Not all the online political forums are futile: The case study of the “radical community”

By

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ABSTRACT: This paper draws insights from several interviews (40) that online forums can play important democratic functions within political organizations. It focuses on a particularly interesting case study, the Italian party “radicali italiani”, and analyses three aspects: i) the technical and organizational characteristics of the forum; ii) the reasons for participating (or not) in the forum; iii) the functions that forum fulfills for the different political actors (leaders, activists and sympathizers).

Keywords: e-democracy; political parties; online deliberation;

Introduction

The forum of the “Italian radicals”\(^1\) is one of the most successful forums worldwide from the point of view of its rate of participation and probably as well from the perspective of its quality of participation. Created in 2000, it contains more than 380,000 messages and has more than 23,500 people that are registered. It is, in other words, an exemplary case study that is useful for understanding, on the one hand, what role and function a successful online forum can play in a political institution, such as a political party, and, on the other hand, for pointing out some of the ingredients that have determined its success.

For the limited purpose of this paper we will not enter into the promising and still exploratory research field that concerns the quality of the interactions that took place in the forum\(^2\). This question will be the object of further research. Our focus is limited at three issues that nevertheless have a direct impact on the quality of the interaction: first we define the technical and organizational characteristics of the forum and the way these are perceived by its users. Second, we focus on the reasons put forward for participating (or not) in the forum. The third, and final issue, concerns the functions that forum fulfills for the different political actors (leaders, activists and sympathizers).

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\(^1\) The url of the website is: [www.radicali.it](http://www.radicali.it)

\(^2\) For an overview of the researches, the findings and the methodologies used for measuring the quality of online debates on public issues see Janssen and Kies (2005).
To date, no such research has been conducted in depth\(^3\): existing studies on digital political parties have focused on the *external* reasons for using ICTs: in particular they have focused on their impact on information dissemination, campaigning and electioneering and on party competition. The *internal* reasons for using ICTs and in particular the role played by the online forum within the parties received far less attention.\(^4\) The likely reason for that is that political parties do not, most of the time, offer possibilities of discussions and, when these exist, participation tends to be very low. This absence of online deliberation within digital parties has been verified in 2003 for the political parties in the 25 EU countries (see Trechsel et al. 2003).

The findings are based on 40 qualitative interviews (5 women and 35 men) that were realized to a large extent during the congress of the Radicali Italiani that took place from the 29\(^{th}\) of October until November 1\(^{st}\) 2004. The people interviewed were i) the historical leader of the party, Marco Pannella; ii) 6 members of the direction of the party that is composed of 18 members. These comprehend the secretary of the party, Daniele Capezzzone, the treasurer of the Party, Rita Bernardini; iii) One member of the “Giunta”, that is a co-directive commission that is composed by ten members; iv) 8 members of the national committee that is composed by 60 members; v) 2 regional elected among the five regional elected; vi) The remaining ones (22) can broadly be considered has sympathizers of the party even if not all of them are in possession of the membership card of the party.

1. General characteristics of the forum of radicali.it?

When asked to compare the forum to a space of real life, the persons I have interviewed recurrently compared it to a “Square” or an “Agora”, to a “permanent assembly”, to a “bar” or even a “bar sport”. More originally it has been assimilated to the “living room of the party” or to “a market of Venice”, a market “where the people would not only go to buy and sell things, but where they would talk also about the big problems of the world”.

These initial comparisons are indicative of the technical and sociological characteristics of this forum. As a “Square” or an “Agora”, the forum is a *space that is public*. As a “bar sport”, the forum is a *space that is free and chaotic*. Similar to a “permanent assembly” the forum is to a certain extend also a *responsible space of discussion*. Finally, similar to a market of Venice, the forum is a *creative space of discussion*.

1.1. A public space

Public, in the way we use it here, is to be understood as the fact of being read by an unidentified group of people. Concretely it means that the active participants at the forum are aware that their comments are likely to be read by many people and, in particular, by

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\(^3\) For a review of the research up until now realized on digital parties refer to Gibson, Lusoli and Ward (2003) and Lusoli and Ward (2003).

\(^4\) This distinction based on internal and external role of parties is from Gibson and Ward (1998, 2000)
members of the direction of the party. According to the threads, and, more importantly, the persons that are participating to the threads, comments can receive more than 1000 hits, which means that they can be read more than 1000 times.

This aspect of publicity has an impact on the formal and substantial characteristics of the interventions. As to the formal impact, we can mention the example of a regular user of the forum explained that “understanding the mechanism (the publicity), each time that he intervenes he writes ‘dear companions’”. He knows in fact that he “talks to everybody”. If he wants to refer to just one person he puts his name, but he is aware that at “the end it is always open letters”. Finally, if he wants to have a really private discussion he “asks him his email and writes to him privately.” Regarding the more substantial impact we will see further that this public aspect has a major impact both on the quality of the deliberation and the level of participation in the forum.

1.2. A chaotic space of discussion

“There is an incredible chaos. But I know that in certain way this chaos tends to find an order and again a disorder. We are at the beginning.” (M. Pannella, historical leader of R.I.)

“I would compare to a square or even to an avenue where you can stop to meet people or simply pass by…there is a continuous movement. The square gives more the idea of a something circular while the avenue is more like a continuous action…In an avenue you can decide whenever you want to come out from a bar and to participate to an encounter…” (Laura Pistone, working for the R.I.)

As the historical leader of the party, Marco Pannella, suggests, the forum is a chaotic discursive space, at least in appearance. The disordered and confusing aspects of the forum derive from the absence of a pre-established discursive structure. The participants at the forum are perfectly free to open new threads and/or to participate in existing threads. Visually, each time that a new topic of discussion is opened and/or that a comment is inserted in an existing thread, the thread into question jumps at the first place of the discussion board and acquires a high visibility. This phenomenon is nicely defined as the “floating effect”. The idea of the avenue represents very well this aspect of perpetual movement: everyday there is an impressive scrolling of new and old topics of discussion that are comparable to the scrolling of citizens debating in an avenue.

From a general perspective we can distinguish two types of threads. There are, on the one hand, the ephemeral threads that last for few hours or days and that, generally, contain few comments. These are by far the most numerous ones and correspond normally to discussions that follow and comment the day-to-day actuality. In an avenue these could be compared to small groups of people that gather shortly to discuss some particular topics. On the other hand, there are the longer threads that can last for weeks, months or even years. These correspond in many cases to sub-communities within the broader community that is the forum. They are generally frequented by users that have similar interests and that have implemented certain bonds of trust and friendships. By pursuing the metaphor of the avenue, these longer threads would correspond to bars, salons or even little square frequented by habitués.
What structures the discussion and makes it more comprehensible is the ability of the users to filter the content of the forum. Most of the familiar forumists do not normally read all the comments that are inserted in the forum. They filter the messages they read on the basis of the topic and the author of the message. This filtering strategy, depending on the person, can be very broad. As a user puts it: “often it is the same people that talk in a thread of American elections and in the other of sex”.

1.3. An open and responsible space of discussion

Similar to a bar, a square or the common room at the headquarters of a party, the forum of “radicali.it” is a space of discussion that is open: anybody at any time is free to read, write and start new discussions.

Technically, there is complete openness for the passive use of the forum, since no formality is required for reading the contents of the forum. On the other hand, for the active use of the forum, whether for writing new messages and/or opening new threads, the party has recently opted for a rather cumbersome system of identification: participants that want to contribute to the forum are requested to register online and to send through fax a copy of their identity card. I was given essentially two reasons for opting for this peculiar procedure of registration. The first is related to the online elections that the party experienced three times for electing one third of the members of its direction. During the last online elections that took place in 2003, several problems of identifications were encountered since there were persons that had been voting two or more times under different identities. This was done not so much for influencing the electoral outcomes, as to prove that the electoral procedures were flawed. Since the participants at the online elections are now automatically registered following the procedures of the online forum, this should allow to resolve the problems of electoral identification. The second essential reason is related to the radical philosophy of dialogue. The normative principle applied is that everybody is totally free to say what he wants knowing that each person is accountable for their actions. “You can not throw a stone and then hide”. This procedure makes the interaction more similar to normal face-to-face contacts where the identity of the interlocutors is normally certain. A consequence of this request is that disruptive behaviors, such as flaming and personal attacks, are limited.

1.4. A free space of discussion

The forum is free in the sense that no censure is admitted. All the comments, even the most extreme and critical ones, are welcome. In its four years of existence the forum has experienced extremely few cases of censure. These were admitted only when the discursive instrument was made unusable for other users.5 On this regard, the moderator responsible for the forum said: “Our principal characteristic is that there is no form of censure. And if in the last years there were people that were chased out from the forum, it

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5 This is the case, for example, of a person that was copy-pasting hundred of pages of unrelated material and that, as a consequence, made the forum unusable for other forumists.
was exclusively because they made the forum technically impossible to read. Never for
the content.” The moderator responsible for the forum also bases his refusal of censure on
his past experience (at the time of Agora) where he observed that the censure was
inefficient in increasing participation and its quality within the forum. In fact, this has
according to him just the opposite effect.

It is important to underline that this formal openness and freedom of the forum does not
mean there are no internal types of censure. As we will see in the next chapter, there are
many internal reasons that explain why some people do not contribute at all in the forum.
Additionally, diligent users of the forum also suggested that this freedom of expression is
to a certain extent just theoretical and illusory since participants always conform to
certain types of behavior that are imposed by the social context that is present even in the
forum.

1.5. A creative space of discussion

As I was told by the precedent webmaster of the Italian radicals: “It is striking to note
how with few tools the forumists have invented everything”. Some forumists have
created opinion polls on different topics such as “who is the best forumist”; “who should
be the new secretary of the party”. Some participants make a use of the forum that is
comparable to a Blog by accumulating for several years in the same thread an impressive
number of comments that are commented by other users. Other forumists have used the
forum to exercise their artistic skill: they write novels, they send pictures, they make
virtual collages. Finally, the forum witnesses an extremely innovative use of syntax and
orthography: “the orthography is becoming more vast” as a radical users said. We can,
for example, mention the wide use of the smiley faces, the mixture of colors for writing,
the combination of images and text, the imaginative surnames found for the participants
at the forum, the invention of new words and/or the original way starting and signing the
contributions. The ex-webmaster of the website of the Italian radicals is probably right
when he says “that the scarcity of tools leads to imagination of the use that can be done
with them”.

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2. Participation in the forum

In this part we will focus on the contextual reasons and the ones put forward by the people interviewed that explain, on the one hand, why the radical community is a rare case of high and constant participation and, on the other hand, why some sympathizers and members of the party still avoid using it.

2.1. Reasons for high and constant participation

An important factor that explains the particularly high rate of participation in the online community is the fact that the radical movement has always been a forerunner in the democratic use of new technologies. It introduced in the mid 80’s a BBS system called Agora, which was one of the very first virtual communities in Italy and in Europe. In 95, it was the first political party in Italy to have a website. And, in 2000 it was the first and still only party in Europe to have realized open online elections to elect one third of its executive board. These innovative and democratic uses of the NTIC are important for explaining the initial high rate registration and, consequently, of participation in the forum. In fact after the disappearance of the BBS system “Agora”, that was sold to finance the 99 EU elections, several hundreds of persons decided to register at the forum of the radical community to pursue their online political activity. Additionally, the strongly publicized online elections of 2000 strongly contributed to boost the online registrations since the 20.000 people that registered to participate at the elections were automatically registered as users of the forum.

Now if we focus on the reasons contributing to the maintenance of a relatively high rate of participation over time, the interviews suggest that it derives from essentially three causes. The first are the technical and organizational characteristics of the forum. As we just saw, the forum is a rare, if not unique, example of virtual public space that is open, not censured and that is at the same time held accountable through transparency of identity. According to several users, these procedural characteristics correspond to necessary conditions for promoting and maintaining a high rate of participation. A second reason is the constant attention that the direction and, more essentially, the leadership of the party attribute at the forum. Most of the people interviewed underlined that they were motivated to read and to write in the forum because they knew that the radical leaders regularly participated passively and actively in the forum. In other words, they participate because they have the feeling “that they do not talk just to each other in the air but that they are listened to”. Finally what kept the people coming back in the forum was the fact that the forum is a community where many people already know each other from within and outside the forum. As the literature (Riva, 2004) suggests these personal links are fundamental for reinforcing the trust of the forumists. The absence of trust, deriving generally from the somewhat chaotic order that characterizes online interactions is in fact one of the major reasons why the community does not last over time.
2.2 Reasons for not participating

People avoid using the forum, on the one side, for personal reasons that are independent from the characteristics of the forum and, on the other side, because they are not satisfied with the forum itself.

Regarding the first category of non users, the most common reason advanced for not using the forum is the time constrain due to an intense working load and/or family life. For a minority of persons, the reason for not participating is an inability to use the computer or the Internet. There are also people that consider that the online debates do not correspond to an authentic form of making politics and that therefore prefer to discuss about political matters in a face to face contexts. Finally, some people that work directly or indirectly for the party invoke a form of “radical saturation”: they consider themselves already too much involved in the life of the party for further using the forum in their free time.

Referring now to the category that is unsatisfied with the forum, a major factor for not participating is the low quality of the content. In particular, it is argued that the forum tends to be dominated by provocative agents that flame, are vulgar and/or interrupt serious discussions on public issues. A vast majority of users, however, recognized that not all the content of the forum should be dropped out since the forum contains discussions of a very high quality, but the problem is generally to find and to valorize them.\(^6\) Another reason for not participating is the complexity of following the forum. This is particularly the case for the longer threads that can last for years and contain thousands of interventions. The latter require too much effort and time to follow the debates from their origins. In the same vein some people complained about the linguistic and behavioral codes adopted by some forumists that usually know each other for years. Finally, some users justified their non active participation by arguing that it is a “futile” exercise. They have the impression that “whatever is written there will get lost”, that “any type of intervention is pointless”.

All these aspects constitute without any doubt important barriers to potential newcomers. Several times I was told that “Someone that enters for the first time in the forum is not at all encouraged to stay”. The people that visit for the first time are likely to experience a choc, since it is a place where there is no rule, no filter and with a huge amount of material.

\(^6\) On this regard the comparison made by the secretary of the party Capezzone is illuminating: “It is the same thing as for the gold seeker with a gold pan: there is a lot of sand but at the end of the day you find gold nuggets. So in this sense, there are a lot of very important stuff that come out at the end of each day. If anything, all the documents and the links. It is at the end of the day a unique space of information. I am not aware of many political discussion spaces like this one”
3. The forum and its functions

When I interviewed the members of the leadership of the party, I was surprised to note that apart from considering the forum as an open space of political discussion, no other functions were foreseen for the forum. These political functions emerged spontaneously. Through the interviews I have identified several of them that were applicable for the different categories of actors: the community, the militants, and the direction of the party.

Informative function
The forum is generally perceived as an extremely informative *locus*. In fact, there are many threads that provide a broad range of information on some specifics topics such as euthanasia, situation in Latin America, the legalization of drugs, the situation in the prisons, nuclear energy, the question of the demographic bomb, research on stem cells, the situation in Cecenia etc. For many leaders, these threads are extremely useful in order to be informed and updated on these specific topics. As a member of the leadership expresses it: “There is a professional use to be informed about things important to me”. Similarly, the historical leader of the party, Panella, that is a constant reader of the forum, says: “the forum is a mine of information that is continuously growing. I always gave the order to archive it, but not to store it…My only dogma is that nothing must get lost…I always get ideas from there. Today I had to make a decision and I went there”. Daniele Capezzone, the secretary of the party, declares as well that the information contained in the forum is important and have an impact on the forum’s political activity: “This has happened a thousand times. In other words this is the rule. Everyday ideas appear that resolve a political question or put it in a new perspective”.

Formative functions
Even if not all the interventions are of high quality some users consider that the forum fulfills a formative function. At a very basic level the forum allows for improvement of writing skills. More generally, the forum is a formative instrument to learn how to debate about political matters. As a user says: “Sometimes there are things that are a bit sterile. But sterile until a certain point, because in any case they teach the way of discussing”. Moreover, it is an instrument that, if taken seriously, encourages reflection on some personal opinions: “the participation in the forum is personally enriching for me. You just need to read, if I say mistakes, it obliges me to think”. For some users, the positive aspect of learning in the forum is that it is a pleasant way of learning something new: “it is an amusing space in the sense that amusing means an other way of learning something”.

A privileged link with the leadership
The forum offers a privileged avenue for communicating with the leadership and the direction of the party. As a user says: “It is the most direct way for the members of the party, the sympathizers and also the non sympathizers to be in contact with the direction of the party”. This aspect is particularly important for the citizens that are outside Rome and that, therefore, cannot communicate as easily with the direction. It is also useful for
people that are shy about communicating directly with some leaders of the party. I would here distinguish two cases of communication with the leadership. On the one hand, there are situations in which the intention is to communicate to the entire direction. In this case the forum is useful, since the author is aware that he is normally read by a large part of the leadership. The second case regards messages that are directed to one particular leader. Such direct communication is interesting since the leader to whom the question is raised feels encouraged to respond, since, if he does not respond, he decreases his “reputation capital” among the forumists.

**A space of political initiatives and militancy**
The forum allows the radical militancy that is dispersed around the country to have a place to keep in contact and debate on radical issues. This is all the more important since the Italian Radicals have few territorial sections in which to interact. The forum is, in other words, the only place where the entire militancy can meet outside the canonical appointment of the party, such as the national congresses and comities.

The forum is not only a place of debates, it is also a *locus* for organizing political action. However it is not a space where political initiatives are taken. As a user said: “More than a space of political initiatives it is a space of suggestions of political initiatives. Things can take form here, and, sometimes, they are even taken into consideration”. Generally, the people interviewed consider the forum more as an open space of political “proposal” or “stimulus” than as a space of political decision. It is in other words perceived as “a tool to share, to make personal reflections, and to find elements for new ideas and initiatives”. Decisions in fact are taken by the direction. Regarding the impact of the proposals on the leadership, the users are generally aware that this is not certain, but possible: “It is like throwing a message in a bottle”.

Additionally, the forum is used by some militants for gaining public recognition of the work realized. For instance, during the recent signature gathering campaign for initiating an abrogative referendum against the law that limited the freedom of research, many militants were writing on the forum to underline how many signatures they had gathered. In this case the forum was used as a way to gather new energies and to encourage a sane and competitive competition among militants.

**A function of community**
For some people the forum corresponds to a space to find company and comfort in the radical broad family. As a user says: “First of all it is a space for not feeling lonely. You interact with persons that would not have anyone to discuss with outside the forum…It is a space of company even fighting”. A person I have interviewed told me that she consulted the forum intensively just before a risky operation. She considered that it helped her a lot because she has fond a “beautiful humanity” in the forum. The idea of community is also revealed by the fact that some people enter in private contact through the forum. This community aspect is very well expressed by the secretary of the party, Daniele Capezzone when he says: “there are a lot of people that come out from their
loneliness and that meet other people in the same situation…they enrich the boat and also a bit themselves. In other words, their loneliness evolves in something else”.

A feedback instrument
Several members of the leadership indicated that they use the forum as a feedback and e-consultation instrument. This allows them to be aware of the opinions and reactions of the forumist on their actions, propositions and their public interventions. It is, in other words, as having a permanent opinion poll or, in certain cases, a spontaneous deliberative opinion poll (Fishkin, 1991). However, not all the public interventions receive the same attention from the members of the forum. In fact the forum comments exclusively and freely on what it is interested in. Moreover, the feedback can be more or less representative of the general opinion. To simplify we can distinguish three levels of representativeness. At a minimal level the opinions are representative of just one or very few particular opinions. At an intermediary level the opinions can be representative of different preferences/opinions within the radical movement. Finally the feedback can also reflect the opinions of a broader category of the population since the active participants at the forum are to a large extent non radicals. Generally I would argue that the opinions expressed in this forum tend to be rather representative of the general opinions since the radical movement carries a vast amount of political sensibilities that range from the right, to the left spectrum of the Italian political opinion with also a strong ecological sensitivity.

Conclusion
This initial research based on interviews provides a rather extensive picture of reasons that explain why some citizens like to participate or not in an online political forum and reveals some important political functions that an online forum could fulfill for different categories of political actors.

Regarding political participation, the online forum of “the Italian radicals” suggests that an online forum, in order to be successful, should be based on a community where at least some people know and trust each other. This community should be characterized by a pre-existing participative culture and an experience in using NTIC. As to the discursive rules the forum should be open, free of censure and participants should be identified. Finally, the leadership should read and participate regularly in the forum since it encourages the members of the community to participate in the forum. They have the conviction that their interventions count.

Regarding the political functions we have underlined that the forum fulfills several functions that serves the different actors of the radical movements (sympathizers, militancy and leadership):

- A general political discussion function
- An informative function
- A formative function
- A direct link with the leadership
- A function of political organization for the militancy
- A community function
- A feedback, e-consultation function

In order to reach a more comprehensive understanding of the democratic potential of the online forum, this study begs for quantitative measures which would help to measure which the principal reasons are for participating or not in an online forum and to evaluate which functions are most used by the different categories of users. We plan to obtain these answers through an online questionnaire that we will send to all the members that are registered at the online community. Finally, further research is also needed for evaluating the quality of interaction within this specific online forum. The interviews offer just some personal appreciations that suggest that the quality of the debates and the content of the interventions are appreciated very differently. We plan to further scrutinize this aspect through the online survey and through a content analysis of the forum based on the discursive normative theory of Habermas.

Bibliography


