

**At the roots of media cultures.**

**Social movements producing knowledge about media as discriminatory workspaces**

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**Abstract**

In this article we aim to contribute to the study of social movement media cultures by paying specific attention to the practices through which collective actors build specific knowledge about media as workspaces. More precisely, we analyze how knowledge about media and tech companies as discriminatory workspaces is produced starting from the very lived experiences and situated understandings of women and LGBT workers. We investigate this set of media knowledge practices by exploring the case of Unicorns In Tech (UiT), a network of queer and straight people working in the media and technology sector, through the lens of “movement knowledge repertoires”, which has been recently pushed forward within social movement studies to illuminate the knowledge work pursued by collective actors. Our analysis of the UiT case sheds light on how women and LGBT workers experience media and tech companies as a vast space that is characterized by gender imbalances. In turn, this situated understanding of media as discriminatory workspaces grounds UiT endeavor to achieve more diverse and inclusive spaces, where dissonant subjectivities can be made visible together with technical expertise, and where synergies with media and tech companies can be created to produce welcoming cultures in and beyond the workspace.

**Keywords:** Social Movements, Knowledge Repertoires, LGBT, Media as Workspaces, Gender and Media

## **1. Introduction**

Recent studies on the nexus between culture and social movements are engaging more systematically with culture as a constitutive, rather than strategic, dimension of collective endeavours (Ullrich, Daphi and Baumgarten, 2014). In this sense, social movements have been described as ‘performances [in which] culture is created and affirmed, changed and fortified, nudged along and tied to past practices’ (Johnston, 2009, p.26). Thus, movement strategies, organizational choices and decision-making procedures have been characterized as culturally grounded insofar as they connect to and vary depending on participants’ understandings, preferences, and beliefs about society and how to change it.

This shift from a strategic to a constitutive view of culture is affecting also the way in which the relationships between media, communication and movements are studied. With the rise of the global protest wave at the end of 2010, attention has indeed grown for the communicative dimension of social movements and scholars have begun to suggest that movement actors own media cultures, that is, they understand and approach differently traditional and digital media platforms, professions, and logics depending on their very knowledge of media objects and environments but also in strict connection with their strategic, organizational and decision-making cultures (Costanza-Chock, 2012; Kavada, 2013; Mattoni, 2012; Mattoni and Treré, 2014;).

Against this background and borrowing from recent developments in the media studies field (e.g., Couldry, 2004), it has been suggested that movement media cultures can be observed empirically starting from activists’ media practices, which include both routinized and creative social practices through which they appropriate media objects, interact with media professionals but also create knowledge about the overall media environment in which they act (Mattoni, 2012). This practice-oriented approach has been applied so far to explore media usage across a multiplicity of mobilizations – from Occupy! (Costaza-Chock, 2012), to the

European Social Forum and anti-austerity protests (Kavada, 2013, 2015), to the fight against work precarity and the student movement in Italy (Mattoni, 2012; Mattoni and Treré, 2014), to the Labour, the Environmental and the Autonomous movements in the UK (Barassi, 2015). Despite the heterogeneity of analysed cases, these studies provide consistent evidence of the fact that, across different domains of contention, specific protest cultures inform activists' uses of media thus contributing to create peculiar communication and media cultures that intertwine with movement organizational and strategic cultures (Bennett and Segerberg, 2016).

While the broader debate on how media can be effectively studied as practices is, and is likely to remain, wide open (Couldry and Hobart, 2010), the empirical investigations of media practices and how they relate to protest cultures are still in their infancy. As Mattoni notes (2017, p.496), media practices entail both activists' *interactions with* and *understandings of* media technologies, professions, and rules. Nonetheless, research in this area tends to look more often at the former thus focussing on what the author labels 'relational media practices (...) oriented towards interaction with media technologies, media outlets and media professionals' (Mattoni 2013, p.49). Less attention has been paid instead to the practices through which activists develop *knowledge about the media environment*, that is to 'media knowledge practices' (Mattoni 2013, p.48). Through these practices, activists develop a whole set of assumptions, predispositions and attitudes towards media objects, professionals and rules, which in turn guide the definition of their 'communication repertoires' – i.e., 'the entire set of relational media practices that social movement actors might conceive as possible (...) and then develop in the latent and visible stages of mobilization' (Mattoni, 2013, p.50). Despite their foundational character, media knowledge practices are oftentimes left implicit, as acts of media appropriations (for example, in the construction of a website or the use of a Twitter account) show more explicitly the link between media and protest cultures.

To contribute overcoming this gap, in this article we take a closer look at the roots of movement media cultures by turning attention explicitly towards media knowledge practices and investigating how movement actors build specific knowledge about media as workspaces. More precisely, we analyse how knowledge about media and tech companies as discriminatory workspaces is produced starting from the very lived experiences and situated understandings of women and LGBT workers and is then channelled back to companies in the attempt to achieve a genuinely gender-inclusive and gender-respectful work environment. We investigate this set of media knowledge practices by exploring the case of *Unicorns In Tech* (UiT), a network of queer and straight people working in the media and technology sector, through the lens of ‘movement knowledge repertoires’ (della Porta e Pavan, 2017). The idea of knowledge repertoires has been recently proposed to disentangle the variety of actions that movements realize, sometimes on purpose and some others unintendedly, to produce knowledge about the world around them (Casas-Cortes et al., 2008; Cox, 2014; della Porta e Pavan, 2017; Eyerman and Jamison, 1991). As it is on the bases of this personalized way of ‘knowing the world’ that movements strive to generate social and political change, delving into how they progressively ‘get to know’ the world around them, and media as part of this world, provides a suitable entry point to investigate the formation of media cultures.

Certainly, the media knowledge practices developed by UiT participants are a specific set of activities that are undertaken within a rather formalized portion of ongoing gender-oriented collective endeavours. However, we argue that accounting for the ‘knowledge work’ (Ferree and Verloo, 2016, p.x) made by this community sets a two-tiered contribution. On the one hand, it enriches the discussion on the nexus between media practices and movement media cultures by showing that not only media cultures emerge within specific collective endeavours but in fact can be a constitutive component of collective action dynamics. While extant studies in this area have sought to unveil the link between protest and media cultures across a variety

of mobilizations, no attention has gone yet towards collective endeavours targeting directly media and communication companies. In these cases, media practices do not only reveal situated media cultures that tie back to broader protest culture but, more radically, give substance to protest dynamics that aim at challenging, when not directly at changing, the dominant culture that regulate the modes of operation and the working principles of the media industry sector. When activism dynamics are *oriented towards* the media, movement media cultures cease to be ‘solely’ something that is generated in the cultural context of protest and become, by all means, constitutive elements of collective action dynamics. On the other hand, our investigation adds to ongoing discussions on the role of media in shaping gender (in)equalities – as it goes beyond a more established focus on media contents and uses and turns attention towards experiences of discrimination and injustice that are lived beyond the binary opposition between women and men.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. In section 2 we summarize the main traits of movement knowledge and introduce the ‘knowledge repertoires’ approach motivating its suitability to investigate movement media cultures. In section 3, we sketch the contours of the discussion on the nexus between gender and media, and we call for complementing current discussions on the role of media in shaping gender (in)equalities with a more clear-cut focus on work dynamics in the media sector. After illustrating our case study (Section 4) and the results of our ethnographic investigation of the knowledge practices (Section 5), we conclude by elaborating on how a knowledge-based lens can add to both our understanding of movement media cultures and discussions on the gender and media nexus.

## **2. Social movements as knowledge producers**

Not only social movements affect participants’ biographies, struggle to change policies and contribute to cultural change (Bosi, Giugni and Uba, 2016). More peculiarly, they elaborate

and experiment alternative epistemologies, that is, systems of ideas, theories, and strategies about the status quo and how to change it to achieve their aspirations. In this sense, social movements configure as collective spaces of knowledge production wherein collaboration and participation lead to the ‘rethinking [of] democracy; the generation of expertise and new paradigms of being, as well as different modes of analyses of relevant political and social conjunctures’ (Casas-Cortes et al., 2008, p.20). On the bases of ‘how they know the world’, movements imagine alternative ways of being and living and flesh out strategies to translate these imaginaries into practice in their daily activities and throughout the continuous process of movement building (Chesters, 2012).

As it is produced outside institutionalized educational and epistemic spaces, movement knowledge is peculiar. First, it is a ‘local’ type of knowledge because it is deeply embedded in personal experience. As such, it does not offer general and abstract explanations but, rather, concrete testimony of particular situations, often of imbalance and discrimination. Second, because it is an expression of ‘actors’ reflexivity’ (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991, p.52), it is more accountable to the places it aims to affect and is geared to ‘create an appropriate and operative theoretical horizon, very close to the surface of the “lived,” where the simplicity and concreteness of elements from which it has emerged, achieve meaning and potential’ (Malo, 2004, in Casas-Cortes et al., 2008, p.44). Third, movement knowledge is often a ‘knowledge-in-struggle’ (Barker and Cox, 2002, p.23), not only because it is a tool for opposing the status quo but, more broadly, because it is always evolving as a consequence of its constant interaction and confrontation with broader cultural and political milieus.

In relation to a wide range of mobilizations, from the Global Justice Movement to the anti-austerity protests and campaigns against gender-based violence, observers are increasingly stressing the centrality of knowledge production within organized collective efforts (della Porta, 2015; Santos, 2003; Schoenleitner, 2003; Pavan, 2017). In this context, it has been

argued that, as much as movements enact protest repertoires they also enact *knowledge repertoires*, which can be broadly understood as ‘the set of practices that result from and, at the same time, foster the coordination of disconnected, local, and highly personal experiences, rationalities, and competences within a shared cognitive system able to provide movements and their supporters with a common orientation for making claims and acting collectively to produce social, political, and cultural changes’ (della Porta and Pavan, 2017, p.305).

These knowledge repertoires are carried out fluidly, sometimes on purpose and sometimes unintendedly, at different levels. At a first level, they entail the production of ‘knowledge about the collective self’ (della Porta and Pavan, 2017, p.305). To be sure, ‘social movement actors do not instantly think of themselves as doing something radically outside the ordinary’ (Cox, 2014, p.50). For this reason, initiatives and events are organized to reflect on the identity of the collective self that is in formation, on its vision, and on the actions to transform this vision into reality. Examples in this regard are the assemblies organized during the World Social Forum, where ideas were exchanged as inside a street market (Schoenleitner, 2003); or the anti-austerity camps set up in public squares where the activists engaged in discussions amongst themselves but also with the citizens to grasp the thousand facets and implications of the economic crisis (della Porta, 2015).

Second, movements produce ‘knowledge about the action network’ (della Porta and Pavan, 2017, p.306) – a more strategic type of knowledge that is geared to favour the construction of coordinated networks of action between movements (or parts of them) wherein specific competencies, resources and capacities are shared and cross-fertilize. To this aim, meetings are set up amongst members of different groups, to discuss their respective agendas and action priorities, to then find possible intersections and spaces of collaborations – like it happened in the Occupy camps in Boston where activists reached out to the black and the

precarious workers' communities to jointly fight on issues such as dispossession, mortgage crisis, and inequalities (Juris, 2012).

Finally, knowledge production is geared towards the production of political alternatives that are delivered to targeted actors – be they local, national or international institutions, companies, or other organizations (della Porta and Pavan, 2017, p.307). In this respect, the work done by the women's movement is exemplary in many respects – not least with regard to the gender and media nexus, an issue that would have remained at the margins of the political discussion if civil society organizations from all over the world had not raised explicitly their concerns about it (Padovani and Pavan, 2017).

There are several reasons for which knowledge repertoires can be a useful lens to investigate movement media cultures. First, consistently with the original repertoires of action idea (Tilly, 1986), this lens privileges a focus on actions that people 'do to know the world' rather than a focus on what they 'should know about the world' given certain premises (their gender, income, geographic origin etc.). Hence, knowledge repertoires are germane to the original epistemological shift entailed by the media practice approach, which accounts simultaneously for the subjectivities that engage with media and with the context in which this engagement occurs (Couldry, 2004). Second, because the lens of knowledge repertoires focuses on the creation of understandings that derive from personal and local experiences, it serves well the purpose of grasping the situatedness and, therefore, the dynamic nature of the understandings that movements produce about media objects, professions, and logics. Finally, because knowledge is understood, under this lens, as multifaceted (it is indeed simultaneously knowledge about the collective, the action network, and the political alternatives), it allows to examine the formation of media-related understandings from different angles thus making sense of the different components that form them.



### **3. Gender equality in and through the media: moving beyond binarism through the production of knowledge**

Studies on the multifaceted nexus between gender and media have a rich history that entwines with developments of the feminist movements, of theoretical reflections on gender relations, and of the media and communication technology environment.

Initially, the theoretical connections to the feminist model of gender equality prevailed and attention went particularly onto the absence of the female figure – compared to the male one – and to female symbolic degradation in media contents. With the emergence of what is often referred to as ‘second-wave feminism’, the idea of assimilation was flanked by a tendency to valorise the specificity of female experiences and differences between women (Krijnen and Van Bawel, 2015). This new strand of research led to different outcomes. Beside emphasizing stereotypical gender and sexual roles and the role played by the media in their construction, researchers have sought to deconstruct the categories of women and men commonly taken for granted in terms of both gender and sexuality. As Gill notes (2007), the focus shifted from the analysis of the representation of women to the ways in which media actively participate in the production of gender. Going beyond, de Lauretis (1987) argues that the representations of femininity produced by the media participate in the production of gender within a series of social and discursive apparatuses that become ‘gender technologies’.

Feminist media studies have been influenced also by new theoretical frameworks emerging in the context of ‘third-wave feminism’ – particularly, cyberfeminism, postcolonial feminism, and postfeminism (Carter, 2012). In this context, epistemological perspectives have been being progressively reoriented towards unveiling the intersections between gender and other axes of power such as colour, class, age, ability (Crenshaw, 1991). Latest studies in the area are redefining in critical terms consolidated relationships between identity, representations and politics (Ross, 2012). At the same time, observers continue to address contemporary forms

of female objectification and forms of sexism that persist in the media sphere in the postfeminist new media context (Gill, 2011).

Carrying on a systematic deconstruction of the traditional categories of masculinities and femininities, scholars are increasingly paying attention to the forms of power that are built starting from heterosexual norms and confront with the various forms of universalism in the media and popular culture (Butler, 1990). Consistently, the focus has been set on the visibility and the representation not only of women but also of other subjectivities who have remained marginalised in media such as LGBT people (Gross, 2001). Moreover, the affirmation of *men's studies* is contributing to question the traditional notion of masculinities, the representations of masculine stereotypes and roles in the media sphere, and how masculinities are constructed by media representations (Boni, 2002). Additionally, queer media studies are shedding light on the possibilities offered by digital media and web 2.0 to those who identify as LGBT a space to speak (as opposed to being spoken about) and to create personal and political relationships (Dhoest, Szulc and Eeckhout, 2017). By altering conventional modes of mass communication and breaking the boundary between production and consumption, digital media have become a strategic place for minorities to speak autonomously and showcase the multiplicity of their diversity in the public space (Shawn and Sender, 2016; Dhoest, Szulc and Eeckhout, 2017).

To a much lesser extent, attention has been paid to how the spaces of production, with their values, norms and organizational forms, affect the gendered content that is produced (Krijnen and Van Bauwel, 2015). When gendered discriminations and exclusionary mechanisms within media as workspaces are considered, analyses remain anchored to dichotomous understanding of gender and sex. Endorsing an implicit equation between gender and women, recent in-depth investigations (EIGE, 2013) looked at the positions and the roles occupied by women (as opposed to those occupied by men) as well as to the policies adopted by media companies to promote a gender-balanced context. In this sense, not only the presence

of LGBT subjectivities in media and tech workplaces has been rarely investigated. Also, no attention has been given to whether and how LGBT activists engage in the creation of situated media cultures which then reflect in their attitudes towards and uses of media.

In a context that is inevitably characterized by the pervasive and profound intervention of media materialities and contents in the construction of our daily lives, it becomes increasingly important to accompany extant reflections on the nexus between gender and media with a more systematic account of gender (in)equalities that have so far remained at the margins of the discussion, as part of a ‘tacit’ knowledge (Wainwright, 1994) coming from situated experiences of discrimination and injustice that are lived beyond the binary opposition between women and men. A focus on media as workspaces seems particularly relevant in this respect, precisely in light of the few, and yet consistent, evidences that suggest a tight link between the presence of multiple gendered subjectivities in media companies with the creation of gender-balanced contents as well as of genuinely gender-inclusive and gender-respectful media environments (Padovani and Pavan 2017).

#### **4. The case: Unicorns in Tech**

Unicorns in Tech (UiT) originated in Germany in 2014 as a network of queer and straight people working in the media and technology sector in different capacities - from information technology professionals and engineers, to social media specialists, journalists, startupper, entrepreneurs and science and technologies supporters. In only few years, the network has grown beyond the German context and has become, as stated on its website, a ‘global tech network for LGBT and straight allies’ (UiT 2017). Broadly speaking, the network operates in the media and tech sector dealing, in line with other LGBT movements, with difficulties queer people face in their workplaces such as invisibility, isolation and widespread homophobia. Most importantly, the UiT network provides a space that is open to lesbians, gays, bisexual,

trans people and women, as it acknowledges the common roots of discrimination that characterize work relations particularly in the digital media and technology landscape. On the one hand, the network is driven by the need to build an inclusive and respectful workplace for sexual and gender differences. On the other hand, it aims to provide a space where to imagine and produce communication technologies that are open to the multiplicity of the embodied experiences.

UiT organizes an annual conference, i.e., the UNIT, an event aimed to promote the importance of LGBT people in the media and tech community. So far, three events have been organized, each involving more than 40 speakers coming from all over the world, delivering insights from a range of backgrounds, through music performances, interactive installations and thought-provoking talks which have been witnessed by an always increasing number of participants. Thus, UNIT has a strong festive character: a lot of attention is given to social activities that engage people not only in networking but even in a celebration of ‘you are not alone’. The network organizes also the so-called ‘Get Together’, a monthly event hosted by different companies in the media and tech field where two speakers each time are invited to discuss the last trends in technology. Get Together usually gather a hundred participants and provide not only training opportunities but are, in fact, a social event in which LGBT media and tech workers feel part of a community and build a support network.

To investigate the repertoires of knowledge practices enacted by UiT, we adopt an ethnographic approach that combines unstructured interviews with participant observation. This latter was conducted during the UNIT conference and during a preliminary event which took place in Berlin in May 2017. In these occasions, we conducted three exploratory informal interviews that were supplemented by eight unstructured interviews with UiT members who participated in the organization of the conference and/or attended it. Interviews gathered insights on a number of topics, from personal experiences as practitioners in the media and tech

field to the UiT network and its action and knowledge practices. All interviews have been recorded, transcribed and anonymized. Given the sparseness of the network behind the UNIT event, we integrated interviews with a collection of insights through an anonymous online semi-structured form containing both open and closed questions directed to the speakers of the 2017 UNIT conference. Through this form, we aimed at reconstructing and better understanding speakers' motivation for participating both in the community and in the conference as well as what these experiences meant to them.<sup>1</sup> Information collected through this multi-method approach has been analyzed to identify UiT's knowledge practices at the three levels of collective self, the action network and for the creation of political alternatives.

## **5. Unicorns in Tech and their knowledge practices**

### **5.1 Knowledge about the collective self: gender matters on different levels**

UiT aims to connect and bring together women, lesbians, gay, bisexual, trans people to make them more visible and empowered in the diverse media and tech communities in which they work – whether these are physical spaces such as start-ups or online spaces such as developers' communities. The presence of LGBT people and women at various levels of the media and tech field and the possibility for them to act freely according to personal gender and sexual orientation in the workplace are indeed understood as crucial for a total recognition of their rights but also to create workplaces that are inclusive of all.

Data we collected through interviews and observation reveal that, to achieve its aim, UiT brings along and fosters knowledge around three main key elements that correspond to the

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the collaboration of the festival organizers, the online form reached 49 people, and we received 11 answers. While these answers are not representative of the wide range of experiences and perspectives brought by speakers, they provide useful indications to understand the background of the speakers, their interests and motivations.

needs of participants – i.e., diversity, inclusivity and visibility. These three dimensions also become a method through which Unicorns build their initiatives.

The element of diversity constitutes a major concern for UiT and points to two sets of complementary necessities: on the one hand, having different subjectivities not only present but actively engaged in the media and tech world; on the other, recognizing the different knowledge and approaches they bring to this world as valuable. As the media and tech domain is mostly inhabited and led by cisgender white middle-class men, different levels of discrimination and segregation are produced: from exclusion by top ranking roles to unemployment passing through the marginalization of individuals that do not fit widespread gender norms. In the words of Ambra:

Coming out as a lesbian, as a trans person, whatever, on one hand, yes, most people are interested in software and how your code is, how you work, but in the other hand there are sexists, homophobic, misogynists... the spectrum is quite wide between being welcomed or being ignored or neglected. (Ambra, electronic designer)

Our observation of UiT events showed that diversity is also a method to organize initiatives. The UNIT conference is particularly illustrative in this respect – as its preliminary phases unfolds through the circulation of a call for speakers that is explicitly addressed to ‘women, people of colour, trans people, people with disabilities and other underrepresented LGBT groups’. In the selection of actual speakers, then, a lot of effort is put to avoid the overrepresentation of one subject over another:

We do have in choosing the speakers certain guidelines, like for instance where the speakers come from, what is her or his identity, is it like a man or a woman because if

there are too many men there is something wrong. To balance... even the backgrounds.

(John)

Diversity as a method guides also the selection of topics to be addressed during the event, which range from issues that might be more relevant for women and the LGBT community – such as ‘how to deal with everyday discrimination’ – to insights into cutting-edge technological development – for instance ‘how blockchain technologies are changing art and intellectual property’. As one of our interviewees involved in the organization declared:

Regarding the ‘being a trans women in tech’ we feel it was an important talk and it should be there. Or other talks, tech workshops for instance, this is important because people can acquire certain skills and we want also the conference to be about LGBT in tech – so, not only a reflection about our experiences but also to learn something practical and be even like a tech conference. (John)

Ultimately, the conference seeks to create the best conditions to expose and cross-fertilize the diverse knowledge of participants who are characterized by different backgrounds and interests, carry personal and situated experiences as dissonant subjectivities in the heteronormative media and tech field, own elevated know-how in tech and science related issues and a resilient attitude toward discrimination. Through talks and presentations, but also workshops, art performances and installations, participants exchange both their situated experience and professional expertise. In this way, the UNIT conference challenges the categorization between different types of knowledge – professional, scientific and informal – and allows codified and grassroots expertises to contribute to develop ideas and projects from

different perspectives and languages, according to the specific skills and knowledges of the applicants – from art to journalism and engineering. In the word of one of our interviewees:

There is a thematic diversity but also diversity in people, diversity in speakers, that all create this feeling of a creative space, of a very informal space that helps to build alliances, helps to build networks, brings people together and they start cooperating... they start doing something together or even to produce something together. (Carl)

Diversity connects to the second key element on which UiT reflects – i.e., inclusion. This element points to the need of having spaces in which to discuss about media and technology that should be increasingly free from gender norms. In disclosing their personal experiences, our interviewees recounted stories filled with discriminations and biases based on gender not only in their workplaces but also in the spaces in which ‘institutional’ knowledge about media and technology is produced and discussed, such as tech and media conferences. In this respect, they commonly underline that male speakers regularly outnumber female ones. Secondly, as the following quote from Sasha highlights particularly in relation to women, the culture that surrounds these events is often misogynistic and exclusionary:

I go to like ...conferences on Internet of things area mostly... I’m one of the few women there. Most of the time it’s just me (*laugh*), it’s very difficult because, socializing is very hard because if you are friendly some people they take it in the wrong way and think you are hitting on them, you know... I’m a married woman! Or they just avoid you because you are female. (Sasha, tech journalist)



UiT puts into question this macho culture and values inclusive practices that contribute to a shared culture of respect for all subjectivities. Inclusivity becomes even a method to create environments open to everyone's experiences. In the UNIT conference, all individuals have the same right to participate and be heard as there is no criteria to define in advance who is allowed to speak or not. Most importantly, the space it creates is intended to be 'safe', to allow different subjectivities not only to be present but, more importantly, to freely express. As it stated in the conference program:

Our conference is dedicated to providing an harassment free conference experience for everyone, regardless of gender, gender identity and expression, age, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, body size, race, religion, ethnicity (or lack thereof), or technologies choices. We do not tolerate harassment of conference participants in any forms before during after the conference online and offline.

Ambra's narrative shows the actual possibility to create, outside of the UNIT conference, an environment in which gender norms can be challenged and, more radically, gender itself might be put into question in its normative nature to produce a welcoming media and tech culture:

I live in the field of 'chaos computer club' which is a key space where you can be the way you want. It's a good space for LGBT people to be the way they are. For example, in my beginning of living as female, as a woman this was my safe space, I knew I was looking a bit, in the first time with the make-up, not perfect and so... I was safe in this area, in this environment, so this was quite open. (Ambra, electronic designer)

In this sense, participating in the UNIT conference allows to share positive experiences and thus to create synergies between desires for inclusive workspaces and their actual realization.

Finally, the third topic around which UiT promotes critical reflection, that of visibility, points to the need of bringing at the forefront the knowledge, competences, and experiences of LGBT people and women so that they can be shared, heard, and thus be accounted for in the media and technology field. Furthermore, visibility is also intended to be a method that aims to foster the creation of spaces in which this local knowledge is displayed and made available to all. Our interviewees outlined a two-tiered set of impacts triggered by knowledge visibility. On the one hand, it provides a resource to support coming out and self-confidence in daily life for subjects who do not fit into the normative and dichotomous categories of sex and gender thus empowering them. The need for positive examples and inspirational experiences is recognized to be a strategic resource for the process of self-definition in the workplace. Indeed, as testified by one of the respondents to our online form, ‘Often I have young “geeky” LGBT people come up and tell me that they are glad I “came out” so they know they might be able to do that too’. On the other hand, pulling out LGBT and women’s experiences from invisibility helps media and tech companies to move towards the creation of more participated workspaces, wherein all subjectivities are considered and their contributions recognized and embraced as assets. Crucially, it also facilitates the representation of multiple roles and identities within contents – for example, within videogames, which have been a transversal topic in the three annual conferences.

## **5.2 Knowledge about the action network to build a community across countries**

As mentioned above, UiT puts a lot of effort in building and fortifying its network within and beyond Germany. At the local level, UiT works actively to engage media and tech companies in hosting monthly Get Together meetings in Berlin, while at the international level it managed

to create a '*community across the country*' (in the words of John) that can meet annually at the UNIT conference. This latter is fundamental to give substance to the UiT international community. In bringing together in a physical space all its members, other tech LGBT people and women with the aim of attending talks, participating in workshops and listening performances, the UNIT conference is a collective experience 'in-between': a space for sharing knowledge and to mix relational infrastructures, within which competences and resources circulate among nodes and which amplifies the capacity of the network to produce a new understanding of the LGBT involvement in the media and tech world on the global scale yet without missing the particular.

Our interviewees underline how the practice of meeting for sharing personal and technical knowledge as LGBT people in tech is understood as crucial also in the way in which it challenges the risk of isolation they face as non-binary media and tech people:

I think that people in this situation learn that they are not alone, they are many, being a nerd, a geek, doesn't mean you are alone. There are a lot of people. Before that, there were not so many places for this. And they just exchange with other people "wow everybody is very intelligent!". [...] We want to have more face to face meetings, it's a more interesting thing. We need a real separated space which we don't have right now. (Carl)

Within the macro space of conference, specific practices are enacted that fulfil this vision. 'Speed networking', for instance, is a format that is enacted every three hours and asks participants to speak with each other in couples during brief exchanges that last a set amount of time. This aims at encouraging people to meet each other and to avoid the risk of producing small and exclusive groups. Furthermore, this practice pushes participants to share their

embodied knowledge not just during talks and workshops but also in less formal settings such as face to face short interactions. The value of this practice is clearly recognized by participants:

It was fun because the two or three people I talked to I also talked to in the following days (Nathan, marketing and branding expert)

Ultimately, the UNIT conference is a space for the community to strengthen its foundational ties but also to multiply them. Specific work is done to achieve this second goal – like it is shown by the meetup that took place in the 2017 edition and aimed to coordinate to bring UiT in cities where it does not exist yet.

This work of knowledge production about the network is strongly facilitated and supported by a conscious use of digital media by the community. Communication about Unicorns in Tech activities, like the Get Together, are spread through a monthly newsletter that, at the time of writing, reaches out to more than 2600 subscribers. Moreover, social media platforms, particularly Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, are strategically used to build and maintain connections between interested individuals based in Germany and abroad. During the 2017 conference period, the joint use of Twitter by UiT and its participants play a vital role in expanding not only the network of interpersonal collaborations but also the network of meanings of gendered discriminations in the media and tech field. Beyond the conference period, UiT Facebook page provides a space where members share job opportunities, connect the community with companies searching for collaborators, and ask questions which are relevant for their everyday personal professional knowledge:

I have used Facebook to ask a couple of questions for something I was working on.  
(Sasha, tech journalist)

Finally, interviews confirm the role of the conference in producing a more collective strategy for women and LGBT people in the media and tech sector. Through their participation in the conference, also people who are at the margins of work networks can and in fact do develop a critical knowledge – for instance deciding to become a speakers – and contribute to the construction of a collective space that host knowledge dynamics that have consequences not only at the personal level, but also at the collective one. As the following quote shows, participating in the conference encourages participants to be more self-confident and to take a public stand:

Participating in Unicorns in Tech gave me some motivation actually I think, motivation to think about things critically...from the different people experiences and talk about it. Now, I would like to write an article but I need time to do it. (Nathan, marketing and branding expert)

### **5.3 Producing knowledge to change the media and tech company policies**

Fundamental to the existence and the maintenance of the UiT community is the sharing of embodied experiences of its participants, which grounds a situated knowledge that is elaborated at the intersection between professional and informal contexts and serves as a base to suggests possible strategies to overcome the status quo. An alternative vision of LGBT and women presence and roles in the media and tech companies is not only elaborated inside the network but also actively constructed inside companies:

I think there are a lot of workplaces that want to say ‘yes of course we support non-heterosexual stuff’, be involved in the network, provide offices to host an event or

sponsoring something by providing some kind of founding, or promoting jobs they have available. (Sasha, tech journalist)

By engaging in the systematic effort of involving tech and media companies in the network, UiT invites the subjects who are part of the problem – corporations, start-ups, digital agencies – to take an active role in defining the solution. As seen above, this passes through the promotion of connections between UiT members and media and tech companies that are opening job opportunities for collaborators. Most importantly, UiT asks companies to be partners in and sponsors their initiatives. Two main types of knowledge practices seem to be particularly interesting in this regard. First, companies host the Get Together monthly events and commit to start a partnership program to support LGBT staff and recognize the values and the importance of diversity in their workplaces. Quite illustrative of this collaboration is the logo of one of the upcoming Get Together events (fig. 1), where a play on words between UiT values and the names of the company hosting the event (i.e., King) and of one of its most recognized products (the Candy Crush videogame) results in a synergic call for openness and inclusiveness.

Fig. 1 – Logo of the Get Together meeting between UiT and King

\*\*\*insert figure 1 here\*\*\*

Second, small and big companies, such as videogame agencies, web development start-ups, multimedia brands, are invited to participate in the UNIT festival and to play an active role, for instance giving talks about their experiences in fostering and supporting LGBT staffs and their rights. Furthermore, the conference provides a learning space in which companies

acquire new knowledge and resources to improve and expand their politics of inclusivity, as the following excerpt of an interview conducted with a member of a network of LGBT employees states:

for my network was interesting that Unicorns are organising technical workshops, data science, data analytics or coding. And this is something that we could benefit from. That is something we would like to do in 2018. Set up mentorship programmes or workshop, it will attract some people who wouldn't necessary be interested in social get together or panel discussion but might be more interested in technical workshops. (Sam, Advertising Policy Specialist).

## **6. Conclusions**

In this article, we aimed at contributing to ongoing research on social movement media cultures from a practice-oriented approach. In this vein, we turned attention explicitly to media knowledge practices and we analysed how activists engage in the construction of knowledge about media and tech companies as discriminatory workspaces. To this end, we analysed through the lens of movement knowledge repertoires the case of the global network Unicorns in Tech (UiT), which joins queer and straight people working in the media and technology sector.

Through the application of the knowledge repertoires lens, we learned directly from the lived experiences of women and LGBT workers about the media and tech companies as a vast space that is invariantly characterized by gender imbalances. Moreover, our analysis shows how this situated understanding of media as discriminatory workspaces grounds UiT endeavour to achieve more diverse and inclusive spaces, where dissonant subjectivities can be made visible freely and safely together with their technical expertise, and where to build solidarity

networks and synergies with media and tech companies to produce welcoming media and tech culture in and beyond the workplace.

Moreover, the investigation of knowledge repertoires enacted by UiT allows us also to retrace the proactive orientation of participants to correct the distortions that characterize their work environment. Our investigation shows that the common core of needs raised by participants grows out from constructing environments where to enact processes of diversities: open ended paths of involvement, less conditioned by gender norms, that do not take identities as a starting point but, rather, value their situated knowledges and experiences. In this sense, concentrating on the process of knowledge production on media as workspaces has shown that actual solutions are being pushed forward to overcome gender-based inequalities in the media. Turning diversity, inclusivity and visibility from principles that guide the community into the methods through which it organizes does lead to the definition and the crystallization of practices that cut-across different agendas and guarantee multiple subjectivities, rather the inclusion of one subject against the other.

Beside shading light on how media ‘are getting known’ as workspaces, we believe that focusing on the practices developed through experiences like the UiT network about media can add to current analysis of the gender and media nexus in several ways. Setting the focus on the creation of knowledge about media workspaces developed by multiple subjectivities that experience gender-based discrimination in and through the media allows providing new substance to the very idea of equality – which is not only a main theoretical concern for gender and media studies but, more substantively, their final goal. By unveiling the ‘knowledge work’ that is encapsulated in the organization of events and communication networks like those promoted by UiT, voice is given to a knowledge that has so far not only remained tacit but, more often, silenced as it is willingly left out of the discussion. Voicing local knowledge allows streaming different narratives on all the dimensions that structure policy (and political, we



would add) frames on gender equality (Verloo and Lombardo, 2007): the *diagnosis* and the *prognosis* of equality as a problem and the role that different *actors* play in this respect, the *intersection* between gender and other sources of discrimination, the boundary between *private* and *public* aspects, the *mechanisms* that sustain and reproduce inequalities.

Certainly, our analysis concentrated on a specific set of media knowledge practices undertaken within a specific setting – i.e., a rather formalized portion of ongoing gender-oriented collective endeavours in which women and LGBT media workers converge, confront, and discuss. Yet, it is precisely the situatedness of the understandings produced in this context that makes them relevant to ongoing attempts to unveil movement media cultures. Rather than paving the way to read culture according to external and overarching viewpoints, the investigation of media knowledge practices allows to grasp cultural dynamics as they develop from below and starting from the very lived and embodied experience of participants, which provides a framework to interpret reality and to mature shared and collective programmes of change.

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