branding makes explicit properties of social movements that would otherwise remain (at best) implicit or (at worst) neglected: that movements are multiplicities referred to by signifiers that hint at their supposedly essential nature.<sup>106</sup> It is no coincidence that the problem of whether to understand and write about Occupy and Anonymous in terms of one-ness or many-ness – and of where to set the boundaries for analysis – was a recurring theme in this research.

What began as Occupy Wall Street and quickly turned into a universal marker of protest is not an individual Occupy movement ‘in itself’ but rather, in semiotic terms, its signifier: the container was detached from the message and filled with different content. This is clear in how existing mobilizations suddenly converged around the Occupy brand (which was admittedly developed by strategists at AdBusters as a tactical device, without pre-ordered content). In Occupy Wall Street, the more ‘classical’ dynamics of urban social movements remained important, with the Occupy brand augmenting the visibility of a mobilization revolving around well-known issues (protesting inequality and corruption) and following well-known dynamics (spreading from an epicenter to other contexts). It is clear the strategic dimension of branding, with hundreds of local networks joining and capitalizing on established flows of solidarity and visibility. It is somehow legitimate, although not easy, to distinguish between an Occupy Wall Street movement, a number of more or less related global offshoots, and more independent derivations where the only reference to the original protest is the label ‘Occupy’ – and its affective potential.

For Anonymous, the detachment of container and message is more radical. Anonymous is characterized by a number of radically counterintuitive elements, including, in the first instance, the paradox of its name – the rendering of an ephemeral entity nominable contradicting its own purpose. Anonymous, by definition, is not a specific movement; in the words of its supporters, it is an abstract

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<sup>106</sup> What has been referred to as the fundamental paradox of semiosis. See Chapter 2, Section 3.1 (‘Sign systems as recursive networks’).

idea. Very general principles (an ethic) and, more importantly, very specific semiotic elements (a syntax) are what bind its ‘associates’ together, more than a common political orientation or definite goals (a semantic). The threshold of ‘membership’ is so low and vague that the Anonymous brand is recalled for such heterogeneous aims as raiding an online multiplayer game for the sake of the ‘lulz’ and reporting Twitter accounts related to the Islamic State for the sake of justice.<sup>107</sup> Recurring accusations of inauthenticity is not a schismogenetic process tearing Anonymous apart; rather, it is the paradoxical precondition for its tautological reproduction. The fact that Anonymous is not an essence but a multiplicity is not only an analytical conclusion that derives from unfolding the material dimension of its assemblage; it is also an implicit and, sometimes, explicit element of its expression. *Branding, commonly considered a matter of packaging, becomes in this case a constitutive element of the contentious processes to which it relates.*

In light of the above, how then should we conceive of the relation between ‘contentious brands’ and ‘social movements’? Scanning the literature on social movements, we can find radically different conceptualizations of what a social movement is. Some emphasize the existence of shared beliefs and purposes, taking them as endogenous to social movements and focusing on their organization instead (e.g. McCarthy and Zald 1977). Other definitions acknowledge the negotiated and processual character of a social movement’s meanings and boundaries (e.g. Melucci 1996). Common ground between these competing definitions can be found by defining a social movement in terms of the presence of three elements (Diani 1992, 13): (1) a network of informal interactions; (2) engagement with political or cultural conflict; and (3) a shared collective identity.

The three constitutive aspects of this synthetic definition (network, conflict and identity) remain integral to the empirical phenomena studied in this dissertation, albeit with distinctive qualifications. While informal networks between human activists remain important, networks also include relations between activists and sympathizers and a variety of materials, including signifiers that can easily circulate through digital networks and thus broker diverse, sometimes incoherent, contentious issues. While political and cultural conflict is the main (but not sole) expression of the Occupy and Anonymous brands, it is directed by means of a single brand against a diverse and often incoherent set of targets, in support of a fragmented set of causes, and without the felt need to articulate a common rational account. And while collective identities remain at the core of social movements, they are increasingly abstract and paradoxical: in order to be Anonymous, it is not required to adhere to a set of beliefs or values. All that is required is taking up its mask.

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<sup>107</sup> Or, as we saw, to spread the message of the Caliphate.

The term ‘movement’, after all, is a physical metaphor referring to an object changing its position in space. The motion may well not be the effect of a pre-existing, straight direction, but rather the composition of a parallelogram of forces, as a constructivist, non-essentialist approach to social movements would have it (Chester and Welsh 2006; Melucci 1996). However, if we take Occupy and especially Anonymous in their entirety, the resulting movement would be totally unpredictable, or even null, considering that pushes of variable intensity are applied to every direction possible. The point is that – whatever definition of social movement is chosen – unfolding the assemblage of entities such as Occupy and Anonymous, and applying the current understanding of what constitutes social movements, leads to the conclusion that behind the Occupy and Anonymous brands lie many movements (each with a system of relationship, goal of action and cognitive definition). What brings together people, targets, ideas and actions that would otherwise have so little in common? The claim here is that a crucial agent of this incoherent assemblage is the brand itself. Contentious brands are *affective devices emerging from the assemblage of and assembling social movement processes*. The affective property of brands – the capacity ‘to affect and be affected’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) and to create assemblages (DeLanda 2006) – is evident in their role as mediators and in their mobilizing potential.

It needs to be underlined again that this work does not aim to disqualify Occupy and Anonymous as not being ‘real social movements’; nor does it argue that current definitions of social movements are inapplicable to the contemporary landscape. Rather, the goal is to introduce the branding of contention – understood as a distinctive process of differentiating a multiplicity, tracing recognizable boundaries by means of material-semiotic devices – into the toolkit of social movement theory.

## **6.2 - Brand new movements?**

The theoretical reflection, empirical hypotheses and methodological suggestions raised in this section point to future directions this research may take.

A crucial question concerns the degree of newness in the process of contentious branding: is branding a distinctive element of the cases treated here, or should it be understood as an omnipresent trait of social movements? Thinking through the history of social movements makes one suspect that something analogous to contentious branding is not unique to radical cases such as Occupy and

Anonymous: the absence of essentialist foundations, I argue, is essentially fundamental to social movements as such.

Considering the importance of contemporary media systems in the process of branding and in informational capitalism more generally, the question concerning the relation between branding and classical mobilizations is also largely a question of the role of digital media in contentious branding. Two hypotheses that emerged over the course of research – which deserve more precise formulation and testing – are here only briefly presented: branding as a ‘catalyst’ and branding as a ‘refractor’ of digitally-mediated mobilizations.

The relation of digital mediation to the branding of contention is not only understood in terms of the (possible) exacerbation of empirical dynamics; it also has to do with methodological considerations pertaining to the digital field of observation. This section concludes by arguing that the branding perspective should be conceived in conjunction with the digital nature of the exploration of Occupy and Anonymous.

### *6.2.1 - Contentious brands of the previous century*

Is the argument of contentious branding a specific one that applies only to Occupy and Anonymous and analogous contemporary cases, or does it unveil a more general aspect common to other historical mobilizations? The answer, in a sense, is both. On the one hand, reality always exceeds the boundaries of language; on the other hand, *these cases specifically make evident the limits of a vocabulary based on atomistic assumptions, when confronted with the irreducible complexity of reality.* The reassessment of the relation between form and substance is the joint effect of empirical transformations and linguistic constraints: the cases discussed render explicit the ever-present tension between the expression of one-ness and the materiality of many-ness. It is up to future research to assess the degree of generalizability of a branding perspective on social movements. The reflections related to the analyzed cases, however, encourage questioning the existence of essential foundations underlying classical social movements (Uitermark 2016).

We begin with a rather trivial observation. Movements have always had a more or less prominent branding dimension: labels, images and slogans have always condensed and communicated struggles, for whatever purpose and in whichever form. Think, for example, of a ‘communist brand’ made up of hammers and sickles, red flags, raised fists, effigies of masters, and a set of verbal floating signifiers such as the words ‘communism’, ‘socialism’, ‘proletariat’ and so on. The emotive impact of these semiotic tools – their role in recruiting the masses around professed ideologies – is beyond



doubt. Analogously, the heterogeneous and contested adoption of signifiers commonly denoting a social movement is nothing new. Think, for example, of ‘feminism’: what defines the ‘feminist movement’ and what do ‘feminists’ fight for? The answers here are multiple and largely depend on what is signified by the signifier ‘feminism’ in each context of adoption: the liberal understanding of improving women’s career opportunities shares few cultural and political reference points with radical lesbian theorizations of homosexuality as a challenge to patriarchy. While feminism has come in historical waves and survives in diverging and sometimes conflicting forms, however, a minimal definition – a semantic common denominator of what feminism is – remains possible: a movement concerned with the conditions of women. This is in stark contrast to the signifier ‘Anonymous’: what and who Anonymous is is not a question that can be answered on any semantic / rational level of abstraction. Whereas for movements ‘of the previous century’ branding appears more as an extension, a derivative property of contentious processes mostly defined in terms of goals, ideologies and values, in the case of Anonymous contentious branding largely becomes a constitutive dimension, subsuming a variety of goals, ideologies and values. However, what the notion of contentious branding highlights on a more general level is that it is easy to be fooled into believing that people take action as a consequence of a shared vision of the world just because they wave the same flag. What brings people together, to various degrees, might be the affective potential condensed in that flag.

This argument may transcend not only the boundaries of digitally-branded mobilizations, but also those of social movements in general. Entities such as ‘the state’ – commonly understood as a monolithic block, a unique centre of action with clear, identifiable interests – are composed of numerous players entertaining different relations between themselves and with other players (Duyvendak and Jasper, 2015). Not only are countries marketing themselves to attract investments and tourism (Fan, 2006), and nations represented as brands to reinforce citizens’ identification (Varga, 2013): the state itself might be seen as the result of a process of branding, strategically presented as a unit to affirm or contest its authority, or broken up into otherwise branded units for reasons of political opportunity.

The relation between ‘what is new’ and ‘business as usual’ can only be defined in historically reflexive terms. Contentious branding can be seen as a latent dimension within classical mobilizations, variously overlapping with other processes and thus more or less important and visible – an argument that points to the intervening role of digital media in processes of branding and contention.

### 6.2.2 - *Catalysis and refraction*

The intervening role of digital media in the empirical trajectories of Occupy and Anonymous was not the focus of my research. Nevertheless, it is only once signifiers are inscribed in specific material forms that they can assume their floating character. This observation is the logical premise – and the empirical outcome – of the stunning persistence and diverse array of connotations that the Occupy and Anonymous brands have encountered. The branding perspective generates two related hypotheses on how digital mediation affects contentious processes: the role of contentious brands as ‘catalysts’ and as ‘refractors’. Both emphasize the affective character of branding, where affect is understood as both the capability to elicit and undergo a change of state (Massumi 1987, 15), and the ability to create and be part of assemblages (DeLanda 2006, 10).

A heterogeneous crowd of activists and sympathizers in New York protesting the power of Wall Street in 2011; mass mobilizations against rising fuel prices in Nigeria in 2012; a social movement organization protesting against Hong Kong’s electoral laws in 2014; students and staff of the London School of Economics denouncing the neoliberalization of the university in 2015. Why these seemingly distinct mobilizations adopted the same contentious brand has much to do with their strategic attempts to capitalize on Occupy’s visibility and perceived success. Contentious brands are thus *repositories of affective potential*, open to appropriation by otherwise disconnected mobilizations. Whereas these mobilizations had diverse goals, the action potential of each was not dissipated in a climax, but reiterated in a collection of intensive states or *plateaus* (Chesters and Welsh 2006; Deleuze and Guattari 1987).<sup>108</sup> The perceived success of a contentious brand thus recursively influences its actual success (Klandermans 1984), a self-feeding loop that generates cascades of affectivity. Systems of collective action are often<sup>109</sup> triggered by a critical mass of actors entering the fray (Elster 1989; Granovetter 1977; Oliver and Marwell 2001) – or more accurately, by the *expectation or perception* that a critical mass has become active.

The acceleration of this system dynamic can lead to synchronization effects (Tufekci 2011) that align branding practices. Virtually unrelated mobilizations are channeled into the same process of recognition, both *capitalizing on and contributing to the affective potential of the same contentious*

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<sup>108</sup> The concept of ‘plateau’ (as opposed to ‘climax’) was first used by Bateson to describe the distinctive ‘phase of moods’ of Balinese people (Bateson 1972, 121-2). It was then famously included in the Deleuzian-Guattarian assemblage of *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). An effective definition for its adoption here is that “[...] a plateau is reached when circumstances combine to bring an activity to a pitch of intensity that is not automatically dissipated in a climax leading to a state of rest. The heightening of energies is sustained long enough to leave a kind of afterimage of its dynamism that can be reactivated or injected into other activities, creating a fabric of intensive states between which any number of connecting routes could exist” (Massumi 1992, 7).

<sup>109</sup> Though not solely (see Oliver 1984).

*brand*. A possible effect of digital media on social movement processes is thus encouragement to synchronize branding strategies, which in turn transforms contentious brands into catalyzers of the system of contention.<sup>110</sup> This was already visible in the early stages of Occupy when disconnected mobilizations, such as the US Day of Rage and the We Are the 99% Movement, converged under the banner of the Occupy Wall Street protest. It is even more evident in the memetic reproduction of the meta-hashtag #Occupy, ultimately branding mobilizations far away in time, space and character, such as Occupy Nigeria and OccupyPD.

Anarchists protesting against capitalism; seekers of justice hunting pedophiles in the deep web; patriots defending sacred American freedom; ‘truthers’ exposing the secret plans of the Illuminati – for some reason, this incoherent array of identities is expressed through the same symbolic repertoire of the Guy Fawkes mask, the headless suited man logo, and the identity claim that ‘we are Anonymous’. Social movement brands are defined here as ‘contentious’ not only because they concern contentious politics, but because their non-excludability places them at the center of contention. But as the empirical analysis has shown, this constant process of resemantization does not compromise the possibility of empirical integration of different mobilizations, leaving room for interaction between less coherent or even plainly contradictory segments.

Communication is based on relatively autonomous moments, and mismatches between the encoding and decoding of messages remain a perpetual possibility (Hall 1980). At the same time, the relation between signifiers and what is signified is always complex and recursive, from which we can distil various degrees of abstraction (Barthes [1957] 1972; Bateson 1955). Here the bending of signification processes within digital environments of communication enters the argument, supporting the hypothesis that the refractive effects of digital branding allow for a *systematic differential encoding / decoding of the meanings associated with a certain contentious brand*. Digital media fix signifiers to material forms that can circulate with unprecedented ease. Symbolic reconfiguration (Poell et al. 2014, 7-8) – the overturn or evolution of the semantic content of a sign – is indeed typical of internet meme culture. Memetic signifiers (Gerbaudo 2015) such as Anonymous’ Guy Fawkes mask enable contingent processes of identification by means of their flexibility. The objectification of signifiers in digital formats coupled with their accelerated circulation across heterogeneous locales may consequently favor refractive effects (Rieder 2012), according to which digital communication takes the form of a massive ‘game of telephone’ where a systematic mismatch between encoding and decoding is partially hidden by the uniform syntactic form. This hypothesis is suggested by the

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<sup>110</sup> This process – analogous to the idea of circular reactions and emotive contagion within crowds in earlier collective behavior approaches (Blumer 1946) – also applies to digitally-mediated assemblies (Wiedemann 2014).

counterintuitive evidence that many of Anonymous' Facebook pages are connected by page-to-page network paths, despite their contradictory political orientations and causes. Specific pages, which mutually like each other on Facebook, bridge conflicting positions thanks to the brokering role of the Anonymous brand. In order to corroborate this intuition, it is crucial to test how pervasive and capillary this 'systematic misunderstanding' is.

Both ideas of contentious brands as catalysts and refractors of contention can retrospectively be applied to non-digital mobilizations. It remains to be explored whether the acceleration and fluctuation of signs in digital environments exacerbate these functions.

### 6.2.3 - Follow the brand

Whereas the intervening role of digital media was not the explicit focus of the empirical investigation, Occupy and Anonymous were indeed explored solely by means of digital research tools. I again stress that the relation between digitization and branding should not only be understood in terms of the remediation of specific empirical dynamics; the methodological aspect of exploiting digital media as research tools or fields of analysis<sup>111</sup> is integral to the argument.<sup>112</sup>

Digital media can be exploited by social researchers as devices that materialize social processes (Latour et al. 2012; Rogers 2013), with radical implications for the remediation of these methods (Marres 2012; Ruppert, Law and Savage 2013). The inscriptive property of digital media, in particular, applies to both movement participants getting the latest updates on worldwide protests and for social researchers trying to collect data for their papers. The claim here is that the branding perspective represents a shift in the focus of observation suggested by the increasingly digital traces left behind by social movements.

The empirical analyses presented in the previous chapters assumed that what counts as relevant data to the empirical objects 'Occupy' and 'Anonymous' is defined by following the hashtags #Occupy and #Anonymous. Unfolding the associations of these hashtags with other heterogeneous elements – hashtags, users, and issues – unveiled the extremely diverse and incoherent character of the overall assemblages. This corresponds to a strategy of reverse black-boxing (Callon 1986b; Law 1992) the otherwise non-transparent effects of the brand.

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<sup>111</sup> The distinction is ambiguous in light of the dissertation's epistemological framework.

<sup>112</sup> This would be problematic if the epistemological reference point was that of traditional causalist sociology: entanglement of the object's properties and choices to delimit the subject matter would then be considered biases. But following the epistemological principle of reflexivity and symmetry, one needs to account for one's situated vantage point.

What falls under the scope of contentious branding may well reside outside the boundaries of a movement, simply understood as a group of people interested in and mobilising for a cause. Branding incorporates both auto- and hetero-definitions, and does away with the distinction between authentic and inauthentic appropriations: whoever (and whatever) contributes to the circulation of the related signifiers, contributes to contentious branding. This shift is not just a matter of methodological convenience, but also a strategy useful to approach social movements from a material-semiotic standpoint: contentious processes are put into focus by recognising the affective dimension of digital signifiers, tracing the assemblage they articulate.

In the analyzed cases, the production of boundaries was at once more ambivalent and more unambiguous than in other well-known cases. On the one hand, the radical diversity of these assemblages complicates the act of drawing lines between in-groups and out-groups; on the other hand, their uniform branding provides an objectified mark of delimitation. To take a contentious brand as an analytical unit means exploring the surface produced by the level of the syntax, *equating the arbitrary boundaries of the analytical object to the objectified boundaries of the empirical one*. Opening the black-box of the brand by mapping its heterogeneous and diverse associations means unfolding this assemblage. This strategy proved useful for Occupy and Anonymous as the continuity of the empirical spectrum between ‘the original social movement’ and its ‘diverse derivations’ and ‘illegitimate appropriations’ – as well as the many intersecting layers of these multiplicities – made the drawing of boundaries based on other definite criteria a daunting task. Given their inherent porousness (Diani 2003) and non-essentialist properties, identifying the boundaries of movements is an analytical act (Melucci 1996, 21). It must be noticed that social movement scholars are themselves often key-contributors in branding a social movement as such, conventionally delimiting and/or labelling an ontological multiplicity, thus converting an undifferentiated contentious process into a differentiated social movement.<sup>113</sup>

Following a branding perspective means taking the self-definitions of participants seriously and thus following the brand as a unique, ontologically qualified object of analysis, bracketing and then rendering visible the heterogeneous souls behind it. The epistemological principle according to which the analysis should not take the empirical unity of a movement for granted (Melucci 2006, 380-93) still holds: the expression ‘contentious brands’ also recognizes that brands themselves are the objects of contention. The mapping of the controversies (Latour 2005; Venturini 2012) arising around their contended definition then becomes an important methodological premise. Branding, then, is a

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<sup>113</sup> This consideration may deserve further exploration, since it unfolds a further reflexive/recursive line of inquiry of the argument being made.

distinctive vantage point that exploits the research affordances (Weltevrede 2016) of digital devices. The contribution of a branding perspective is to provide a standpoint from which to reconstruct the plural points of observation embraced by each contingent adoption of the brand – a methodological strategy that becomes much more feasible following the digitalization of social processes and much more useful considering its growing complexity.

### **6.3 - Reassembling the social movement: From reflexivity to recursivity**

This concluding section relates my core argument of social movements as multiplicities and contentious brands to debates over the connective and collective dimensions of digitally-mediated protest and the means and the meanings of contention. It argues that social movements can be reassembled by following their move from reflexivity towards (radical) recursion. It remains open to debate whether this should be understood pessimistically, as the emergence of meaningless movements, or optimistically, as adaptation to the complexity of power.

#### *6.3.1 - Connecting and collecting*

This dissertation has made extensive use of terminology inspired by spatial metaphors: inside/outside, surface/depth, around/under, behind/beyond. These spatial metaphors should be understood through the lens of a topological definition of space (Law 1999, 6-8): space is not the external container of objects, but the stretchable property of objects themselves.<sup>114</sup> One of the arguments that has arisen throughout this research is that the cases studied indeed alter the relation between surface and depth, package and content, form and substance, means and meanings.

Are the diverse issues, people, ideologies, places and symbols studied here *articulated around* a contentious brand, or are they *subsumed within* it? The answer to this question is far from self-evident. On the one hand, the brand ‘connects between’, brokering otherwise largely disconnected entities, establishing and resulting from relations of affectivity crossing diverse locales. On the other hand, the brand also ‘collects under’, wrapping the semantic diversity of an array of items into a

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<sup>114</sup> Brands are paradigmatically understandable in topological terms as boundary-making devices (Gerlitz 2013).

recognizable surface, punctualizing a distributed and diverse network into a singular black-box (Callon 1986b; Law 1992). The difference between the two roles depends on one's point of observation – probably the reason why the connective / collective debate eludes resolution. Not by chance, approaches that emphasize organizational dynamics prefer the connective element (e.g. Bennett and Segerberg 2013), whereas those that emphasize identification processes defend the properly collective character of movements (e.g. Gerbaudo and Treré 2015). The problem of the collective and the connective is of the same class of problems as that of the collective and the individual, the macro-level and the micro-level. The solution is not to introduce an intermediate, connective or meso-level, but to recognize their 'holographic' definition: depending on one's point of observation, 'the whole can be smaller than its parts' (Latour et al. 2012).

That the Occupy and Anonymous brands function as connective devices should by now be clear: in the absence of stable organizational apparatuses and strong ideological reference points, branding accounts for the assemblage of otherwise dispersed persons, places, and ideas. I further suggest that branding has become an *explicit* element within contentious processes – a visible property and sometimes even a purposeful strategy, condensing an organizationally viable model of action (acting as a catalyst of action systems) and ensuring that identification among irreconcilable instances becomes possible (acting as a refractor of signification processes). This explicit short-circuit between the form and the substance, the means and the meanings, makes visible a distinctive, radically recursive element in the process of assembling a social movement: *a common orientation of action or a shared cognitive definition, a necessary premise of their organizational and identitary collective dimension, can be recognized in these cases only on a meta-level of organization and identity.*

How far, and in what sense, can the connective dimension of contentious brands be understood as collective? Here we need to keep in mind two previous insights: that defining the boundaries of 'one social movement' is an analytical act (Melucci 1996, 21), and that the more objectified boundaries of 'one social movement' are those traced by its brand in digital environments. To reassemble the social movement from these cases means recognizing that *contention can be traced on a different degree of abstraction* than that of the semantic (corresponding to the conventional understanding of meanings). Organizational units and a common 'sense'<sup>115</sup> of the we' can be distilled at the level of syntax (corresponding to the conventional understanding of the means). While this distinction between static layers of signification (syntactic / semantic) and communication (means / meanings) is an artificial

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<sup>115</sup> This hints at the difference between 'signification' and 'sense' in Deleuzian terms: the first concerns meaningful relations among objects, the second includes the possibility of meaningless contradiction (Deleuze [1969] 2004, 41).

device, a heuristic to make a different point, it renders visible the *properly recursive nature* of signification and communication (Barthes [1957] 1972; Bateson 1955; Luhman 1992).

### 6.3.2 – *The means are the meanings*

When we look more closely at the social movement processes compared to the process of contentious branding earlier on in this chapter, we can see that concepts that explicitly originated from, or were subsequently translated into processual and/or non-linear forms, often turn back into static and/or linear understandings. Although organizations can be seen as primarily a matter of communication processes<sup>116</sup> (Luhman 1992; Schoeneborn 2011), they are given definite names and boundaries. Whereas movement networks can be understood in terms of flows and reversibility (Castells 1996; Latour 2005), they are operationalized as links between nodes. Although framing is a multi-layered and iterative process (Bateson 1955; Chesters and Welsh 2006), frames have turned into static semantic schemas. And while collective identities should be understood as the open outcome of the process of ‘identization’ (Melucci 1995, 51; Kavada 2015), they are still too often taken for granted. The perspective that has been *branded* ‘contentious branding’<sup>117</sup> emphasizes that recursion – the abstraction of a meta-layer of contention (the brand) generating a repository of affective potential and a semiotic refractor open to affect a number of mobilizations – *becomes an explicit property* of contentious processes. Occupy, as we saw in chapter 3, was purposefully deployed as an open container to be filled with various content. The ‘form’ of Occupy enters its ‘substance’; the demand, as occupiers put it, is a process. And as we saw in chapter 5, Anonymous can only be defined in terms of chains of tautologies and paradoxes, precisely because non-essentiality has been incorporated in its essentiality, inauthenticity in its authenticity. Anonymous is not only a multiplicity; it defines itself as an incoherent machine. Anonymous does not contradict itself even when it contradicts itself. Projecting the depth of complexity onto the surface of branding, the social movement can be reassembled by following a process of ‘radical recursion’ (Rosen 2004).<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> On this point, see particularly the perspective of communication constitutive of organizations (Kavada 2015; Schoeneborn 2011).

<sup>117</sup> The concept of ‘contentious branding’ also has a branding dimension, a point that introduces a recursive element in the argument. To assess whether this corresponds to a useless tautology or to a productive output is left to the reader.

<sup>118</sup> The notion of ‘radical recursion’ may seem paradoxical: recursion, properly defined, is an endless loop that goes ‘all the way down’. However, the qualification ‘radical’ wishes to highlight the further level of abstraction that a recursive entity acknowledging its recursive character brings about.



It is necessary to distinguish between reflexivity and recursivity.<sup>119</sup> The former is a widely acknowledged property of ‘new social movements’; the latter, I argue, is a more distinctive element of Occupy and, more particularly, of Anonymous. The feminist movement was never a monolith but an open field of discussion and cultural elaboration, precisely because of its reflexivity (Melucci 1996, 133-44). The anti-globalization movement transcended internal incoherence by iterating meaning-making practices and continuously re-negotiating its identity (Chesters and Welsh 2006). In this sense, reflexivity refers to the capacity of movements to question their own organization and identity, in the process synthesizing new definitions. In contrast, recursion is understood as the process of abstracting a meta-level of organization and identity, one that does away with the necessity of synthetic definitions.<sup>120</sup> Anonymous is who is Anonymous; Anonymous is not who Anonymous says Anonymous is; Anonymous is everyone and no one, everything and nothing; Anonymous, after all, does not even exist.

The rise of ‘communicative capitalism’ marks the intensification of reflexivity, creating infinite chains of self-questioning and doubt (Dean 2014). Whereas corporate branding seems to halt such ‘radical reflexivity’ (Mumby 2016, 8-9), contentious branding does so, I argue, by embracing ‘radical recursion’ (Rosen 2004). What ‘goes all the way down’ in these cases is not reflexivity, but recursivity: the impossibility of action that would follow from endless contingency, doubts and reflections is ultimately surpassed by the abstraction of a meta-layer of observation at the level of branding. Recursivity is understood by second-order cybernetics as an inherent feature of social systems (Luhman 1986; Maturana and Varela 1980) as well as a deep trait of digitally-mediated society (Couldry 2016, 267-77). The role of ‘cutting the loop’ of recursion, suspending the paradoxical foundations of the reproduction of social systems, is generally granted to ideologies (Luhman 1988)<sup>121</sup> – *and challenged by the analyzed cases*. For this reason, it may be argued, they manage to be recursive ‘all the way down’, by refusing to resolve the paradox of their inherent contingency (Schoeneborn 2011) and thus working as a tautological device. Moving away from the search for a transcendent normativity, for shared beliefs at the semantic level, these movements

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<sup>119</sup> This is more of a pragmatic than an authentic distinction, as recursivity can also be seen as a property of reflexivity or *viceversa*; the two are also often treated as synonymous.

<sup>120</sup> The difference is evident in two computer science definitions: ‘reflection’ is the programming strategy according to which a program can modify its structure and behavior in run-time, while ‘recursion’ is the programming strategy according to which a program executes itself during its own execution.

<sup>121</sup> “Such an extensive temporalization still achieves what we expect of ideologies: to de-paradoxize and to de-tautologize societal identity. That is, as opposed to ‘pure’ tautologies and paradoxes, ideologies offer specific descriptions of society and recommend particular programs for action” (Luhman 1988, 32).

embrace the possibilities of immanent contingency projected onto the plain of shared syntax.<sup>122</sup> The importance of branding can then be understood as an epiphenomenon of the loss of ideological references typical of the ‘post-grand narratives’ era (Lyotard 1984). The brand, in this context, acts as a last resource for mutual recognition. The empirical analysis showed that political ideologies have not disappeared. Instead, they are bridged in an inter- or intra-ideological assemblage, subsumed under a non- or anti-ideological ideology. Anonymous has no possible ideology, Anonymous has every ideology possible, Anonymous says.

Following this line of reasoning, the impossibility of articulating a rational critique of the state of the world – the premise/promise of any political ideology – is compensated for by general affective impulses against injustice being transformed into recognizable yet opaque signifiers, of brands at once catalyzing and refracting social movement processes. Translated into the vocabulary adopted thus far, the standardization of the syntax of contention surpasses the fragmentation of the semantics of contention, actualizing an otherwise inexpressible ethic of contention. *The means through which the materiality of meanings is expressed themselves become, on a higher order of abstraction, the meanings of contention.*

Two competing conclusions may follow. First, mobilizations of the class studied here represent a post-modern drift in contention, the rise of the ‘simulacra’ of movements, with meanings dissolving in the hyper-reality of the media system (Baudrillard 1980) due to declining ‘symbolic efficiency’ and the non-translatability of meanings across locales within ‘communicative capitalism’ (Dean 2014). Second, the abstraction of a non-semantic meta-layer of contention is an adaptive response to environmental conditions, the growing complexity and indecipherability of network power constituted by unidentifiable flows of information (Castells 1997) and the deployment of a capitalism based on ‘higher-order production’ where the control of abstract corporations replaces the discipline of concrete factories (Deleuze 1992).<sup>123</sup> There is no ambition here to choose one interpretation over the other. What can more modestly be concluded is that branding – a social form that has arisen within mass capitalism and the constitutive logic of its informational turn – has entangled its destiny with the agents of contention.

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<sup>122</sup> It may be true, as hypothesized in the previous section, that these ‘compelling shared beliefs’ reside more in the accounts of classical movements than in the actual homogeneity of their semantics. Whereas classical movements at least tried to articulate a rational, common understanding of the world, this does not seem to be on the agenda of the cases discussed.

<sup>123</sup> This hints at the idea of ‘schizophrenia’ as a *pharmakon* of capitalism: both the result of and the last resource to escape its inherent contradictions (Deleuze and Guattari 1984).

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## Summary

### **Contentious Branding. Reassembling social movements through digital mediators.**

This dissertation wishes to contribute to the sociological debate on protest movements by developing the notion of ‘contentious branding’ as a reflection emerging from the digital exploration of two empirical cases that challenge social movement theory: Occupy and Anonymous. The research was orientated by three interrelated questions operating at a methodological, empirical and theoretical level: How can digital research remediate the study of social movements? What sort of assemblages are articulated around the contentious brands Occupy and Anonymous? How does a branding perspective add to or amend traditional theories of social movements?

The argument is built on a complexity-orientated epistemological background, interweaving insights derived from assemblage theory, actor-network theory, socio-semiotics and second-order cybernetics. The empirical research has been undertaken by means of digital techniques: Application Programming Interfaces of popular social media (mostly, Twitter and Facebook) have been pulled for data; the #Occupy and #Anonymous hashtags have been employed as research devices to set the limit of the analysis; and the datasets have been explored mostly by means of network analysis and computer-assisted content analysis techniques.

The core contribution of the dissertation is to introduce and develop, within the field of social movement theory, the notion of ‘contentious branding’, to cope with the theoretical challenges highlighted by the empirical sections. A branding perspective on social movements not only fits these specific cases better: it intends to provide an epistemological and methodological device, to sustain a non-essentialist understanding of social movements, especially in the cases of digitalization of empirical phenomena and research methods.

Chapter 2 (‘**Social movements, signification and branding processes**’) presents a literature review of theories of social movements, semiotics and branding. The first section is a brief historical review of the main families of theory that deal with social movements, highlighting their strengths and limitations, especially with respect to ‘digitally-mediated’ movements. This section starts by



introducing earlier socio-psychological perspectives and rationalist models of collective action, then moves to ‘classical’ approaches that focus on resource mobilization and political opportunities, framing processes and collective identities in ‘new movements’. Subsequently, it presents the recent trends in the field, which emphasize emotions, geography and networks as key concepts. After this, a brief review of the relation between new movements and new media is provided. To conclude, the section develops the argument that the discourse on social movements is articulated around a divide between different approaches: in particular, what will be defined as the ‘means-oriented’ versus ‘meanings-oriented’ divide. The need to do away with dualist attitudes is justified by reference to both epistemological considerations and empirical observations.

The aims of the second section are the following. First, it introduces the basic semiotic definitions and processes relevant for the rest of the work; in particular, the distinction between the signifier and the signified, the recursive character of signification and the idea of infinite semiotic chains, that together constitute sign systems as topologically recursive. Second, merging insights from semiotics with ecological communication theory, the section will introduce the idea of a ‘bending effect’ that media produce on sign systems. Finally, the relation between semiotics and politics will be discussed, highlighting both the inherent political character of signification processes and the symbolic dimension of power/counter-power dynamics.

The third section seeks to legitimize the translation of the process known as ‘branding’ to the field of social movements and contentious politics. Brands originated in the rise of mass production and have become crucial institutions in the context of global informational capitalism. While they can be denotatively defined as semiotic elements that allow for the recognition of something, their connotative definition is more controversial, because they are both the outcome of ‘top-down’ strategic devices of management and ‘bottom-up’ emergent cultural expressions of publics. Whereas branding is classically associated with products and companies, nowadays ‘place branding’, ‘political branding’ and ‘personal branding’ have become established fields of research: everything can be an object of recognition, thus everything can be branded. Given their peculiar ontological heterogeneity, openness and modularity, brands can be paradigmatically depicted as assemblages that capture and articulate diverse meanings. While the proposal to juxtapose branding and social movements may sound provocative, so-called ‘movement marketing’ already conceptualizes social mobilizations as driving forces for market innovations and brands' success, while, more relevantly, theories of social movements have already started to transgress this semantic boundary.

The chapter ends by proposing a heuristic distinction between ‘orders of contention’, which will serve as a prism for the analysis of the empirical cases: the syntax, the semantic and the ethic of contention.

A key proposition for the overall argument states that contentious branding highlights the role that the syntax of contention plays in shaping a blurred ethic of contention, thus articulating a potentially diverse semantic.

Chapter 3 (**'Occupy What?'**) tries to analytically isolate the Occupy 'contentious brand' from the Occupy 'social movement', through the means of empirical data and examples. It argues that the peculiar relation between the means and the meanings characterizing this empirical case suggests this epistemological move, useful in order to have a better grip on the challenging fluidity of the movement's semantic, spatial and temporal boundaries. The research questions leading the analysis can be formulated as: *Occupy what?*

The first section presents a phenomenological assessment of the associations of the Occupy brand, following three dimensions: semantic (Occupy what?), spatial (Occupy where?) and temporal (Occupy when?). First, it reconstructs the overall variations of the #Occupy meta-hashtag, showing that a marker related to a specific target and event undergoes countless processes of re-semanticization, following a number of dimensions. Then, it looks in-depth at the spatial properties of the movement/s, proposing various analyses of the complex geography behind and between the digital and the physical presence of Occupy. Finally, the section enlarges the temporal span in order to show the persistence of the contentious brand beyond the momentum of the specific movement, presenting some of the initiatives that have reiterated a reference to Occupy in recent years. The overall aim is to provide empirical evidence for the need to conceive of an abstract entity, 'contentious brands', that are analytically autonomous from what is commonly referred to as 'social movements'.

The next section presents and analyses the distinctive features of the Occupy movement/s, both in organizational and identitary terms. The expression 'Occupy' here refers to the protest wave that, in late 2011, originated in Zuccotti Park, New York, and spread all over the world, bringing together a number of local networks sharing the following elements: the practice of the occupation of public spaces; the intensive adoption of social media; the project of identity ('we are the 99%'); loose claims of economic justice developing into much more heterogeneous goals. After a presentation of the origins of the Occupy epidemic, each of these elements is covered in a specific paragraph; the argument, though, specifically pertains to the need to understand their inter-relatedness and the resulting subversion of the relation between the 'form' and the 'substance' of this entity, which is explicitly sought by Occupy activists.

This chapter aims at contributing to the debate on contemporary social movements, by suggesting the relevance of the dimension of branding for understanding the peculiarities of the ‘Occupy entity’ as a whole, as well as for tackling the challenges related to the analytical delimitation of the boundaries of the movement/s. The conclusion contends that Occupy manifests a rearticulation of the relation between the means and the meanings of protest. Local movements from all over the world have seized the opportunity to hook up flows of solidarity and visibility, replicating the same protest tactic directly denoted by the label ‘Occupy’, purposefully developed as an open container for yet-to-specify grievances.

The case that is the object of Chapter 4 (**‘Unfolding Anonymous’**) approximates to a greater extent the ideal-type of contentious branding. Scholars and commentators have adopted a plethora of expressions to refer to Anonymous, ranging from the more demanding terms to more cautious formulations: a ‘social movement’, a ‘hacktivist collective’, a ‘loosely associated protest network’, an ‘internet phenomenon’, and a ‘collective label’. Consequently, a straightforward question arises: *what is Anonymous?* The proposal of this work is to characterize Anonymous as a ‘contentious brand’, which means focusing on the connective potential related to its standardized semiotic repertoire. Methodologically, the chapter adopts a structural-relational perspective, involving exploiting Twitter data. The general goal is to show empirically the limits and contradictions related to conceiving of Anonymous as an individual social movement; the alternative proposal is to interpret Anonymous as a ‘contentious brand’ appropriated by and interacting with various mobilizations.

The first section of the chapter focuses on the structural properties of the network of interactions between users whose activity is branded as being related to Anonymous. The goal is to understand to what extent Anonymous can be analyzed as a single network, either maintaining a certain structure over time or involved in an overall process of evolution. This section focuses on the structural evolution of the network of interactions between users. It concentrates on patterns of stability, compactness and centralization, showing how the network surrounding the hashtag #Anonymous on Twitter demonstrates oscillating behavior.

The second section moves to the ‘semantic’ level of social movement goals and issues of concern, it elaborates on the hashtags included in the Twitter corpus already presented. In particular, the focus will be on the hashtags related to Anonymous operations. The aim is to understand whether a core mission of Anonymous can be isolated – e.g. the fight for internet freedom. The hashtags related to operations are mapped and aggregated in order to propose a heuristic categorization of the many,

distinct ‘souls’ behind Anonymous activism, each characterized by quite divergent goals, targets and concerns. The observation of the dynamics of operations leads to the conclusion that there is no dominant issue, or set of issues, which is stable across time; conversely, Anonymous targets are always shifting, and users’ flows sometimes converge on specific issues, while at other times they diverge toward heterogeneous targets. The various operations are structurally connected due to a minority of users flowing from operation to operation, though each operation presents a largely independent constituency.

Anonymous has often intertwined its destiny with other organizations, mobilizations and causes, promoting campaigns that were found worthy of its endorsement. Interestingly, a number of more or less related offshoots have arisen. This section intends to shed a light on the peculiar process of ‘brand variation’, by assessing the structural relation between Anonymous as a whole and its many offshoots; this is meant to highlight the role of Anonymous as an ‘umbrella brand’ for largely autonomous mobilizations. Matching the dataset of users and hashtags for recurring matching sub-terms results in a list of ‘sub-brands’, some of which are minor variations of the word ‘Anonymous’ with a more connoted meaning, while some are external groups with which Anonymous has collaborated, and others are more ambiguous entities, partially distinct and partially overlapping with Anonymous. These offshoots re-brand themselves to mark their specificity, though they maintain a more or less direct symbolic reference to the Anonymous brand. The analysis of the users’ overlap reveals that whereas few broker users connect most of the offshoots together, these offshoots are largely independent in terms of the long tail of users. The focus on the Million Mask March offshoot shows that, despite its strong symbolic association with Anonymous, consistent modules of the Anonymous network have been almost untouched by the march of 5 November 2013, which took place worldwide. Altogether, these observations suggest the distinctive role of Anonymous as an ‘umbrella brand’ involved in a process of ‘brand differentiation’.

This chapter argues that it is problematic to try to observe Anonymous through the lens of categories that are classically associated with social movements, for many reasons – related to the complex and counterintuitive articulation of this entity. This work wants instead to put into focus the dimension of contentious branding: unfolding the assemblage traced by the ‘Anonymous signifier’, instead of uncovering the essence of Anonymous, allows us to have a better grasp of the ontological status of the entity named Anonymous.

The aim of Chapter 5 (**'Dividing by zero'**) is to unveil the distinctive Anonymous identity by asking the following question: *who is Anonymous?* This question is answered by analyzing a vast corpus of Facebook pages, mainly by digging into the massive textual data they provide.

The first section answers the question 'who is Anonymous?', focusing on the orientations that can be identified from the network of pages liked by Anonymous pages. It shows how Anonymous orientations are not only extremely heterogeneous, but also that they are often incoherent or even openly contradictory, manifesting a clear schizophrenic identity. To make this claim apparent, the involvement of Anonymous in the Ukrainian and Venezuelan political crises is briefly presented, showing how its brand is recalled from 'both sides of a barricade'. To sustain this argument further, another part compares radical left-wing and radical right-wing manifestations of the Anonymous brand –RedHack and Anonymous Patriot– as well as the position allegedly expressed by Anonymous in support of, and against, the conservative and progressive US presidential candidates Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. The section concludes by presenting a radically counterintuitive aspect: not only are directly opposing utilizations of the brand documentable, but also the page-to-page network testifies that contradicting pages are indirectly connected through relationships of 'likes'. The resulting 'schizophrenic' character of Anonymous orientations may be related to a 'masking effect' that the standard visual identity of the brand produces on the actual semantic content of its adoptions. The second section focuses on the recurrent controversies present in the textual corpus, connected with the question of who – individual or collective actor – is 'really Anonymous' and can thus legitimately claim its identity, according to Anons' own words. This means observing cases of discursive production of the boundaries of Anonymous and the recurrent inauthenticity claims. The first, oldest divide is between 'oldfags', loyal to a purely recreational adoption of the brand, and 'newfags', which redefined Anonymous' mission as a fight for the good. Second, in order to be part of Anonymous, many Anons would say, you have to give up your personal identity; but many Anonymous activists do not conceal their names and faces anymore, and temporary leaders have always emerged in Anonymous' history. One of the recurrent (non-)rules defining authentic Anonymous actions is to never attack the media, despite the media being a primal enemy and, indeed, often a target. Anonymous, for its own definition, does not have a fixed character; rather, it takes the emergent form that those who join wants it to take. Analogously, there are no standard procedures for joining: anybody can be Anonymous, without the need for approval or specific knowledge or skills. In a sense, thus, everybody is Anonymous and, at the same time, nobody is really Anonymous. The continuous allegations show, however, that sometimes someone is not Anonymous. For these reasons, nothing can be an 'official' manifestation of Anonymous, but the need to mark the

authenticity of a group surrounded by dozens of ‘imitations’ leads many to adopt this label, with the paradoxical effect of attracting accusations of inauthenticity. The third and final part of this section, alongside presenting exemplificative cases, pulls the threads of the argument: it is the distinction between the authentic and the fake, the original and the copy, which fails when applied to an object like Anonymous.

The last empirical section intends to ‘ask’ the corpus of Anonymous’ posts and comments for spontaneous declarations concerning its own ontological nature: who is Anonymous, in the sense of what are the constitutive elements of Anonymous’ identity? Anonymous, first, is a legion: it is not properly one unified entity, nor simply the juxtaposition of many groups; rather, it manifests as the co-presence of different souls that refuse to be captured. Anonymous, however, is also a family: the many diverging opinions and the recurrent infights do not compromise a strong sense of ‘we’-ness and unity, which is actively pursued and deemed as vital. Anonymous, in Anons’ own words, has a peculiar ontological character, since it is not a group in the conventional sense, nor even something that really exists: it is an abstract idea that can be incarnated in different forms. Anonymous is, moreover, an incoherent machine: the heterogeneity and contradictions between its manifestations, as well as the systematic mismatch between its declarations and its behavior, are anticipated in its own definition. These dimensions altogether make evident how the essence of Anonymous lies in its inessential character.

This chapter’s main contribution is to suggest that, from a cybernetic perspective, Anonymous counterbalances schismogenesis by explicitly defining itself in terms of tautologies and paradoxes, thus embracing a radical pattern of recursion. Anonymous’ contentious brand, from this point of view, acts as a meta-level capable of integrating contradictory orientations by anticipating its own schizophrenic character, turning the conditions of its dismantling into the conditions of its reproduction.

The conclusions pull together the arguments advanced in the previous chapters in three lines of reasoning: the analytical autonomy of branding from other social movements processes and its role in supporting a non-essentialist, material-semiotic understanding of social movements; the role of contentious branding in older, pre-digital movements and the specificity of digitally-mediated contentious branding; the relation between the connective and collective levels of organization and identity, and the recursive relation between the means and meanings of contention.

The concluding chapter's first section tries to bring conceptual clarity. It first assesses the relation between branding and various social movement processes studied in the literature and then ventures a definition of branding based on the idea of movements-as-multiplicities and on a material-semiotic understanding of social movements.

The chapter's second section asks whether branding is distinctive to the digitally-mediated contentious entities studied in this dissertation or more generally a part of social movements as such. I argue that Occupy and Anonymous foreground properties that, with a reflexive epistemology, can be seen in classical, pre-digital mobilizations as well. The role of digital media in foregrounding the branding process should not only be sought in the remediation of social movement dynamics but also, following a principle of epistemological symmetry, in the research affordances that digital tools provide to social movement research. The focus on branding generates two hypotheses that bear on the media-movement debate, to be developed and assessed in future work: the role of branding as catalyst and as refractor of contentious processes.

The chapter concludes with a reflection on how social movements are reassembled in the network society: moving from reflexivity towards recursion. Enabled by the affordances of digital media to bring their complexities to the surface, Occupy and Anonymous abstract a meta-level of contention to compensate for their ideological fragmentation and the non-intelligibility of contemporary forms of domination.