Emiliano Treré, *Hybrid Media Activism,* Routledge, 2019.

The contextual nature of techno-ambivalence

Overcoming both the dystopian and utopian visions that comprise technological determinism, the practice-based ecological exploration of social movements has instead unveiled the ambivalent, contradictory, and ambiguous nature of contemporary activism. Recognising the ambivalent nature of digital activism does not mean simply acknowledging that technologies can be used for the good or for the bad as this conception would be reaffirming a problematic technological neutrality. Instead, it means critically charting the social, cultural, and political conditions under which certain kinds of media practices, technological appropriations, and media imaginaries were generated, combined and implemented by concrete individual and collective actors in specific historical contexts. In Italy, as we saw in Chapter 5, the Five Star Party/Movement was able to ride the wave of technological innovation, understanding and fully exploiting the power of digital technologies and algorithms in the realm of politics. Its digital sublime was characterised by the deployment of a techno-utopian discourse that combined all the technological myths of the digital age in order to obfuscate and legitimise top-down political practices. Italy’s 5SM is thus particularly illustrative of the dangerous cleavage and clash between a digital utopian imagination and poor political practices. The contradictory and perilous relationship between techno-utopian discourse and political practice within the 5SM is testament to the problematic effects of techno-utopianism on social organisation, accountability, and democracy. In 2008, as we saw in Chapter 2, the Anomalous Wave student movement predated other global protest movements in exposing the deleterious consequences of the financial crisis. Yet in 2011, a significant and unified movement did not emerge in Italy. Indeed, the 5SM was able to catalyse the energies of digital activism in Italy, colonising its technological imagination, and defusing the digital power of social movements precisely in a period where grass-roots rebellions were flourishing around the world. Therefore, in the Italian scenario, the communicative power of digital media and their sublime were skilfully appropriated by a Party/Movement whose communicative strategies are managed by a private marketing firm, while social movements remained trapped in their techno-scepticism, and locked in several fragmented bubbles that reflected the organisational and identitarian divisions of activist collectives on the ground. As I write these conclusive lines (June 2018), the 5SM is now ruling Italy in an unexpected alliance with the right-wing xenophobic League party: there is little doubt that the roots of this huge electoral success are inextricably linked to its seductive, authoritarian sublime and its effective communicative strategies that have been carefully illustrated in this book. In Mexico, activists enthusiastically embraced the power of digital media – and social media in particular – in their struggle for media democratisation. For the #YoSoy132 movement, communication technologies represented their genesis, addressee, and primary resources. However, they were exceeded by the ability of parties, authorities, and the state in bending the power of the algorithm to spread propaganda, enact repression, and generate paranoia. Hence, in the Mexican scenario, authorities and traditional political forces rode the dirty wave of technological innovation in the realm of politics. #YoSoy132 was neutralised by the double pressure of the highly influential Mexican telecracy and the simultaneous deployment of algorithmic strategies of oppression. However, the movement, along with other civil society actors, was able to positively impact legislations around telecommunication policies (Segura and Waisbord 2016) and inspire countless social movements, organisations, activist collectives and academic institutions with its practices, imaginaries, and knowledge (Gómez 2018). In particular, the practices of algorithmic resistance developed by Mexican activists have provided academics, journalists, human rights advocates, and NGOs with effective resources to unmask and counteract some of the most pernicious algorithmic strategies of parties and institutions. However, these latter strategies are gradually becoming more sophisticated, and their influence on the 2018 Mexican elections is still largely unpredictable. In Spain, activists were at imaginary that envisaged social media algorithms as political opportunities and agents of transformation, a strong technical expertise on how to carry out digital political actions, and an extensive network of activists that can be activated at any time. The communicative legacy of the 15M has deeply pervaded the strategies of several political manifestations in the Spanish scenario: Party X, Podemos, and the changes unfolded at the level of local administrations and municipalities are all infused by the belief in the political power of digital media technologies, by the need to further develop open and collaborative resources for citizen participation (Gutiérrez 2017), and by the urge to move towards technological sovereignty against corporative/ extractive models of communications. As this final comparison of the three different laboratories analysed in the book illustrates, the recognition of the ambivalent nature of activism emerges from the ecological study of the intricate articulation between activist media practices, imaginaries, and algorithms in specific sociopolitical contexts, characterised by a distinctive set of actors, political opportunities, power balances, protest cultures, and historical trajectories. As Kidd and McIntosh (2016, p. 792) have remarked: techno-ambivalence (…) awaits the accumulation of evidence of the actual outcomes of social media and its impact on activism, (…) recognizing both the power of existing hegemonies and the agency of individual actors. Finally, it allows for the possibility of social change without presuming

it to be an automatic outcome of new technology.the forefront of technopolitical innovation, while the government, the parties, and the police were slower in ‘catching up’ with the last improvements of digital political action (and repression). 15M activists managed to overturn the mainstream media logic and hack social media algorithms to their advantage, while also transferring these digital skills to other parties such as Podemos who then relied on and extended them. The algorithmic resistance that was unleashed by the Indignados can be explained by the combination of various components, including a technopolitical