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Challenging mainstream media, documenting real life and sharing with the community: An analysis of the motivations for producing citizen journalism in a post-disaster city

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to explore the motivations that drove many ordinary people to produce citizen journalism after the earthquake that destroyed the Italian city of L'Aquila in 2009. Using in-depth interviews, we investigate the motivations and the obstacles underlying the publication of grassroots information related to the post-earthquake situation. Findings highlight that people were largely motivated to upload their content online (1) to contrast the quake-related news provided by Italian mainstream media with their own perceptions, (2) to document their lives and the 'real situation' of the city and (3) to share their points of view with other citizens trying to re-establish online the ties broken offline because of the catastrophe. Analysis shows that these non-professional journalists also had to face a series of obstacles, such as risks of fragmentation and lack of professionalism, funding and visibility.

1. Sociology of disasters in the era of digital media: a paradigm shift
On 6 April 2009 a devastating earthquake struck L'Aquila, a small Italian city located in the Abruzzo region (approximately 100 km north-east of Rome). It had a magnitude of 6.3 Mw and caused serious damage to L'Aquila and the surrounding villages, destroying many areas of the medieval centre, killing more than 300 people and leaving around 65,000 homeless.
Immediately after the tragedy, there was massive use by ordinary citizens of internet platforms to spread information about the reality of the situation in the post-earthquake phase (Farinosi and Micalizzi, 2012). The city thus witnessed an explosion of citizen journalism on multiple online platforms. Forums, blogs and social media were flooded with posts, comments, videos and pictures regarding everyday life after the catastrophe, the city's reconstruction process and the need to reconnect online the ties that had been severed by the earthquake.
    In the sociology of disasters focus on this kind of practice represents a significant paradigm shift. Although for years sociologists have investigated the patterns of adaptation that take place within communities traumatized by a catastrophic event, research has often left out analysis of the communication dynamics (see Fritz, 1961; Gilbert, 1998a; Kreps, 1998; Quarantelli, 1998; Porfiriev, 1998). In recent times new light on disaster related topics and on issues involved in the politics of knowledge has been shed by scholars from STS (Science and Technology Studies), who deeply studied both Hurricane Katrina (Frickel, Campanella and Vincent, 2009; Frickel and Vincent, 2011; Dowty Beech and Allen, 2011; Barrios, 2011), the Fukushima nuclear disaster (Fortun and Frickel, 2011) and their impact on citizens, communities and neighbouring countries. Many of this emerging research on catastrophic events is focused on the social dynamics of techno-science in extra-ordinary contexts and

delve into the questions of public debate and public participation. These studies try to understand how techno-scientific knowledge, experts and authority respond to disaster and in investigate the significant relationship between techno-science and disaster. But, as the majority of the existing communication-oriented research, they tend to adopt a top-down perspective (in particular regarding the warning response process) (important reviews include Anderson, 1969; Mileti and Beck, 1975; Carter, 1980; Quarantelli, 1980; Bauman, 1983; Hiroi, Mikami, and Miyata, 1985; Nigg, 1987; Mileti, and Sorensen, 1990) considering catastrophes as 'the affairs of the public authorities rather than the affairs of citizens and, in doing this, the perception of the population as a whole is merely passive and bound to be directed and commanded in cases of disasters' (Gilbert, 1998b: 97). As highlighted also by Banzato et al. (2010: 1), in the case of disasters citizens are usually seen as people to be rescued rather than as active participants. The widespread adoption of digital media and the abundant production of content generated by ordinary people has marked a significant change in the exploration of disaster contexts and allowed analysis of the tragedy from a completely new perspective: that of the victims.

In a context where the Italian mainstream media were too busy sustaining the framework of a supposed 'miraculous' reconstruction to pay attention to people's real needs and everyday struggles, a large number of citizens in L'Aquila started to use blogs, social media, and video/photo-sharing platforms in order to produce, upload and share online content related to their post-disaster situation, narrating their everyday lives and casting light on their 'out of the ordinary' experiences.

The aim of this article is to explore the motivations that drove these citizens to produce grassroots information. We first provide an analysis of the Italian mainstream media response to the earthquake during the Berlusconi government (section 2); secondly, we review the current literature on the phenomenon of citizen journalism, focusing in particular on the studies that have explored the motivations for producing this kind of content (section 3). Then we illustrate the aims and methods adopted (section 4) and describe and discuss the findings of our research (section 5). Finally we draw some conclusions and sketch future challenges for research in this field (section 6).

2. The L'Aquila earthquake as a media spectacle of catastrophe

The response to the earthquake by the Italian mainstream media was fast and expensive. As highlighted by several media scholars and commentators (among the many: Ardizzoni and Ferrari, 2010; Padovani, 2007, 2010a; Treré and Bazzarin, 2012) the Italian media landscape is particularly defined by the anomaly of a (three times and recently former) Prime Minister, media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, who owns three of the seven television channels broadcasting at a national level, and controlled other three when he was Italy's Prime Minister. The Berlusconi government deployed a complex media strategy in order to turn the L'Aquila tragedy into an opportunity to strengthen its consensus. Media events are defined by Dayan and Katz (1992) as public ceremonies, deemed historic and broadcast live on television. Liebes (1998) prefer to speak of 'disaster marathons', referring to the countless hours that the media spend recycling gory portraits from disaster scenes, focusing on the heroics of rescue workers and speculating on the reasons for the tragedy with experts and authorities. Grounding his theory in Guy Debord's notion of the society of the spectacle and in Dayan and Katz's notion of media event, Kellner (2010: 76) has coined the term 'media spectacle' to refer to "technologically mediated events, in which media forms such as broadcasting, print media, or the Internet process events in a spectacular form" (Kellner, 2010: 76). These events are out of the ordinary media constructs that involve an aesthetic dimension and are often

dramatic. The scholar distinguishes between spectacles of terror (such as the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers) and spectacles of catastrophe (natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina).

Literature on the media coverage of the L'Aquila earthquake (Dominici, 2010; Farinosi and Treré, 2010a, 2010b; Padovani, 2010b) has pointed out the different ways through which the Berlusconi government was able to build a 'media spectacle framework' where the many inflated promises of the Italian government about the reconstruction process were hiding the sad reality of a city left alone when the media attention had disappeared. Furthermore, ample journalistic literature on the topic (among others: Bonaccorsi et al., 2010; Erbani, 2010; Puliafito, 2010; Caporale, 2011) helps to unmask the rhetoric of the L'Aquila earthquake conceived as a 'spectacle of catastrophe', where the immediate post-earthquake emergency was framed by Italian mainstream media within the metaphor of the 'miracle in L'Aquila'. This metaphor is based on the use of several marketing techniques with the aim of conveying the false idea that a fast, efficient and almost 'miraculous' post-quake reconstruction was taking place at L'Aquila. Berlusconi appeared everyday on national and international televisions and, speaking from the 'red zone' (the dangerous areas located in the historical city centre), he reassured the citizens that the city was undergoing an effective reconstruction process.

While through the inaugurations of new houses and the construction of several image events culminating in the G8 Summit (Padovani, 2010b) Berlusconi was able to transmit the image of a city undergoing a 'miraculous' process of reconstruction, for several people of L'Aquila this supposed miracle was nothing more than a media mystification that was in strong contrast with their everyday existences, where rubble and debris still dominated the centre of the city and many citizens were still living inside the tent camps (Farinosi and Treré, 2010a, 2010b).

2. Literature review: motivations for producing citizen journalism

In the last few years, the tools provided by the so-called social web and the spread of digital devices to a great part of the world's population have helped to change the practices of 'traditional' journalism and the press: nowadays ordinary people play an increasing important role in the creation and dissemination of news and commentary online. Scholars and professionals have addressed this new phenomenon from multiple points of view and have adopted a wide array of labels to describe it. They refer to this new journalism as 'participatory' (Lasica, 2003; Lievrouw, 2011), 'hyperlocal' (Schaffer, 2007), 'networked' (Jarvis 2006), 'open source' (Bentley et al., 2005; Leonard, 1999), 'grassroots' (Gillmor, 2004; Schweiger and Quiring, 2005; Littau, 2007), 'wiki' (Outing, 2005), and so the debate continues, albeit 'citizen journalism' is the term that is most generally accepted (Gillmor, 2003).

Labels, terms and definitions vary, but all studies share a common foundation in that they point to the underlying amateurism of these practices: different authors seem to agree that at the core of this phenomenon lies media content generated everyday by unpaid people and published on independent news sites, opinion blogs, Indymedia sites, social networking platforms like Facebook and YouTube and micro-blogging platforms like Twitter. In citizen journalism, the readers, writers and editors participate jointly in the ongoing process of news production and circulation via digital media. Thus citizens play an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information.

Additionally, the concept of citizen journalism shares several similarities with the concept of citizens' media (Rodriguez, 2001) and the more general labels of 'alternative' and 'radical media' (Atton, 2002; Downing, 2001; Lievrouw, 2011). According to Rodriguez's perspective, people engaged in the production of citizens' media become empowered citizens. Rodriguez sees citizens' media as loci for the

enactment of citizenship where "the social subjects negotiate and renegotiate social definitions, their identities, cultures and lifestyles, on the personal as well as on the collective level" (Rodriguez, 2001: 54). Chris Atton (2002) stresses the importance of radical media where activist-journalists seek to establish a counter-discourse to those found in mainstream media. The author focuses on the 'native reporting' technique where activist accounts of events are preferred over more detached commentaries. In her analysis of Indymedia, one of the most relevant online alternative media created in the advent of the Seattle protests, Leah Lievrouw argues that the site represents "one of the earliest and most successful forms of participatory journalism online" (2011: 132).

Nowadays, in the Italian context, these hyper-local media act as 'micro watchdogs', on the one hand addressing pressing problems at a local level and on the other hand, thanks to the possibilities offered by social media and blogs, trying to draw national and global attention to important issues such as the fallacies of the Italian media system, the privileges of Italian politicians, the crisis in neoliberal systems and so on (Treré and Bazzarin, 2011, 2012).

Few studies have explored and examined users' motivations for producing grassroots content. Papacharissi (2003) analysed the posts of 150 bloggers and concluded that blog posts were intended for friends or family to fulfil a social utility motivation. Other scholars (Trammell et al., 2004) through the content analysis of 358 randomly selected blog pages explored six major motivations for blogging: self-expression; social interaction; entertainment; passing the time; information; professional advancement. Nardi et al. (2004) identified five major motivations for blogging: to document lives, to provide commentary and opinions, to express deeply felt emotions, to articulate ideas through writing, and to form and maintain community. The authors concluded that 'blogging is an unusually versatile medium, employed for everything from spontaneous release of emotion to archivable support of group collaboration and community' (Nardi et al., 2004: 46).

Leung (2009) examined uses and gratifications for a variety of online activities, including participation in Wikipedia, blogging, and YouTube. The researcher found that online content creation was driven by recognition needs, cognitive needs, social needs and entertainment needs. Liu et al. (2007) explored 10 motivational factors of 177 bloggers and discovered that the most significant reward of extrinsic motivation was connecting with people, whereas the most important reward of intrinsic motivation was expressing feelings and owning space for file and data storage. Similarly, Ekdale et al. (2010) examined intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of 66 US political bloggers and found that the most important one was offering a point of view missing in the mainstream media. Furthermore the authors analysed the bloggers' initial and current motivations and demonstrated that in the first phase of their activity they were driven by intrinsic motivations (in particular formulating new ideas and keeping track of their thoughts) and subsequently by extrinsic ones (such as providing a different perspective or critique from that of the mainstream media, helping society, serving as a political watchdog, etc.). Our study investigates the relevant question of why citizens produce grassroots information in a post-catastrophe scenario, adding qualitative data to the existing literature regarding citizen journalism which is mainly quantitative (Kokenge, 2010; Korgaonkar and Wohlin, 1999; Sheehan, 2002; Li, 2007).

3. Research questions and methodology

In this article, we do not adopt a narrow conception of citizen journalism, because we believe that closed boundaries are hard to draw and sometimes useless in this field. We agree with Goode's (2009) critical analysis of the phenomenon, especially in relation to two points. First of all, even if some authors such as

Gillmor (2004) refer to citizen journalism as 'a movement', we believe that we should not restrict the analysis to platforms that are explicitly built as alternatives to 'mainstream' or 'traditional' journalism. As a consequence, we situate citizen journalism within a broader mediation framework that accounts for a wide spectrum of news-making practices, including blog comments, mobile phone reporting, social network tagging and labelling of news stories. The citizen journalism phenomenon appears thus as a 'complex and layered mix of representation, interpretation (and re-interpretation), translation, and, indeed, remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 1999) whereby news and comment, discourse and information, is reshaped as it traverses a range of sites and varying media platforms' (Goode, 2009: 1291). We thus conceive of citizen journalism as a complex phenomenon composed of a variety of news-making practices through multiple technologies and platforms (blogs, wikis, social networking sites, micro-blogs, alternative websites, mobile phones and other digital devices). Because we see citizen journalism as a continuum of media practices, the focus of our research does not lie in one particular website or technology nor does the core of our analysis reside in one specific medium, but in people and their practices across multiple platforms (Barassi and Treré, 2012).

The L'Aquila post-earthquake media landscape is illuminating in this respect: while citizens created their own blogs and websites to give their point of view about the situation of the city, at the same time they made massive use of commercial online platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to spread the content they produced. Using multiple websites, personal blogs, social network sites and video/photo/audio-sharing platforms, many ordinary citizens of L'Aquila were able to post articles, videos, pictures, commentary and reports that shed light on the post-quake situation in all its aspects, providing their own reflections on the tragedy and narrating their everyday lives from the inside (Farinosi and Treré, 2010a, 2011; Farinosi and Micalizzi, 2012; Micalizzi, 2010; Padovani, 2010b).

Citizens from L'Aquila used the internet to bypass traditional gatekeepers and directly communicate their critical views on their post-quake situation. Moreover, activists, collectives and civic movements (such as, for instance, the movement of the 'People of the Wheelbarrows' and the '3e32' citizens' committee) employed multiple online platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Flickr, Web TVs and blogs to organize and report citizens' protests and to provide their own perspectives on the post-quake events in L'Aquila (Farinosi, 2011; Farinosi and Treré, 2010b; Padovani, 2010b; Treré and Farinosi, 2012). The information spread on blogs, on YouTube channels, on Facebook pages and Facebook groups and on the wiki-TV L'Aquila99[1] aims at providing independent and reliable views on the local situation from a bottom-up perspective. The number of platforms adopted by citizens in L'Aquila reflects the richness of both the content produced and the digital practices performed. We formulated the following research questions:

RQ1: What motivations drove citizens to produce grassroots information in the post-quake phase?
RQ2: What kind of obstacles did the actors producing grassroots information have to face?

To answer these research questions, we deployed a qualitative research method. Our sample criterion was purposive (Patton, 2002): we selected twenty citizens from the most active online creators of grassroots information and carried out twenty in-depth interviews with them in April 2010. In our selection we took into account the widest array of news-making practices so we included the most important bloggers, amateur journalists, social media content curators, online groups managers, amateur photographers and video-makers and Web TV content generators from L'Aquila. Among the most important bloggers we interviewed Federico, a young medical student who created the StazioneMIR blog, Anna, the owner of an

antique shop in the old town destroyed by the earthquake, who set up the Miskappa blog and Giusi, assistant professor at the University of L'Aquila, creator of the blog 'Trentotto Secondi' (in English 'Thirty-eight seconds', the time passed from the moment she was awakened by the earthquake to the moment in which she felt the shock had faded). As far as the amateur video-makers are concerned, among the others, we interviewed Francesco, a master student of Journalism whose YouTube channel included ironic videos criticizing Italian mainstream media coverage, and Luca, a young engineer with a passion for film-making who created short films denouncing the dramatic situation of the historical centre. Furthermore we included in our sample people who, among the growing volume of unfiltered digital data, were able to find, select and organize alternative information on the post-disaster situation, thus creating a collection of news that were neglected by the mainstream media. In this category we also took into consideration people who acted as curators of pages and groups on social media such as Giovanni, a computer scientist who decided to open the Facebook page 'Aggregatore Aquilano Flussi Alternativi' (in English "Aquilano Aggregator of Alternative Flows"), building a reliable collection of relevant but often underrated news that he discovered, gathered and organized from a variety of different sources, funnelling this information to his readers in a mash-up style. Finally we interviewed the members of the wiki-TV L'Aquila99, a collaborative online space which aimed at providing independent and reliable views on the local situation from a bottom-up perspective.

Interviews ranged from 45 to 70 minutes in length and aimed at exploring the motivations for producing citizen journalism as well as the obstacles that impeded grassroots production. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim and the resulting texts were thematically analyzed following Flick's (1998) method of thematic coding in order to determine the most relevant categories that depicted the citizens' perspectives on their grassroots production. Data analysis was approached without any preset list of categories and the findings emerged through the interaction with the data available. This methodological approach allowed us to investigate the phenomenon directly from the perspective of the population under study (Vettehen et al., 1996) and gave us a better grasp of the actors` points of view, motivations, goals and values.

4. Findings: motivations for producing grassroots content

In order to facilitate the analysis, the answers to the interviews have been clustered into categories based on underlying topics emerging from the content analysis. We have organized the research findings as follows: in the first sub-section we present the most relevant motivations that drove citizens of L'Aquila to produce and publish grassroots content on the internet; in the second subsection we focus our attention on the obstacles that people had to face when creating and uploading information online.

4.1 Fissures in the media spectacle[2]: challenging mainstream media coverage

The most frequent motivation for producing citizen journalism which has emerged from the analysis of the interviews is related to the Italian mainstream media coverage of the post-earthquake situation in L'Aquila. On the one hand, the coverage is seen as overabundant, especially in the first days following the disaster, when conventional media were bombarding audiences with so much information it was hard to obtain a clear picture of the situation. On the other hand, citizen journalists feel that the mainstream coverage of local events is bad, incomplete, almost entirely pro-government: this is the main reason why they provide their own version of the facts.

Francesco, a young student of communication sciences and an amateur videomaker, talks about 'information bulimia' and highlights the propagandist aspects of the content transmitted by the Italian media:

> 'There was information bulimia, especially during the first few days, in press, television and radio; in short, the images of L'Aquila have spread all around the world. The question is how this information was produced. It is information that often celebrated the Italian government'

These two related aspects repeatedly emerged from the interviews. Alberto, for instance, points out that 'the quantity and the quality of the information broadcasted by mainstream media were respectively super abundant and propagandist', Thomas underlines that 'the information on the earthquake was in quantity even excessive, but in terms of quality insignificant' and Anna clarifies that the main reason for her becoming a 'reporter from the inside' is related to 'the main problem of this earthquake, beyond the tragedy, the event itself: information, namely the lack of information at all levels'. Grassroots information producers report that the message regarding L'Aquila propagated by the Italian media was 'everything is OK, a reconstruction miracle is being realized here' (Ezio). Findings highlight the bad quality of media coverage, more focused on the celebration of the Italian government's work than on reporting the real situation faced by citizens. In this regard the interviewees also cited examples of news transmitted by the mainstream media in the first days after the earthquake. Some of them recalled an episode related to the first television news on the TGI channel. The day after the earthquake the TG1 journalist started the programme 'bragging about the incredible audience share that the TG1 had received owing to its coverage of the earthquake' (Francesco). According to the citizens interviewed this episode is an example of bad journalism that aimed at celebrating a private 'audience victory' while thousands of people were living through one of the worst tragedies in recent Italian history. In addition, interviewees said they were shocked by journalists' audacity in bothering -in the middle of the night- the Aquilani who had lost their homes and were sleeping in their cars. As Thomas pointed out:

> 'In my opinion, showing a journalist who goes into the cars of people sleeping on the streets to ask them why they are sleeping in the car is not journalism! It insults people's common sense and especially insults those poor people who were sleeping in the cars. It was the lack of proper information during the days following the earthquake that drove me to create my videos'.

Another bad coverage example reported by the citizens is that of the City Council meeting held in the rubble in the centre of L'Aquila. Some interviewees tell us that the TG5 newscast (the most important of the Mediaset channels owned by former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi) reported that the council had been summoned outside to celebrate the reopening of some of the most popular shops and stores in the centre. In reality, the mayor of L'Aquila had decided to stay in the square in front of the City Hall to speak out against the failure to remove the debris. As Federico, a young blogger from L'Aquila, says:

> 'Whereas the TG5 said that the City Council had met on the ruins of the Piazza Palazzo to celebrate the reopening of the historic centre, in fact there was a press release by the municipality stating that they protested against the fake media reconstruction of the old town'.

There are several other examples that citizens cited to describe how mainstream media coverage twisted or left out particular events, showing only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the post-earthquake

situation, such as the so-called '20,000 protest' on 16 June 2010. Only a few small-scale channels broadcast it and the most important broadcasting channels did not report the event at all. Below we report a significant post from Federico's blog, wherein he expresses his rage against the majority of the media that did not cover the event:

> 'It's a pity that only TG3, TG La7 and Sky TG24 and no other television networks have spoken about this protest involving more than twenty thousand citizens. It's fascism, my dear! Onna[3] protesting is a kick in the ass to all the propaganda of these months... but only few will know what really happened'.[4]

Therefore, the frustration derived from over-abundant, unclear and partisan mainstream media coverage was the main engine of dissent and promoted the massive production of grassroots information. These motivations match both academic (Ciccozzi, 2009, 2010; Dominici, 2010; Farinosi, 2011; Farinosi and Treré, 2010a, 2011; Padovani, 2010b; Treré and Farinosi, 2012) and journalistic literature (among others: Bonaccorsi et al., 2010; Puliafito, 2010; Erbani, 2010; Caporale, 2011) regarding the L'Aquila reconstruction process. Journalists, scholars and commentators have underlined that the post-quake L'Aquila situation was exploited for propagandistic aims by the Berlusconi government. As we highlighted in the second section, Italian mainstream media's coverage of the 2009 earthquake can be conceived as a 'media spectacle of catastrophe' with the strong metaphor of the 'miracle in L'Aquila' at its centre. Therefore, citizens challenged the illusion of this miraculous post-quake reconstruction that never took place by using digital media and online platforms in order to create fissures in this media spectacle, so that the light could penetrate and illuminate the dark corners neglected by the mainstream media.

4.2 Life-documenting about the 'real' situation of the city
The second motivation emerging from analysis of the interviews is related to the desire to document citizens' daily lives and tell what they were experiencing. This is strictly related to the first and, more generally, to the desire to make the voice of the people heard. In response to media coverage that was perceived as far from depicting the 'real' situation of the city, citizens from L'Aquila started to produce and publish online information (videos, posts, comments, tags, reports, pictures, info-graphics, etc.) about their daily realities in order to give voice to their points of view and to provide their perspective on the catastrophe by giving firsthand information. This point emerged clearly when Federico spoke about the importance of his blog 'Stazione MIR':

> 'On my blog, given that mainstream media have focused on about 5% of the L'Aquila reality, I try to talk about the other 95%...because these are the proportions! Thus I'm providing counter-information against what has been reported and maybe my stuff is better information. I report the daily life of the city and tell our emotions and our impressions...our everyday lives, our real life'.

Francesco stresses the importance played by grassroots information in life-documenting when he affirms that 'the internet has proven to be an important tool to tell our reality and to share it with other people, firsthand, from below, from our point of view about the city'. This motivation can also have therapeutic implications. Expressing the anger, the pain, the emotions lived after the traumatic event in fact can be seen as a 'safety valve'. These 'digital story-telling practices' represent a useful method to capture, fix and reflect on experiences and, in a context like that of L'Aquila, social media can help people in the process of recovering from the loss of their 'normal lives'. As explained by Gianluca:

'In the days immediately following the earthquake I was really shaken. I did not want to do anything at all... Only after a couple of weeks did I finally find the courage to pick up my camera and start filming what was going on, and what we were experiencing. I started spending days out, recording everything I saw. I felt the need to fix those moments, to share what I was seeing and what we were going through, something that was not properly told at the time'.

The ability to capture events was also pivotal in terms of covering the moments immediately after the main shock and describing those traumatic hours when the cameras of national and international television had still not arrived on site. This aspect is well addressed by Thomas, when he speaks about the role played by the content generated by the citizens who had the courage in the hours immediately following the earthquake 'to go there to report the events, and thanks to them we are now able to remember and live again those moments'. The strong will to document what was happening in the destroyed city emerged in response to mainstream media coverage guilty, in the words of citizen journalists, of a biased representation of events. In particular, amateur reporters started documenting at a micro level their daily lives, their struggles to rebuild their existence in the face of a catastrophe that had obliterated their houses, but, above all, their social ties. This will to document what was going on stands out in the following comment by blogger Anna:

'Four days after the earthquake I got a laptop with an internet dongle and I started blogging. I was living in a car and I started to narrate the earthquake of L'Aquila as I saw it. [...] You can see how I wrote about everything that was going on, what went on into my brain, and I just told my daily experiences. My blog represented a rare source of information and it has grown enormously...I had 38000 visits a day'.

Digital technologies such as cameras and mobile devices, together with online platforms, played a pivotal role and served the need for grassroots producers to show what they were experiencing. Life-documenting is therefore another strong motivation for producing grassroots information in the L'Aquila context.

4.3 Sharing with the community
The third motivation for grassroots content production emerging from the interviews is linked with the strong will of citizen journalists to share the information produced with their community.

Amateur reporters created and posted their content online in order to exchange views with other citizens, thus fostering discussions on the rebuilding process and other 'hot' topics related to the post-earthquake emergency. Blogs and social media represented environments where people could re-establish online the ties that had been broken offline because of the catastrophe. In the absence of traditional public spaces - destroyed or damaged by the quake - the online social sites acted as surrogates of the offline gathering places. They were especially important in the process of grassroots information-sharing among the citizens who were forced after the quake to live outside the city. Moreover, the news-sharing with the community encouraged amateur journalists to go ahead with their work as reporters: it was a sort of civic mutual aid, a continuous feedback in a community that was slowly starting to rebuild its ties with every available tool.

The main idea, according to Alessio, was 'to rebuild the social infrastructure that has been lost, and to rebuild it according to more ethical principles. In this respect, the internet can play a fundamental role'.

As Anna underlines, 'it's important to let people outside L'Aquila know the situation, but it's also fundamental to create an online space for local citizens to join together'.

The grassroots information that circulated through online platforms was perceived by Luca as

> 'a gift, and many people thanked us because they felt represented by this communication for providing not only information in the classic sense, but information with a heart, in the ways we told our stories about our community, because obviously being involved we can put our emotions and we can communicate our feelings'.

Although many citizens did not own a social media account before the earthquake and thought joining these platforms was a 'loss of precious time', the situation changed radically after the tragic event. People started to join these online platforms in order to reconnect with other citizens and suddenly they recognized the 'social power' of the technologies. The case of Giovanni is paradigmatic in this respect. Before the earthquake, he did not have a Facebook account and thought about social media as 'silly games for adolescents'. After the disaster things radically changed, however, and Giovanni decided to create his own Facebook account. Whereas before the tragedy 'social media were just a series of lines of computer code', he then realized 'the power of the social networking phenomenon and the social impact these media could have'. After a week of intense Facebook use, Giovanni built his own Facebook page and started his own selection of posts, articles, and videos published by other local citizens affected by the earthquake who were using this social networking platform. He then became a sort of aggregator of information, alternative flows of contents related to the post-tragedy phase. Sharing different contents from multiple sources (local newspapers, local TV, citizens' posts and comments, etc.) he acted as a catalyst of information that was unreported by mainstream media. People started visiting his Facebook page to obtain a more complete vision of what was going on in the city and to connect with each other, sharing impressions and thoughts and starting to rebuild day by day the connections that had been broken by the earthquake. Online technologies were used to inform about underreported events and situations and as platforms to rebuild connections and ties among a dispersed community that was looking to re-appropriate its spaces.

The case of Enza shares similarities with Giovanni. She owned a blog before the tragedy and used it in her spare time, but did not have a Facebook account. Enza pointed out during the interview that she was anti-Facebook at the beginning, perceiving this platform to be a waste of time, not a social resource. After the earthquake, however, her vision changed dramatically. Facebook represented a way to regain contact with her community, with lost friends and neighbours. As she explained to us:

> 'I realized Facebook was the first thing to do, so I could maintain contacts with friends [...] I felt relieved, I wasn't alone anymore, because I was really frustrated at the beginning, I thought my vision of how bad things were was just mine, but then I saw that there were a bunch of other citizens just like me, sharing, mobilizing and doing something for the city'.

4.4 Obstacles to grassroots content production

In this section we focus our attention on the obstacles, pitfalls and critical issues that grassroots content producers had to face in the L'Aquila post-earthquake context. According to the perceptions of local amateur journalists which emerged from the analysis of the interviews one of the biggest obstacles was 'fragmentation': very often, in fact, the wide range of platforms adopted by amateur journalists constituted a dispersive factor and did not allow the power of the mainstream media to be countered

effectively. Grassroots production was dispersed among a myriad of contributions spread across small-scale online media and 'fragmentation of struggles' (Fuchs, 2010: 186) represented a serious limitation in terms of content visibility and socio-political impact. This point is raised by Francesco: 'unfortunately this citizen journalism is not a structured system, it's just crazy fragments moving at random in the cauldron of the network'. Another issue that emerged clearly from the interviews is the difference between the strong organization of mainstream media and the unstructured and loose nature of bottom-up citizens' production, particularly regarding the lack of financial resources and time. On the one hand, mainstream media have more money and employ professionals and, on the other, citizens' production is mainly created by amateurs who have cheap equipment at their disposal and by people who earn their living in other ways and thus lack the time to dedicate themselves exclusively to media production. This point is addressed by Giovanni when, speaking about his alternative page 'Aggregatore Aquilano di Flussi Alternativi' (Aquilano Aggregator of Alternative Fluxes) on Facebook, he observes the lack of time dedicated to news selection and online diffusion because of work and family commitments. The need to find financial resources to support grassroots production emerges in the words of Francesco: 'You should also find one or more sponsors because first you do it for free and it's an honour, but then it becomes a full-time job and networking takes time, and you need spaces, an editorial office, and so on...And then there are funding problems...Unfortunately there are no funds!'.

Another relevant problem that citizen journalists have to face is that of 'visibility'. It is almost impossible for ordinary people and their bottom-up production to compete from a quantitative point of view with mainstream media. The online environment seems to offer new possibilities for cheap participation and production, bypassing of gate-keepers, and access to the global audience, but the problem of visibility is still present because online political and financial power is essential for gaining public visibility (Sandoval, 2009: 7). In fact, on the one hand the internet favours those who are already privileged and on the other hand, even if some scholars claim it reduces the gap between those who have many resources and those who have but few, the unknown actors usually continue to be unknown even when they are accessible online (Rucht, 2004). As internet scholar Matthew Hindman (2008) reminds us we should not confuse the right to speak with the ability to be heard.

5. Conclusions, limitations and future directions

In this article, we have analysed the motivations that drove citizen journalists from L'Aquila to produce grassroots information in the post-earthquake phase. The overabundant and distorted mainstream media coverage and the need to document their daily lives and share it with their community in order to reconnect their social ties were the main motivations for their grassroots information production. Feeling marginalized by the mainstream press, local citizens used digital media to provide an alternative version to the one presented by Italian mainstream media and used blogs, YouTube and Facebook accounts to shed light on the city's situation in all its aspects. In this way amateur journalists bypassed traditional gatekeepers and communicated directly online their points of view about the post-quake situation, strengthening their community at the same time. Our findings contribute to the literature on disasters, the literature on citizen journalism and alternative media by adding a new point of view to the existing communication-oriented research in the field of sociology of disasters and by providing qualitative data on the motivations for grassroots content production in a post-catastrophe situation.

The analysis of citizens' information production after the earthquake allows us to explore the context of disaster from a new perspective: that of the population involved in the traumatic experience. This

represents a significant paradigm shift in the literature related to the sociology of disasters because, as we have seen in the first section, people are usually considered merely as victims and communication dynamics are analysed from top-down perspectives. Conversely, our research was focused on the analysis of the active participation of citizens and explored their motivations for producing information. Furthermore, our study suggests that in the post-disaster context of L'Aquila ordinary people were driven by many of the same motivations that inspire online producers in their everyday lives such as the need to fulfil a social utility motivation (Papacharissi, 2003), the need to spread information and create social interaction (Trammell et al., 2004), the will to provide an alternative perspective to mainstream media (Ekdale et al., 2010) and above all the need to document their lives, express deeply-felt emotions and form and maintain community (Nardi et al., 2004; Liu et al., 2007). A similar mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations influenced the citizens of L'Aquila. The main difference from the current literature is constituted by the urgency that drove people to create and document their own narratives motivated by the extraordinary post-catastrophe situation and by distorted mainstream media coverage.

Furthermore, our study provides an exploration of the obstacles that online content production has to face (risks of fragmentation and the lack of professionalism, funding and visibility), an issue which is usually neglected in studies on motivations behind user-generated content. In line with Bart Cammaert's (2008) reflections on the participatory potential of blogs, we are convinced that while it is important to critically reflect on the democratic potentials of these platforms, it is also pivotal to acknowledge their limitations, constraints and dangers.

Finally, our findings also reveal some of the opportunities and challenges embedded in the use of blogs, social media and content sharing applications in the production of counter-information and the creation of alternative media. Clemencia Rodriguez (2001) has urged us not to measure the value of alternative media in terms of binary and simplistic distinctions between big and powerful mainstream media and small, 'inoffensive' community media. This merely 'quantitative' way of thinking often leads commentators to state that alternative media represent nothing more than insignificant experiments when compared with big and resourceful media conglomerates (Gumucio Dagron, 2007). Instead, by using the "citizens' media" label Rodriguez wants to stress that first of all we must explore the deep meaning that these media have for the people that adopt and use them. As findings from the L'Aquila case clearly illustrate, one of the main value of these media lied precisely in the ways through which they empowered citizens by allowing them to communicate their own narratives to counter the dominant "miracle framework" of Italian mainstream media (in line with Chris Atton's reflections on the role of journalists in radical media), rebuild their ties within a broken community and regain the public spaces shattered by the catastrophe.

The particular and unique scenario of the disaster, however, is also a serious limitation to the generalizability of the results obtained, especially if we take into account the specific socio-political context of Italy. The Italian media and political scenario, within which we witnessed the explosion of this grassroots phenomenon, presents in fact other anomalies that do not allow for simple comparison with other similar cases (for an in-depth examination of the Italian anomalous media scenario, see Monteleone, 1999; Padovani, 2004; Menduni, 2008; Ortoleva, 2009).

Nonetheless, we think that exploring the motivations behind the production of grassroots information in this particular context can help to shed light on the complex phenomenon of citizen journalism and on the multiple grassroots practices that ordinary citizens employ to tell their stories, share their views and communicate their 'truths' in a situation where conventional media do not answer the population's need for balanced information.

Although we do not argue that power relations inside the Italian media system have been significantly transformed, we have to point out that - as the L'Aquila case clearly shows - digital technologies can provide citizens with powerful tools for the production of independent, alternative and more democratic information (Fenton, 2010). When mainstream coverage fails, citizens can turn into journalists and use online platforms in order to spread news from their point of view. The future consequences of these alterations in the media matrix are yet to be fully appreciated, and this article aims to contribute qualitative data to the ongoing discussion.

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[1] See the following websites:

http://stazionemir.wordpress.com (StazioneMIR blog);

http://miskappa.blogspot.com/ (MisKappa blog);

http://giusipitari.blogspot.com/ (Trentotto Secondi blog);

http://youtube.com/user/funambolic (Francesco YouTube's channel);

http://youtube.com/user/vanth13 (Luca YouTube's channel);

http://facebook.com/?ref=logo#!/pages/Aggregatore-Aquilano-Flussi- Alternativi/181281390915?ref=ts ("Aggregatore Aquilano Flussi Alternativi" Facebook page);

https://facebook.com/groups/79826092084/ (3e32 citizens committee Facebook group);

http://laquila99.tv/ (wiki-TV L'Aquila99).

[2] This is a tribute to Clemencia Rodriguez's book "Fissures in the mediascape" (2001).

[3] Onna is a small village near L'Aquila that was completely destroyed by the earthquake of 6 April 2009.

[4] Available at: http://stazionemir.wordpress.com/2010/06/17/per-ventimila-buone-ragioni/