

“BATTLES OVER ISSUES” IN NETWORKED PUBLICS: INVESTIGATING THE DISCURSIVE MOBILIZATION OF THE ANTIFASCIST FRAME ON TWITTER*

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In this article we explore the discursive mobilization of movement frames within networked publics—a form of unorganized digital activism through which movement organizations, activists, and citizens politicize ordinary conversations by engaging in adversarial meaning-making dynamics online. Leaning on large-scale semantic network analysis and content analysis, we investigate the mobilization of the frame of antifascism within the conversation that sparked on Twitter after the brutal shooting of a group of African citizens by an Italian neo-fascist militant in 2018. We pay particular attention to how the discursive mobilization of the frame of antifascism occurs immediately after the shooting and how it evolves particularly in connection with offline protests. Our results shed light on the fluid nature of discursive mobilization patterns which underpin both the identification with the antifascist tradition and attempts to delegitimize this instance of collective action.

This article aims to contribute to current research on the nexus between social media and collective action by approaching digital public discourse as a battlefield. Social movement studies have long insisted that public discourse is a “terrain of conflict and not simply the medium or messenger through which it is expressed” (Steinberg 1998: 853). Along these lines, discourse has been considered as a conflictual process that involves a plurality of actors struggling to have their preferred meanings prevail over others. Thus, several analyses have focused on “battles over issues” (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards and Rucht 2002: 69): adversarial dynamics that are played out discursively and in which frames and counterframes are mobilized in order to make sense of specific situations or matters.

In this article, we will extend this long-standing research concern focusing specifically on digital contentious dynamics and examining how and with what implications movement frames are discursively mobilized within broad and heterogeneous “networked publics” (boyd 2010) that assemble online to debate everyday issues, facts, and events that trigger a general interest. We understand this discursive mobilization as an act of contention in itself—a digital labor of signification through which social movement organizations, activists, but also citizens with varying degrees of identification with collective endeavors politicize otherwise ordinary conversations. This form of online activism pivots around a deliberately political yet unorganized use of social media in order to impact on the way “people understand, remember, evaluate, and act upon a problem” (Meraz and Papacharissi 2013: 143–144). As such, it stands in continuity with the variety of digital media practices that contemporary social movements adopt to overcome narrow political and discursive opportunity structures, foster recruitment, organize on-site protests, shape collective identities, and challenge hegemonic understandings of reality (Pavan and della Porta 2020).

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At the same time, acts of discursive mobilization within networked publics lie at the margins of conventional online protest activities. As these acts follow facts or events that often occur beyond the realm of contentious politics, they resonate with those forms of “everyday activism” (Mansbridge and Flaster 2007) through which individuals seek “to redress a perceived injustice [in their own life while taking] this action in the context of, and in the same broad direction as, [a] social movement” (ibid.: 628). For this reason, the mobilization of movement frames within networked publics implies greater levels of sparseness and spontaneity in comparison to digital tactics performed by movement organizations and activists (Earl and Kimport 2011) or that develop in looser forms around Facebook pages or ad-hoc protest hashtags (Gerbaudo 2016; Papacharissi 2016; Theocharis, Lowe, van Deth and García-Albacete 2015).

However, differently from more proper forms of everyday activism, this type of online action is not geared toward producing “everyday outcomes” that mostly benefit individual actors (Mansbridge and Flaster 2007: 628). Rather, movement frames are appropriated, personalized, and widely circulated through Facebook posts or tweets to affect public interpretations of specific issues or events. To this aim, social media play a key coordination function as they interconnect individual instances of activism, make them visible in the public space, and set in motion the formation of large-scale online networks of “connective action” (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Nonetheless, social movement frames rise to prominence and affect public opinion if they manage to prevail over those proposed by a variety of other actors, including movement opponents, who share with activists and concerned citizens an interest in defining the terms of the public debate. In this sense, movement frames are mobilized online within large-scale digital battles, following patterns that necessarily react—when they do not directly adapt to—those of competing frames.

In what follows, we explore this adversarial labor of signification by studying the forms it takes in the context of online networked publics, and by analyzing how it evolves in connection with mobilization processes on the ground. Our research approach combines a large-scale semantic network analysis with the granularity of qualitative content analysis to investigate the discursive mobilization of the frame of antifascism within the Twitter debate that sparked after the brutal shooting of a group of African citizens at the hands of an Italian neofascist militant, in 2018. The shooting triggered the reaction of a multiplicity of groups, who organized several antifascist and antiracist protests that took place a week after the attack. However, prior to the protests, the shooting spurred a massive online conversation in which a multitude of users—including activists and supporters of the antifascist movement—tried to make sense of both the incident and the evident persistence of a fascist and colonial memory in the country.

Drawing on an analysis of both the semantic networks generated by users tweeting about the shooting and selected tweets, we seek to unveil the forms and implications of the discursive mobilization of antifascism at two interrelated levels. At the discursive level, we consider the heuristic potential of antifascism as a frame and in terms of its ability to thematically affect the broader conversation about the shooting. At the mobilization level, we explore how the presence and articulation of this frame becomes entwined with mobilization processes on the ground.

The article is organized as follows. We first discuss existing research on the manifold ways in which digital and discursive dynamics intersect with collective action processes. We then outline the peculiarities of the online discursive mobilization of movement frames within networked publics. Next, we illustrate our case study as well as data collection and analysis procedures. Finally, we summarize the main results of our analysis and conclude by reflecting on the discursive mobilization of movement frames as a form of contention.

DIGITAL MEDIA, AND THE VARIOUS ROLES OF DIGITAL DISCOURSE

Over the last decade, a growing body of research has addressed the implications of pervasive digital media, and of the discursive dynamics that result from their use, for collective action processes. First, the employment of digital media has been studied in connection with the structural, organizational, and ideational dimensions of collective action, thus renewing the “classic agenda” of social movement research (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). Second, a

wealth of empirical evidence has been produced that focuses more specifically on the implications of digital interactions for the coordination of offline protests, but also for the shaping of collective identities. Third, further attention has been paid to digital discourse and the contentious nature of digital framing and meaning-making processes.

Renewing the Classic Agenda

Thanks to their unprecedented communication and networking potentials, digital media expand the range of mobilization opportunities, supplementing—often narrow—political and discursive opportunities with new spaces where to act collectively and circulate movement messages (Cammaerts 2018). In this context, collective endeavors can unfold entirely in the digital space, as illustrated by the protests against the Internet Piracy Law (Bennett and Segerberg 2014) or the “strategic voting movement” during the 2000 US elections (Earl and Kimport 2011). However, online communications have also been found capable of fostering offline political engagement as they enrich personal networks that are conducive to individual mobilization (Crossley 2015) and increase individual perceptions of internal and collective political efficacy (Halpern, Valenzuela and Katz 2017).

Greater possibilities for digital communication also impact on the organization of collective endeavors. On the one side, digital communication can “supersize” already existing collective instances (Earl and Kimport 2011); on the other, it enables new forms of digital organization in which peer production and information curation facilitate the coordination of crowds that often lack common motivations to mobilize, and endorse different action frames and programs (Bennett, Segerberg and Walker 2014). Indeed, since digital media allow for more personalized forms of “connective action” (Bennett and Segerberg 2013), engagement in collective endeavors is detached from formal membership in social movement organizations and adherence to their action frames. Thus, the massive turnout in the 15M movement was the result of a multitude of individuals finding common ground to take action through online, personal appropriations of the encompassing frame “real democracy now” (Anduiza, Cristiancho and Sabucedo 2014). This flexibility has proved important also for online engagement in high-risk protests, such as those of the Occupy Gezi movement, although an affiliation with consolidated political organizations remains important to sustain on-site participation over time (Mercea, Karatas and Bastos 2018).

The widespread adoption of digital media furthermore expands action repertoires that sometimes mix online and offline tactics, but which can also sustain an entirely digital protest, as in the case of e-mail bombs or Distributed Denial of Services attacks (Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010). Moreover, other than enacting hybrid action repertoires, collective actors perform “communication repertoires”: whole sets of “media practices that social movement actors might conceive as possible and then develop in both the latent and visible stages of mobilization, to reach social actors positioned both within and beyond the social movement milieu” (Mattoni 2013: 47).

Looking at processes of collective identity creation within digital spaces, scholars have sought to understand how the flexibility and, to some extent, the volatility of online engagement practices couple with the formation of collectivities that share a sense of belonging and common orientation toward action (Gerbaudo and Treré 2015). In this respect, Stefania Milan (2015) highlights a tension between processes of collective identification that lie at the foundation of movement dynamics and what she calls “politics of visibility,” where individual experiences and forms of expression become pivotal. Within this tension, she argues, the collective is not disintegrated but, in fact, experienced and reinterpreted through individual uses of platform features, such as image and video posting or text sharing.

Digital Interactions and the Development of Protests

Although studies that are more in line with the classic agenda have assigned a prominent environmental role to digital media, they have left the substance of digital discourse in the background. Thus, scholars have brought digital interactions and contents to the forefront,

shedding light on how these help coordinate protest, sustain the construction of collective identities, and expand the reach of contentious activities beyond the place in which they occur.

In this respect, empirical research looks at different mobilizations and occasionally comes to different conclusions. Research that compares anti-austerity movements in Spain, Greece, and the United States has found that the majority of the contents that were channeled by protest tweets did support the political and logistic organization of protests only to a minor degree, whereas they mostly widened the debate about movements themselves and the issues they address in different countries (Theocharis et al. 2015). Conversely, other accounts show that social media contents not only enlarge the recruitment base as in both the Occupy! and the Indignados movements (Gaby and Caren 2012; González-Bailón, Borge Holthoefter, Rivero and Moreno 2011), but also foster protest organization—as, for example, the joint use of hashtags enables diffusion and brokerage mechanisms that, in turn, facilitate coordination between different groups and scale-shift dynamics (Tremayne 2014).

Further explorations of online interactions on Twitter shed light on their relevance for movement ideational dynamics. Looking at posts about environmental protests in Romania that were shared on both Twitter and Facebook, Dan Mercea (2018) argues that these platforms encouraged the construction of collective identities that unify diasporic communities and provide transnational support to local protests. Similarly, during the progressive mounting of the *Occupy!* movement, group brokerage mechanisms were accompanied by frame alignment processes that were played out through the careful drafting of tweets (Tremayne 2014).

Moreover, investigations of online communication networks have pointed to the complication of leadership and power dynamics within online spaces. In their study of Twitter communications during the mobilization of the Spanish Indignados, Sandra González-Bailón and her colleagues (2013) show how online exchanges that facilitated the organization of the *acampadas* were driven by “hidden influentials”: accounts created during the protests, which rose quickly to prominence and structurally supported influential nodes in the diffusion of protest messages. Along similar lines, Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2014) discuss the extent to which power dynamics that permeate collective endeavors are redefined online in terms of different “power signatures,” depending on how attention and recognition are distributed within communication networks established during mobilizations.

Finally, attention has been paid to the interconnections between online exchanges and on-site protests. In this respect, some studies stress the generative potential of digital media that activate online movements which then move to the offline space, as in the case of the *tsunami blanco* justice movement in Guatemala (Harlow 2011). More often, however, research focuses on the fluid interplay between online and offline dynamics, stressing the fact that digital media activity paves the way for on-site protests. Thus, Andreas Jungherr and Pascal Jürgens (2014) have shown that a growing social media activity determined the overnight escalation of protests against infrastructural railway projects in Stuttgart. In other cases, scholars have highlighted how digitally enabled participation helps shorten the distance between individuals and on-site protests, thus expanding the reach of collective action, fostering the convergence of heterogeneous crowds within large-scale coalitions (Fisher, Dow and Ray 2017), and narrowing the gap between rural and urban areas (Bastos, Recuero and Zago 2014). However, comparative research has shown that online and offline participation dynamics can remain disjointed even within the same collective endeavor (Bastos, Mercea and Charpentier 2015).

Networked Framing and Affective Publics

A third strand of research centers specifically on meaning-making processes that take place at the level of digital discourse. As such, it contributes to clarify the symbolic power of online communications and also the conflictual nature of digital practices of signification.

Focusing on Twitter, Sharon Meraz and Zizi Papacharissi use the term “networked framing” to describe how online discursive interactions produce “dominant frames that shape the form of news narratives [and] enable both a content-based (substantive) and sentiment-based (affective)

understanding of an issue” (2013: 143–44). Contentious networked framing is produced by a multitude of actors, who aggregate within “networked publics—that is, publics that are restructured by networked technologies and [which] are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice” (boyd 2010: 39). Much like predigital publics, networked publics allow a variety of actors to converge for many different purposes, among which civic participation and public engagement. As digital formations, though, they enable spaces and modes of interactions that are configured by digital media features.

Close inspections of Twitter discussions channeled by protest hashtags in 2011, as well as by hashtags referring to the 2015 refugee crisis, show that networked framing processes are inherently conflictual and often take the form of a battle for “hashtag stickiness or traction [that] symbolically comes to represent the ebb and flow of an issue’s interpretation longitudinally” (Meraz and Papacharissi 2013: 144). During the Egyptian protests of 2011, this battle resembled more traditional, internal “frame disputes” (Benford 1993) that were played out mainly within a large crowd of individuals mobilizing against the regime (Papacharissi 2016). In other cases, this battle consisted of adversarial dynamics in which social movement opponents redefined the meaning of protest hashtags by coupling them with other hashtags or with contents expressing opposite ideologies (Papacharissi 2016; Siapera, Boudourides, Lenis and Suiter 2018).

Contextualized within contentious dynamics and often assembled around protest hashtags or Facebook pages, networked publics and networked framing assume a strong political value and become crucial to the unfolding of collective action. Digital networked publics are indeed the preferred spaces for connective action, as they bind disorganized crowds together and turn them into “affective publics”: communities—however ephemeral—that are sustained by highly individual interpretations, personal frames, subjective experiences and, at the same time, by generalized feelings of belonging and solidarity (Papacharissi 2016). Rooted in the long-standing efforts of social movements to establish themselves as counter-publics while openly challenging institutions and parties (Fenton and Downey 2003), affective publics exert a unique “semantic agency” (Papacharissi 2016) which bears several implications. On the one hand, they exercise a pre-mediation effect in that they construct discursively and, therefore, orient protests before these happen (Gerbaudo 2016; Papacharissi 2016). On the other hand, they function as “networked counterpublics” that aggregate around Twitter hashtags and help overcoming both the under- and the misrepresentation, within mainstream narratives, of nondominant groups such as women, non-binary gender identities, and people of color. In doing so, affective publics also enable an always-on process of community building that sustains protest and participation in the long run (Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles 2020).

PULLING THREADS TOGETHER: DISCURSIVE MOBILIZATION WITHIN BROADER NETWORKED PUBLICS

In only a decade, collective actions have come to include a multiplicity of ephemeral, individual, and distributed acts of digital communication, which are performed by a variety of actors that are not necessarily affiliated with social movement organizations and their action programs (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Thus, spaces and modes of action have amplified, political collectives have taken shape more spontaneously, and a plethora of information and communication exchanges have reinvigorated organizational and symbolic processes that sustain collective endeavors.

Nonetheless, as in the study of offline protests (Yates 2015), a persistent attention to moments of visible protest compensates for such an increased recognition of both the diffused nature of contentious dynamics and the political relevance of our “digital everyday.” So far, research has indeed focused primarily either on the way organized collective actors integrate digital media into their courses of action or on the contents that are produced and circulated on movement Facebook pages or protest hashtags. Conversely, the gaze has rarely been turned toward the mobilization of movement frames and ideas within the myriad of daily conversations that develop in social media to discuss issues, facts, and events that trigger a general interest.

Entering this sort of networked publics greatly increases a movement's chances to impact rapidly on collective understandings in the space of the everyday, independently from the organization of online or offline protests. In continuity with what existing research on the nexus between digital media and collective action has shown, also the discursive mobilization of movement frames is highly personal and not monopolized by social movement organizations. Rather, it builds on distributed contributions delivered by both organized and "everyday activists" (Mansbridge and Flaster 2007) who, especially through digital communication flows, engage with a multitude of facts and events that they may perceive as unjust, problematic, or worthy of direct intervention. In reaction to these encounters, resonating movement frames are activated and then widely circulated through digital acts of "everyday talk" (Mansbridge and Flaster 2007), with the precise aim of politicizing otherwise ordinary conversations.

As they inject their tweets and Facebook posts with movement frames, social movement actors and everyday activists capitalize on diffused, collective identities while further contributing to their development. In this way, digital discursive dynamics not only foster the convergence of dispersed contributions, which enrich mobilization processes, premeditate offline protests, and expand the debate around issues tackled by movement actors (Theocharis et al. 2015). Crucially, they also build a bridge between these "affective publics" (Papacharissi 2016) and other networked digital publics formed by a variety of actors—from single citizens to journalists, political leaders, civil society organizations, and movement opponents—who share an interest in the same issues or events while endorsing different political identities and perspectives.

In this context, dynamics of competition and contention that have been outlined by the literature on networked framing processes do, in fact, become more complex, and the risk that movement interpretations are diluted, or even obscured, is magnified. More relevantly, the digital labor of signification that pivots around movement frames must balance spontaneity with the arduous task of internal coordination as well as with the need of keeping in consideration and—where necessary—opposing interpretations, views, and narratives that other participants put in circulation.

Against this background, our study begins by addressing three research questions:

- First, to what extent do movement frames affect the overall conversation that unfolds within broader networked publics? More specifically, how prominent and strategic do they become amidst all those that are mobilized by other actors interested in the same issue or event?
- Second, what meanings do movement frames channel, and what functions do they perform with respect to courses of collective action?

While placing conflict precisely at the level of digital discourse, the online mobilization of movement frames can (and often does) entwine with processes of offline mobilization. Where existing research on the nexus between digital media and collective action confirms the existence of a tight link between online and offline mobilization patterns, it often stresses the manifold contributions of online framing practices with respect to the organization and the unfolding of offline protests. Conversely, less attention has been paid to the ways in which offline mobilization and protest dynamics affect discursive mobilization patterns, possibly harshening digital adversarial dynamics and fostering a change in the meanings being channeled through movement frames. Hence, our study seeks to answer a third research question:

- How do offline mobilization processes and protests intersect with movement frames and meaning-making activities within networked publics?

CASE STUDY

On February 3, 2018, Luca Traini, a twenty-eight-year-old man from a small city in central Italy named Tolentino, jumped in his car armed with a 9-gauge Glock pistol, fifty bullets, and a 24-centimeter knife. After reaching the nearby city of Macerata, Traini fired his gun at nine people,

injuring six. They were all African citizens. His declared motive was to avenge Pamela Mastropietro, a young girl with a history of drug abuse whose dismembered body had been found only a few days earlier, in two abandoned suitcases. The investigations rapidly led to Innocent Oseghale, a Senegalese citizen with a criminal record for drug dealing. Oseghale was immediately arrested, and he was already in custody by the time Traini decided to avenge Pamela's death. After firing his gun, Traini surrendered to arrest while standing on the city's war memorial, erected in 1932 by Mussolini's fascist regime, holding an Italian flag and making the fascist Roman salute. He was soon identified as a militant of the Italian neofascist scene, but also as a candidate of the right-wing party Lega, running in the local elections in Corridonia, another small town in the province of Macerata.

Instantly condemned—at least formally—by all public authorities and by the (majority of) public opinion in both legacy and digital media, Traini's attack triggered a collective response. The day after the shooting, the social center Sisma circulated an online call to participate in a national demonstration, which was supposed to take place in Macerata. Although the local administration banned the protests, it did not stop the organizers; in fact, a week after the shooting, on February 10, several antifascist and antiracist demonstrations took place all over Italy—from Macerata to Palermo, Milan and Turin, passing through Piacenza, a city in the Emilia Romagna region where protesters engaged in violent clashes with the police.

The organization of antifascist protests across Italy speaks to the liveliness of the memory of antifascism, a key symbolic resource for collective mobilization in the country. Indeed, in stark contrast to the many attempts to relegitimize the fascist experience and ideology, Italian antifascist memories have periodically been recovered and resignified, often flanking the resurgence of protests that, over time, have adopted more or less violent repertoires (Rapini 2006). In all its brutality, the Macerata shooting triggered a new wave of protests as it provided yet another piece of evidence of a persistent colonial and fascist memory in the Italian context (Giuliani 2018), of its appeal for younger and more disadvantaged sectors (Traverso 2019), and of its infiltration in the Italian party system (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018).

However, the protests did not take place exclusively offline. As soon as the news of the shooting spread, a massive online discussion developed in which citizens, civil society organizations, trade unionists, politicians, journalists, and activists tried to make sense of the event and to deal with its evident ideological ramifications. Among the many aspects that were debated, antifascism emerged even before and, in reality, independently from Sisma's call for mobilization. Thus, the discursive mobilization of the antifascist frame constituted a form of protest in its own right: an immediate and explicit attempt to revamp collective resistance against a never dormant fascism that was evidently infiltrating into Italian society and politics. With the launch of Sisma's call for mobilization, patterns of online and offline mobilization entwined, with protests being organized on the ground and the antifascist frame continuously mobilized in the online discussion.

In what follows, we analyze the discursive mobilization of the antifascist frame in the networked public that debated the shooting on Twitter. We will see how prominent this frame became and what role it played, the meanings that were channeled through it, and how its discursive mobilization entwined with and, indeed, was affected by patterns of mobilization on the ground.

DATA AND METHODS

In order to trace the boundaries of the networked public that assembled on Twitter to discuss the shooting, we followed the conventional approach that binds the formation of these collectivities to the use of specific hashtags (Bruns and Highfield 2016; Meraz and Papacharissi 2013; Papacharissi 2016; Siapera et al. 2018). Tweets were collected via the Twitter Streaming API if they contained at least one of the following hashtags: #macerata, #traini, #lucatrainsi. In total, we collected a set of 30,000 original tweets posted from February 3, 2018 (the day of the shooting) to February 16, 2018 (a week after the offline protests) and authored by 11,366 unique users, which were retweeted 193,000 times.¹

Undoubtedly, ad hoc publics that assemble around topics are not limited to communities that take shape on particular social media platforms, let alone around specific hashtags (Bruns and Highfield 2016). Moreover, even within Twitter, anchoring publics to specific hashtags means excluding all those contributions that—albeit pertinent—were delivered without using any specific content markers (Hanna 2013). These considerations certainly hold true in our case study: the overall conversation that was triggered by the shooting did unfold across a plurality of platforms and media outlets, and many inputs were delivered without necessarily making use of selected hashtags (or of any hashtags at all). Without claiming to be a precise reproduction of the entire debate, our mapping of the networked public’s Twitter discussion of the Macerata shooting nonetheless provides a useful entry point to understand the discursive mobilization of movement frames. Indeed, the public that assembled around the three anchor hashtags engaged in an “outright and deliberately public communication” (Bruns and Highfield 2016: 65) about the shooting. It did so on a platform—Twitter—that was not only widely diffused in Italy at that specific moment (We Are Social 2018) but that also has a persistent agenda-setting impact on the country’s mainstream media (Marchetti and Ceccobelli 2015).

The overall “rhythm” (Papacharissi 2016) of the conversation we mapped is illustrated in figure 1. As our data show, tweeting was more intense during the day of the shooting, and then rapidly declined. A new peak of activity occurred on February 10, in conjunction with offline protests. In order to analyze possible interactions between networked framing processes and on-site protests, we divided the collected tweets into two different subsets: the first contains tweets published before the demonstrations (February 3–9); the second contains tweets published from the day of the protests onward (February 10–16). Despite the fact that the two subsets cover the same time span, the number of tweets and unique users that were included in each subset differ substantially (table 1). Regardless of this, during the two periods, the conversation was marked by the general features that typically characterize Twitter discussions (González-Bailón, Borge-Holthoefer and Moreno 2013): a rather low average of tweets, compared to the maximum number of tweets sent by the same user; a small proportion of users tweeting more than average; a large share of users tweeting only once.

Figure 1. The overall rhythm of the conversation on the Macerata shooting (February 3–16, 2018)

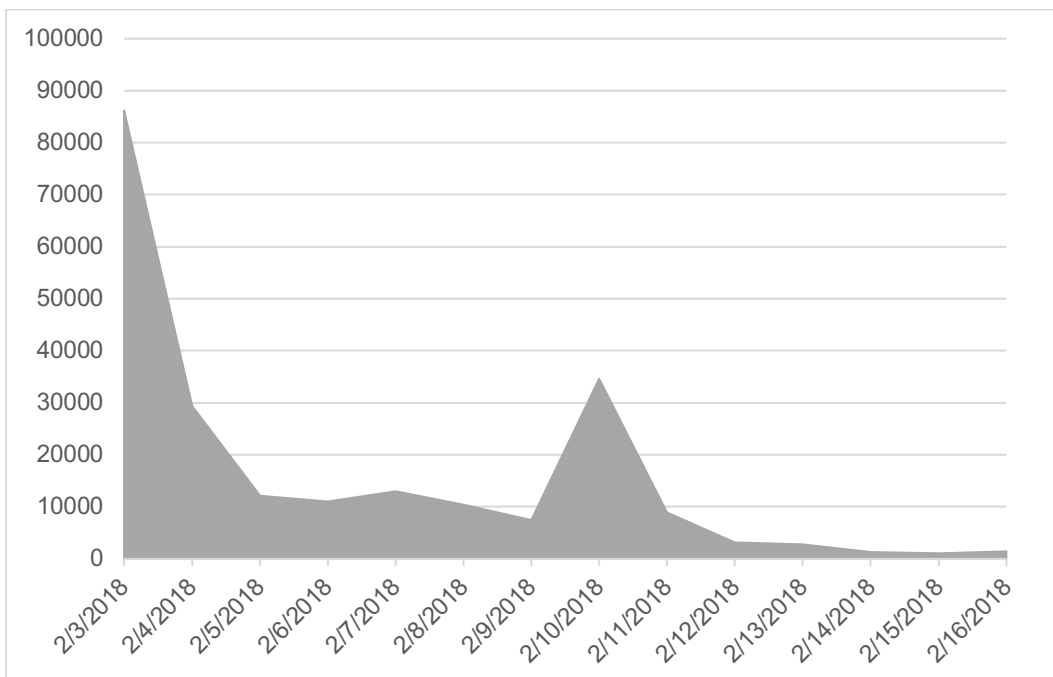


Table 1. Main Features of Total Datasets and Subsets

	<i>Overall Observation</i>	<i>First Period</i>	<i>Second Period</i>
	<i>Period</i>	<i>03/02-09/02</i>	<i>10/02-16/02</i>
Tweets collected	30.000	23.245	6.755
Unique users	11.366	9.914	3.256
Average number of tweets sent	2.64	2.34	2.97
(SD)	(5.70)	(4.60)	(3.06)
Tweets sent (min-max)	1-321	1-255	1-255
Very active users (%)	5.88%	6.11%	7.74%
Users tweeting only once	60.5%	63%	65.3%

Semantic Network Construction and Analysis

We analyzed the tweets in the two subsets using a two-step approach that combines the potentials of large-scale semantic network analysis with the granularity of qualitative content analysis. Compared to quantitative content analysis techniques, which focus on word frequency and presuppose the independence of concepts, semantic network analysis is based on the premise that “differences in prominence and meaning [...] are not due to the identity and frequency of individual concepts, but [...] to the embedding of concepts in networks” (Diesner and Carley 2011: 767). Hence, semantic networks allow us to simultaneously evaluate the presence of specific concepts and the meanings created through their associations.

Our semantic networks are formed by the hashtags that co-occur within the same tweet, which are tied together by an undirected edge.² We looked at the discursive mobilizations of the antifascist frame by examining the position of antifascism-related hashtags (that is, hashtags carrying the #antifa* prefix).³ Consistently with previous studies, we centered our attention on hashtags in view of the fact that they “create visibility for a message and also, can be the message themselves, not only marking context but also changing and adding content to the tweet” (Recuero, Zago, Bastos and Araújo 2015: 3). More specifically, we considered hashtags as key devices to enact networked framing practices within networked publics (Meraz and Papacharissi 2013; Papacharissi 2016; Siapera et al. 2018) and, following Raquel Recuero and colleagues (2015), we recognized their association within tweets as a strategy to convey specific narratives but also to mobilize specific audiences. We performed the following, threefold analysis of these two semantic networks.

The Overall System of Meaning

First, we explored network features at the macro level to infer the main characteristics of the system of meanings created by participants in the two periods. In doing so, we paid specific attention to network segmentation and centralization. Existing research connects the former to possibilities of coordination and information transmission within collective action networks, and the latter to the extent to which these processes are dominated by a handful of very well-connected nodes (Diani 2003). Within semantic networks, higher segmentation—measured particularly through the number of components in the network,⁴ the percentage of isolate hashtags,⁵ and the percentage of hashtags included in the network’s main component (Pavan 2017)—points to a variety of framing strategies enacted during the discussion. Instead, higher centralization, measured as the variance in hashtag centrality (Freeman 2002 [1979]), suggests that the conversation tends to revolve around a small group of key hashtags that represent the main frames being mobilized during the discussion.

Identification of Prominent Frames

Second, we examined the prominence of and the role played by antifascism as a frame within the conversation. To this end, we focused on the core of the two networks,⁶ identified prominent frames, and examined the presence of antifascism among these frames. Drawing on Kathleen

Carley and David Kaufer's (1993) classification of semantic network nodes, we identified prominent frames as nodes scoring higher in terms of density (i.e., connected to a greater share of other nodes), conductivity (i.e., mediating a higher number of network paths between unconnected nodes), and consensus (i.e., involved in frequent associations with other nodes). Thus, we considered as prominent frames all hashtags located within semantic network cores that rank higher in terms of degree—that is, these hashtags are connected to the largest share of other hashtags (density and conductivity)—and weighted degree, meaning that they are connected to the rest of the network by stronger associations (consensus).⁷

To assess the role played by the antifascist frame, we uncovered the thematic structure of the overall conversation by manually classifying the most central hashtags within blocks of broader topics being discussed by users. Following the approach outlined by Elena Pavan and Arianna Mainardi (2018), blocks were inductively defined starting from the evaluation of a hashtag's wording as well as of the content of the tweet in which the hashtag was inserted. We next examined the structural position occupied by the block containing antifascism-related hashtags using a group density study—a procedure that evaluates levels of cohesion within and between groups of nodes within a network (Borgatti, Everett and Johnson 2013).

Meanings Channeled Through the Frame of Antifascism

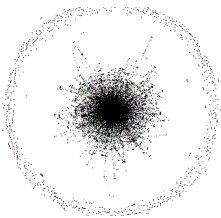
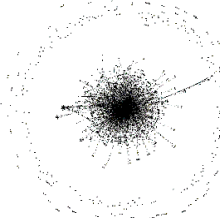
Finally, we analyzed the meanings channeled into the broader conversation through the antifascist frame. Within semantic networks, “the meaning of a concept is the network that is activated when the node of interest is triggered” (Diesner and Carley 2011: 768). To grasp this aspect, we extracted the ego network of antifascism-related hashtags in the two subsets,⁸ and we compared their structural characteristics to assess the level of embeddedness of antifascism within a close-knit meaning system. We then performed a study of cliques (Borgatti, Everett and Johnson 2013)⁹ to identify hashtags “semantically closer” to antifascism-related ones insofar as they contribute, more often than others, to cohesive meaning subgroups that are formed in the conversation.

We next went back to our initial dataset and extracted 120 tweets containing antifascism-related hashtags and semantically close hashtags. We concentrated on tweets that received a greater number of retweets as we acknowledge the power of this “mode of repetition” (Meraz and Papacharissi 2013: 155). We read these tweets several times and analyzed them qualitatively in a twofold way. On the one hand, leaning on the overall evaluation of the message's wording and tone (Papacharissi 2016), we assessed whether the tweet channeled a positive or a negative characterization of antifascism. We interpreted positive characterizations in terms of support for the antifascist frame and negative ones as attempts to delegitimize it. On the other hand, we identified the main reasons for mobilizing the antifascist frame. Following Robert Benford and David Snow (2000), we distinguished between a diagnostic function (i.e., identification of a problem), a prognostic function (i.e., identification of a proposed solution), and a motivational function (i.e., identification of a rationale for collective action). As framing tasks tend to overlap, we assigned each tweet with the main function it performed. Intersecting the characterization and the function of selected tweets, we elaborated more in detail on broader patterns of discursive mobilization of the antifascist frame within the broader conversation.

FINDINGS

Soon after the news of the shooting spread, Twitter users began to engage in an online conversation through which they contributed to make sense of the event. Yet, this meaning-making process evolved dynamically over time. As we mentioned, the conversation on Twitter did gradually resize: by the time the protests occurred, users were less eager to intervene in the discussion. The diminished number of tweets reflects the shrinking of the semantic network, whose size halved during the second period of discussion (table 2). In spite of this, the network centralization scores of the second period remain rather similar to those of the first, respectively, 0.18 and 0.16, signaling that in both moments users tended to rely on a limited set of hashtags when talking about the circumstances.

Table 2. Overall Network Features in the Two Periods.

	Period 1 (February 3–9, 2018)	Period 2 (February 10–16, 2018)
		
Nodes	4394	2251
Edges	18.814	10.160
Min-Max Edge Weight	1-1510	1-1559
Average Tie Strength (SD)	8.31 (33.71)	10.71 (45.59)
Centralization**	0.18	0.16
Density	0.002	0.004
Components	726	251
Isolates	13.65%	8.04%
Average Degree*	1.34	3.02
Inclusivity of the main component	79.47%	84.45%

Note: *= normalized scores; **= computed on main component

Antifascism as a Prominent Frame

At the core of the two semantic networks there is a set of hashtags that were frequently used in the discussion and were also connected to a broader share of other hashtags. These represent the prominent frames mobilized during the discussion. As shown in table 3, the frame of antifascism already rose to prominence in the aftermath of the shooting, although its impor-

Table 3. Prominent Frames in the Two Semantic Networks.

Period 1 (February 3–9, 2018)					
<i>Hashtag</i>	<i>Degree</i>	<i>Weighted degree</i>	<i>Hashtag</i>	<i>Degree</i>	<i>Weighted degree</i>
salvini	61	15884	10febbraio	22	2085
pamela	49	6925	renzi	19	1916
fascismo	37	4720	nigeriano	14	1865
lega	37	4585	fascisti	20	1668
pd	28	3894	antifascista	18	1599
saviano	13	3788	anpi	16	1444
pamelamastropietro	30	3739	erdogan	14	1401
casapound	19	3665	razzista	15	1376
minniti	26	3517	5febbraio	15	1341
fascista	26	2818	gentiloni	13	1278
boldrini	14	2724	antifascisti	16	1159
razzismo	25	2713	sparatoria	13	1129
migranti	19	2635	piacenza	13	923
berlusconi	15	2256			

Period 2 (February 10–16, 2018)					
<i>Hashtag</i>	<i>Degree</i>	<i>Weighted degree</i>	<i>Hashtag</i>	<i>Degree</i>	<i>Weighted degree</i>
antifascista	42	10823	fascismo	19	3414
piacenza	30	6386	razzismo	15	3041
foibe	23	6350	milano	12	2881
pamela	31	5210	antifascismo	18	2370
antifa	26	5201	antifascisti	12	2117
10febbraio	20	3892	pd	15	1593
sanremo2018	12	3706	pamelamastropietro	15	1164

Note: Sorted for weighted degree. For period 1 mean degree = 5,51 and SD = 7,16; mean weighted degree = 630,97; for period 2 mean degree = 5,81 and SD = 6,27; mean weighted degree = 943,60.

Table 4. Thematic Blocks in the Two Online Conversation Periods

Block	Label	Period 1 (February 3–9, 2018)		Period 2 (February 10–16, 2018)	
		Number of hashtags	Hashtags	Number of hashtags	Hashtags
1	Italian politics	10	#berlusconi #boldrini #casapound #erdogan #gentiloni #lega #minniti #pd #renzi #salvini	1	#pd
2	The shooting and its ideological drivers	8	#fascismo #fascista #fascisti #migranti #razzismo #razzista #saviano #sparatoria	3	#fascismo #razzismo #sanremo2018
3	The murder	3	#nigeriano #pamela #pamelamastropietro	2	#pamela #pamelamastropietro
4	Antifascism	2	#antifascista #antifascisti	4	#antifa #antifascisti #antifascismo #antifascista
5	Time and place of protests	4	#10febbraio #5febbraio #anpi #piacenza	4	#10febbraio #foibe #milano #piacenza

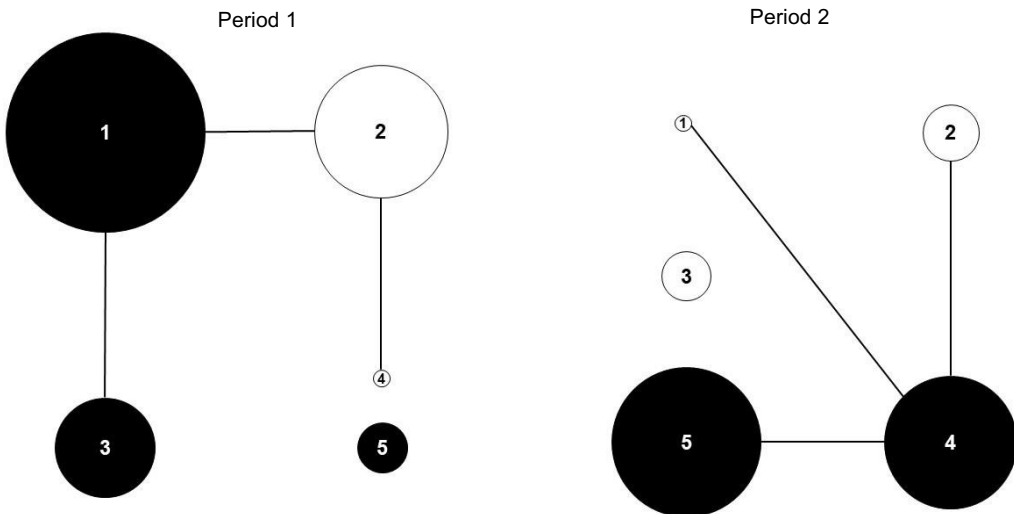
tance was more limited compared to that of the Italian political scenario (e.g. #salvini, #lega, #pd), the murder of Pamela Mastropietro, and the connections between the shooting and racist and fascist ideologies (i.e. #fascismo, #razzismo). Conversely, with protests taking place on the ground, antifascism became the most prominent frame in the conversation. Hashtags referring to antifascism and standing at the core of the network not only multiplied but were also more frequently employed in conjunction with other hashtags. This implies that users intervened more often in the conversation by mobilizing this frame and, more importantly, that they made the overall conversation revolve around it.

A clearer picture emerges in the thematic structure underpinning the conversation. The qualitative classification of prominent frames led us to identify, for both periods, the same five blocks that, in turn, correspond to the broader topics discussed by users (table 4). The first block contains hashtags that connect the Macerata incident to the Italian political situation; the second pertains to the shooting and its ideological drivers, namely fascism and racism; the third block points back to the declared motive of the shooting (Pamela Mastropietro's murder); the fourth and fifth groups gather, respectively, antifascism-related hashtags and hashtags referring to the protests.

As shown in figure 2, which represents strong associations between the five blocks,¹⁰ in the aftermath of the shooting, the frame of antifascism enjoyed only limited prominence and played a rather peripheral role within the conversation, which tended to revolve around Italian politics (block 1). With the general elections approaching (March 4, 2018), users discussed the shooting often calling into question actors from both the left-wing government, led by Paolo Gentiloni (#pd, #minniti, #boldrini, #renzi, #gentiloni), and right-wing actors and forces: Matteo Salvini and his party (#salvini, #lega), Casa Pound (#casapound), and Silvio Berlusconi (#berlusconi). A high cohesion in this block implies frequent associations between the hashtags contained in it, which in turn point to a tendency to frame the shooting as a matter of internal politics.

The key role played by the topic of internal politics is further confirmed by the link between block 1 and block 2, on the ideological drivers of the shooting, and block 3, on the murder of Pamela Mastropietro. In this latter, the systematic association between hashtags that refer to the victim using her name (#pamela or #pamelamastropietro) but to her killer as “the Nigerian” (#nigeriano) suggests that the murder has often gained a racial connotation. The association between block 3 and block 1 bridges this racial element to the Italian political discussion, suggesting a reading of the murder as a matter of internal politics likely connected to migration issues. As for block 2, the various ways in which fascism and racism are brought to the fore of

Figure 2. Image Matrix of Networks among Thematic Blocks in the Two Periods.



Note: Block 1 = Italian politics; Block 2 = the shooting and its ideological determinants; Block 3 = the murder; Block 4 = antifascism; Block 5 = time and place of protests. Cutoff value based on network density ($\Delta_1 = 0.33$; $\Delta_2 = 0.53$). Circle size proportional to the weighted degree within blocks. Black circles = internally cohesive blocks.

the conversation suggests that participants used the shooting as an entry point to discuss the persistence of these ideologies in the country. However, a lack of internal cohesion in this block and its link with block 1 do indicate a preference to comment on fascism and racism in connection with the current internal political scenario, rather than to consider them as two complementary facets of the shooting.

In this first phase, block 4 on antifascism only connects to block 2 on the shooting and its ideological drivers. Together with the disconnection from block 5 on the protest events, this element points to a preference to discursively mobilize antifascism in order to discuss the shooting and its ideological ramifications, rather than to use it as a watchword to organize protests on the ground.

The situation appears to be quite different in the second period, when block 4 comes to unify and coordinate the whole discussion. While the first three blocks do not disappear, their prominence and connectedness are sensibly resized, and the topics they represent are all discussed in connection with antifascism (figure 2). More significantly, antifascism also becomes the frame to discuss the protest events taking place all over the country. Connections between blocks 4 and 5 are underpinned by the association between antifascism-related hashtags and hashtags referring to both the spaces and the time of the protests. With regard to the former, the sustained association between antifascism and the cities of #piacenza and #milano points to a polarized evaluation of the protests themselves: on the one hand, as something violent and negative, as shown by the clashes in Piacenza; on the other, as peaceful and highly participated, as in the case of Milan. When it comes to the latter, the natural emphasis on the day in which the protests occurred (#10febbraio) parallels a systematic insistence on one of the most controversial pages of the Resistance: the Foibe mass killings (#foibe) perpetrated by Yugoslav Partisans during World War II in the regions of Friuli Venezia Giulia, Dalmatia, and Istria (Pirjevec 2009). As these killings affected an undefined number of victims, including civilians, they have often been remembered, particularly by right-wing governments, in an attempt to delegitimize antifascism—as shown in 2004 by the second Berlusconi government, which instituted a national Foibe Memorial Day to be held every year on February 10. The temporal coincidence between the protests and the Memorial Day adds a second dimension to the polarization of the debate on antifascism, which is mobilized in a tension between the present and the past.

The Changing Meanings of Antifascism

While becoming more prominent and strategic during the second period of conversation, antifascism also acquired a different meaning. Table 5 illustrates the main features of the networks that formed around antifascism-related hashtags. As attention shifted toward the protests in Macerata and elsewhere, the size of the #antifa* ego network doubled, thus confirming that the range of frames connected to that of antifascism broadened. Additionally, decreasing density values—indicating the extent to which hashtags that co-occurred with #antifa* were also used together—and increasing brokerage scores—indicating the extent to which #antifa* served to link unconnected hashtags—suggest that, in the second period, antifascism came to represent a symbolic glue holding together a plurality of frames that users mobilized separately.

Looking at cliques within #antifa* ego networks allows us to explore more in depth how these structural modifications translated at the level of content. The increased number of cliques in the second ego network certainly follows from its larger size, but it also points to a greater embeddedness of the frame of antifascism within the discussion. Soon after the shooting, the prominence of the Italian political situation and of the ideological driving force behind Traini’s attack led to more regular discussions of antifascism in connection with fascism (#fascis*), migration (#migranti), key political actors in Italy (#salvini, #lega), and antiracism, the other watchword of the demonstrations (#antirazzis*) (table 6).

In the second period, while #fascis* is the hashtag that remained semantically closest to #antifa*, antifascism was discussed more closely in connection with hashtags mentioning the protests (particularly the violent one in #piacenza and the widely attended one in #milano), the memory of the Foibe killings (#foibe), the murder of Pamela Mastropietro (#pamela), the social centers that promoted the demonstrations (#centrisociali), racism (#razzismo), and left-wing government actors (#PD and #boldrini).

While these results do suggest a semantic enrichment of the antifascist frame in the second period, a qualitative analysis of the most retweeted tweets containing #antifa* and related hashtags reveals a more complex scenario.

Table 5. #Antifa* Ego Network in the Two periods of Conversation.

	<u>Period 1 (February 3-9, 2018)</u>	<u>Period 2 (February 10-16, 2019)</u>
<i>Nodes</i>	26	53
<i>Ties</i>	48	107
<i>Density</i>	0.15	0.08
<i>Brokerage</i>	0.85	0.92
<i>Cliques</i>	15	35
<i>Clique overlap span</i>	0-9	0-9
<i>Closer node(s)</i>	#fascis*	#fascis*, #piacenza

Table 6. Hashtags in the #Antifa* Ego Networks with a Clique Overlap ≥ 3 .

Period 1 (February 3–9, 2018)		Period 2 (February 10–16, 2018)	
<i>Hashtags</i>	<i>Clique Overlap with #antifa*</i>	<i>Hashtags</i>	<i>Clique Overlap with #antifa*</i>
#fascis*	9	#fascis*	9
#migranti	4	#piacenza	9
#salvini	4	#foibe	7
#lega	4	#pamela*	6
#antirazzis*	3	#razzismo	4
		#PD	4
		#milano	3
		#centrisociali	3
		#boldrini	3

Online Meanings of Antifascism Immediately After the Shooting

Although shortly after the shooting antifascism occupied a peripheral role in the conversation, the majority of tweets containing #antifa* were authored by users who identified with its tradition, values, and legacy. The frame of antifascism was thus mobilized with a positive characterization, and it transversally performed a diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational function.

When used in a diagnostic fashion, the frame served to identify the persistence of fascism in Italy and to mark it as a core problem. The frequent association between #antifa* and #fascis* depicted fascism not as something distant in the past but, rather, as endemic to the current Italian political scenario, from the left to the right. This aspect is well demonstrated by a tweet by Giorgio Cremaschi, a renowned trade unionist and spokesperson for the left-wing coalition Potere al Popolo:

Prohibiting the constitutional #antifascist demonstration in #Macerata is an authentic act of #fascism for which the #PD and #Minniti are responsible. Shame on them and on their supporters. (08/02/2018; retweets = 98).¹¹

The Democratic Party (an offspring of the former Italian Communist Party), its ministers (like Marco Minniti, the then Interior Minister) as well as the Macerata local administration are presented here as betraying not only their antifascist origins but, more radically, the country’s antifascist roots—sealed in the Italian constitution “born from the Resistance.”

At the same time, the frame of antifascism—in line with its tradition of resistance against persistent attempts to further institutionalize fascism within the Italian system—was also mobilized in order to offer a solution. Users thus reiterated the need for a necessary and daily commitment to resist the infiltration of fascism especially on the right side of the political spectrum. This prognostic function of the frame was activated especially through the combined use of #antifa* and hashtags that refer to the Lega and its leader, Matteo Salvini. Particularly illustrative in this respect is the tweet authored by Beppe Caccia, a civil servant and a long-term activist in the field of migration and citizens’ rights:

The author of the attempted killing of #migrants, which occurred this morning in #Macerata, is Luca Traini, the one in the bottom-right corner of the election poster of the #Lega led by #Salvini. #nocomment: only always #antifascist and #antiracist cc@Wu_Ming_Foundt. (03/02/2018; retweets = 82).¹²

Attached to the text were the pictures of all the Lega’s candidates for the local elections in Corridonia, including that of Luca Traini. Opening institutional spaces to individuals like Traini was seen as the ultimate form of legitimization of fascism and is denounced in this tweet as a form of connivance between the right-wing party and Italy’s neofascist scene.

In this first period, the antifascist frame was furthermore employed in a motivational way and as a watchword for a necessary reaction to the shooting, which was clearly identified as fascist and racist in other tweets. This function was activated by the mobilization of antifascism in connection with the second frame of the protests, namely antiracism (*#antirazz**), thus reproducing the conceptual bridge outlined in the call for mobilization that the social center Sisma launched soon after the shooting. The systematic association between the two hashtags was particularly persistent in tweets through which associations and groups endorsed the demonstrations that were to be held on February 10. This is the case of the media activist group Global Project, which documented the violent intervention of the police during an “antifascist walk” organized in Padua, a city in the North of Italy, on February 8. The resistance of participants both to police violence and to the provocations of neofascist activists who intercepted the walk served as a trigger to boost the call for participation in the “*#antifascist* and *#antiracist* national demonstration.”¹³ Similarly, the call launched by Sisma was amplified through the tweets of groups highly active in the fight against racial discrimination, such as Associazione Lunaria,¹⁴ or the Group for Human Solidarity.¹⁵

Online Meanings of Antifascism During the Protests

With demonstrations taking place in Macerata and elsewhere, antifascism not only became the main frame of the protest, overshadowing the antiracist one; more relevantly, it became the real center of attention and the main topic under discussion. However, the prevailing tone of tweets changed completely, and delegitimization attempts prevailed over endorsements.

Attempts at delegitimization were made particularly via the hijacking of the frame by movement opponents, who employed it in a diagnostic way and turned antifascism into the core of the problem. This is particularly evident in the tweets that combined *#antifa** with hashtags recalling the Foibe killings and the violent protest in Piacenza. The most retweeted message in the second period was authored by Matteo Salvini. Referring to a group of demonstrators in Macerata who allegedly exalted the Foibe killings, Salvini wrote:

*#Macerata, #antiracist #antifascist demonstration, pro-migration and pacifist: several protesters sing “How beautiful the Foibe are from Trieste downwards.” Turin, antifascist demonstration: rocks, bottles and homemade bombs against the police. Shame on you, worms. (10/02/2018; retweets = 669).*¹⁶

Other highly retweeted messages consisted in attacks against demonstrators from other public figures that are ascribable to the Italian right-wing area, as in the case of Luca Marsella, a city council member for the far-right organization Casa Pound in a city near Rome. Marsella tweeted:

*Remember the #antifascist demonstration in #Piacenza and the slogans about the #foibe in #Macerata because these are the #socialcenters. When these people mess with us and get slapped you should thank us instead of blaming us. (11/02/2018; retweets = 176).*¹⁷

Commenting on the protests in Piacenza, other tweets focused on the clashes between demonstrators and police. They emphasized the “fascism of antifascists,”¹⁸ spoke of the “funeral of antifascism,”¹⁹ and identified the “resurgence of communism” as the country’s real problem—as opposed to the “alleged return of fascism.”²⁰ Thus, the association between antifascism, the Foibe killings, and Piacenza became the primary discursive device to divert the attention from the problems raised by Traini’s attack.

In some cases, the overt opposition between antifascism and fascism—which, in the first period, had underpinned positive mechanisms of identification—was also used in the second phase, to expose the alleged hypocritical nature of the antifascist protests. For example, the association between *#antifa** and *#fascis** characterized the protests as being “out of history,” as the conservative European deputy Raffaele Fitto claimed, “There is no risk of a comeback of *#fascism* in Italy but, rather, a problem of *#security* linked to the problem of *#migration*.”²¹

This picture did not significantly change when we looked at tweets combining antifascism with other semantically close frames, like that of antiracism. In these tweets, users spoke of “parlor antiracists,” who “like #racism against Italians a lot.”²² Similarly, the mentions of Pamela Mastropietro also supported this delegitimization attempt. The most retweeted message containing both #antifa* and #pamela* claimed that, had Mussolini still been alive, Pamela would never have died and Traini would be a free man. At the same time, the tweet portrayed antifascists as “accomplices of the Nigerian murderers,”²³ or, adding an antisemitic tone, as “servants of Soros and his New World Order.”²⁴

In contrast to this massive hijacking, a much feebler flow of tweets continued to channel a positive characterization of the antifascist frame and to motivate antifascist mobilizations on the ground. These supportive statements frequently associated #antifa* with #fascis* but also with #10febbraio, giving an online testimony of peaceful protests in order to counter the tones of the tweets that focused on Piacenza. In this respect, the most retweeted message with a positive take on antifascism was authored by a local section of the ANPI, the National Association of Italian Partisans, so as to amplify the voice of Lidia Menapace, a former partisan and Senator, who—while marching in Macerata—claimed the following: “Participating is inevitable. . . . I am disgusted by those who put #fascism and #antifascism on the same level.”²⁵

Our analysis also pointed to a more contextual task that the antifascist frame performed in the second period, which we could hardly fit in one of the three categories we derived from literature. Indeed, some users overturned the hijacked frame, seeking to dismantle the delegitimizing devices that movement opponents employed in the conversation. This occurred particularly by reversing the association between #antifa* and #foibe. For example, one tweet argued that the Foibe are a “prohibition mechanism aimed at blocking any attempt at a critical analysis of the ‘homeland history’ and any social antagonism in the present.”²⁶ By linking to a blog post authored by Wu Ming, a collective of writers particularly active in the Italian social movement scene, the tweet offered a more articulated explanation of the Foibe as a discursive device completely transcending any historical reality and becoming—in the words of the historian of myths, Furio Jesi (2011: 24)—a “language of ideas without words.” The joint combination of the argument made in the tweet and in the blog post aimed at re-establishing the legitimacy of antifascism by disconnecting the conversation from a historical evaluation, diverting attention from the alleged “tribute” paid to the Foibe killings, and uncovering the strategic function of using the Foibe to make all protesters look like assassins. Another example of this restorative strategy can be found in a tweet from the left-wing political party, Possibile, which denounced the “racist fake news of the #cannibals from Nigeria in #Macerata.”²⁷ It linked to a longer post published in the party’s blog, dismantling the unfounded stereotype of “Nigerians as cannibals” that had widely circulated after the discovery of Pamela Mastropietro’s dismembered body.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this article we have aimed to contribute to current reflections on the nexus between social media and collective action. We have done so by examining the forms and the effects of discursive mobilization of movement frames within heterogeneous networked publics that assemble online to discuss issues, facts, and events that trigger public interest. Starting from a close investigation of the Twitter conversation that sparked after the brutal shooting of a group of African citizens in Italy at the hands of a neofascist militant, we have examined how the frame of antifascism “battled” with other frames, how it managed to affect the overall discussion, and how the meanings channeled through it changed in connection with mobilization processes on the ground.

As an immediate reaction to the shooting, the discursive mobilization of the frame of antifascism succeeded in affecting the overall conversation. Crucially, this result was achieved independently from any planned protest activity as it occurred before the social center Sisma issued its call for action and because it did not pivot around any ad-hoc shaped protest hashtag. Rather, the diffused circulation of the #antifa* hashtag capitalized on a shared collective identity

and sensibility that the antifascist movement has nurtured over time; while the networking and framing potentials inbuilt within hashtags offered a unique leverage to reactivate and put this identity back into play.

Our results confirm and, at the same time, better specify current reflections on the added value of digital discursive dynamics for contemporary collective endeavors. Even when detached from organized protest activities and carried out in the space of everyday networked publics, acts of contentious communication do indeed hold the potential to expand the spaces as much as the modalities of collective actions. A diffused and personalized adoption of the antifascist frame shortly after the shooting amplified the action terrain of the antifascist movement beyond its rootedness in offline actions, enriched its action repertoire with practices of hashtag activism, and allowed a whole set of individual and collective actors to engage with it in flexible ways.

Moreover, our findings suggest that the widespread and loose nature of frame mobilization within networked publics also affects social movements' collective identities, both reinforcing and reshaping them. Injected with the #antifa* hashtags, tweets by antifascist organizations, activists, but also concerned citizens contributed to politicize the overall conversation on the shooting along the lines of a deep-rooted fight against a never-dormant fascism. However, networked framing dynamics pivoting around the #antifa* hashtag did not merely strengthen an already existing collective identity. They also contributed to tune the relevance and the meaning of this movement to the specificities of the current Italian political scenario. Indeed, while rising to prominence in overt opposition to persistent fascism and racism in the country, the antifascist frame was often associated with that of antiracism. Such a collective resignification worked as a proactive push, recontextualizing the heritage of the antifascist tradition in the present and enhancing it with explicit reference to racialized inequalities and discrimination, viewed as new terrains of struggle—one that has, in fact, never been explicitly embraced by antifascist protest waves in the past.

Our study also reveals the peculiar challenges that characterize the mobilization of movement frames within networked publics as a form of online activism. While existing studies show that networked framing processes revolving around protest hashtags are not devoid of conflict, “battles over issues” that take place within broader and more heterogeneous publics seem to entail even higher levels of antagonism. Within networked publics, frame competition dynamics are magnified, as is the risk that movement frames remain invisible. Admittedly, the activation of the antifascist frame shortly after the shooting caused no more than minor divergences, rather than a radical *detournement* of the discussion. Even if antifascism-related hashtags soon rose to prominence, the whole discussion remained centered mostly on frames referring to internal political matters, and to migration and security concerns. In conjunction with protests on the ground, instead, the discursive mobilization of the antifascist frame expressed its full potential and resulted in a real overturn of the conversation, with the shooting ceasing to be a matter of internal politics and the antifascist resistance to its ideological ramifications emerging as the leading frame. Interestingly, the enhanced prominence of the antifascist frame was coupled also with a more strategic role, as it became a symbolic glue holding together all other aspects raised and discussed by users.

Our results also confirm the existence of a tight link between digital discursive dynamics and offline protests. In particular, our findings reassert the premediation effect that studies on affective publics and their networking practices have highlighted. At the same time, though, the ancillary position that antifascism-related hashtags occupy within the conversational structure during the first period also seems to suggest that, given its extremely loose and unconcerted nature, the mobilization of movement frames within networked publics on its own does not hold the same potential to expand the terms of the debate as more organized and protest-centered digital dynamics do. But while existing studies remain focused on offline protests and assess the effects that digital discourse has on them, our results clarify, instead, that offline protests can profoundly affect online dynamics. In the case we have analyzed here, they created an even more hostile environment for the circulation of movement frames and ideals.

The propulsive thrust generated by the offline antifascist protests did not lead to the resolution of the initial battle over the issue of the shooting but, rather, shifted the focus of this battle and made antifascism itself into the real bone of contention. Thus, at the peak of the protests, two radically opposed patterns of discursive mobilization made of antifascism the dominant frame in the debate. On the one hand, users identifying with the antifascist tradition and endorsing the marches continued the positive mobilization of the frame, with a motivational function. On the other, a wide-echoing pattern of discursive countermobilization performed by a variety of movement opponents hijacked antifascism-related hashtags and used them in a diagnostic way, so as to divert the attention from the ideological implications of the shooting and turning antifascism into the core of the problem. In the hands of movement opponents, the same hashtag associations that underpinned collective identification processes were co-opted in order to expose the contradictions that some users attributed to the antifascist struggle. At the same time, a strategic recovery of the past and, particularly, of the Foibe killings paved the way to reiterate—with emphasis and gravity—the violent and hypocritical nature of the antifascist ideology. To some extent, antifascist activists and supporters attempted to resist and react to these discursive attacks by seeking to dismantle delegitimizing narratives. However, in a conversation that had reduced the broader matter of the shooting and its ideological ramifications to a commentary of a few violent protests, these positive mobilization patterns did not reveal to be particularly effective in counteracting the voices of some very popular opponents who, amplified by a plethora of common users, ended up resonating louder within the networked public.

In a context in which digital media enable the active participation of a multitude of actors, the same platform features can be employed to serve multiple and often adversarial aims. As our case has demonstrated, in the course of the same discussion and within the same public, the discursive mobilization of movement frames can become an act of collective resistance or, conversely, a powerful tool to delegitimize instances of collective action.

NOTES

¹ We obtained the retweets of every original tweet that we collected via the GET statuses/lookup endpoint of the REST API, approximately three weeks after the protests occurred on February 10. This endpoint allows complementing a list of tweet IDs by a set of updated information (e.g., retweets or favorite counts) thus bypassing operationalizations of engagement based on computations performed solely on the set of retrieved objects.

² Our semantic networks were weighted according to the number of tweets and retweets in which any combination of hashtags was found. When constructing our networks, we dropped the three anchor hashtags #macerata, #lucatrains, and #traini. As these co-occurred with the large majority of other hashtags used in the discussion, they translated into extensively connected nodes that biased the overall network structure.

³ Like any other concept, antifascism can be expressed in many forms, including through the composite use of different stems and expressions. Whether or not these multiple forms and expressions require that a certain interpretation be associated with antifascism, hashtags bearing the prefix #antifa* clearly refer to antifascism.

⁴ A network component is defined as a maximal connected subgraph, where all nodes are connected—and therefore reachable—either directly or indirectly (Wasserman and Faust 1994: 109).

⁵ An isolate node is a node with no connection to the network (Wasserman and Faust 1994: 128).

⁶ The core is the area of the semantic network that is delimited by edges with a weight that exceeds a conventional threshold L_V equal to the sum of the average edge weight plus one standard deviation (Pavan, Tonelli and Moretti 2017).

⁷ Given that our semantic networks are undirected, a node’s degree—that is, the number of ties in which a node is involved (Freeman 2002 [1979])—can be considered as a proxy for both density and conductivity as defined by Carley and Kaufner. Differently from their original approach, which sees consensus as the property of a node derived from edge weight, we opted for weighted degree to maintain a twofold focus on the structural position of the node and on edge weight. Thus, the main frames in our networks are hashtags with a degree $d(n_i) \geq (\bar{d} + 1SD)$, with \bar{d} equal to the mean node degree; and with a $d(n_i) \geq \bar{d}_w$ with \bar{d}_w equal to mean weighted degree.

⁸ An ego network is a network that centers on a specific actor (ego). It involves the nodes it connects to (alters) and the ties among all these actors (Borgatti, Everett and Johnson 2013). To reduce the variability of linguistic forms that flow from Italian, we reduced all hashtags in these ego networks to stems and merged the original edges weights. For example, we reduced #antifascista, #antifascismo, #antifa, and #antifascisti to the same node, namely #antifa*, and connected it to the rest of the network via the merged set of original edges.

⁹ A clique is a “maximal complete subgraph of three or more nodes. It consists of a subset of nodes all of which are adjacent to each other and there are no other nodes that are also adjacent to all of the members of a clique” (Wasserman and Faust 1994: 254).

¹⁰ Connections are retained in the image matrix if the density of exchanges between blocks is higher than the density of the network core.

¹¹ <https://twitter.com/twitter/status/961516512019402752>

¹² <https://twitter.com/twitter/status/959781450739539968>

¹³ <https://twitter.com/twitter/status/961378103149977600>

¹⁴ <https://twitter.com/twitter/status/960513385795383296>

¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/twitter/status/961960351955914753>

¹⁶ <https://twitter.com/twitter/status/962390820363079681>

¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/twitter/status/962599142878072832>

¹⁸ <https://twitter.com/twitter/status/962397319948832769>

¹⁹ <https://twitter.com/twitter/status/962667064853921792>

²⁰ <https://twitter.com/twitter/status/962349840389890048>

²¹ <https://twitter.com/twitter/status/963375583894876162>

²² <https://twitter.com/twitter/status/962398195656642565>

²³ <https://twitter.com/twitter/status/962565591642058752>

²⁴ <https://twitter.com/twitter/status/964424148905676801>

²⁵ <https://twitter.com/twitter/status/962254412935770112>

²⁶ <https://twitter.com/twitter/status/962815971042963457>

²⁷ <https://twitter.com/twitter/status/963709336894701569>

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