

Digital Activism, Physical Activism

Malta's Front Harsien ODZ

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Abstract: This article analyzes the interaction between the digital (online) and physical (offline) activism of Front Harsien ODZ, a Maltese environmental movement organization. It looks into how Front activists perceive these forms of activism and verifies how important each form is to the organization. Consequently, the research presented herein is operationalized through interviews with Front activists and through participant observation from an insider's point of view. This article concludes that activists within Front Harsien ODZ feel that they are part of a social network. The organization's recruitment, mobilization and activism techniques are at once digital and physical. Most Front activists were already part of preexisting social networks before joining the Front, and the new Front network made good use of Malta's political opportunity structures, including the Zonqor controversy; Malta's small size; and the country's vibrant media landscape.

Keywords: activism, environmental movement, Malta, mobilization, net activism, social movements, social networks

On 1 May 2015, Malta's Prime Minister Joseph Muscat announced his government's support of a new project—the American University of Malta. This project would entail the construction of a private university managed by Jordanian investors on the Outside Development Zone (ODZ), a protected piece of land in Zonqor, Marsascula. A few days later, activists organized a public meeting to oppose the proposed development, and consequently, a new citizens' movement—Front Harsien ODZ (Front of the Protection of ODZ)—was born. Its creation was then announced during a press conference in front of the Parliament of Malta.



The Front subsequently held several meetings and press conferences on this and other issues related to development on ODZ land. On 20 June 2015, it organized Malta's biggest environmental protest with around three thousand to four thousand participants in Valletta, the capital city. The buildup and follow-up to these physical events were carried out through digital media, in terms of both internal communication and the propagation of the Front's goals and statements. The protest was advertised on Facebook, in the press, and on national television. The social networks of Front activists were crucial for communicating and setting up meetings with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and political parties.

Opposition toward the development on ODZ land in Zonqor was widespread. Following the protest, Front Harsien ODZ participated in meetings of Malta's parliamentary environment committee and held other press conferences on the Zonqor issue. Subsequently, Muscat announced that the developed footprint of ODZ land at Zonqor would be substantially reduced and that the other part of the private university would be developed on a brownfield site in another locality, Bormla. Front Harsien ODZ noted its influence on the prime minister's decision, yet it insisted that ODZ land should not be developed. In December 2015, the parliament approved the transfer of public land in Zonqor and Bormla to the developers. The proposed development at Zonqor still requires processing through planning procedures in order to obtain the required development permits from Malta's Planning Authority.

In this article, I analyze the relationship between the digital (online) and physical (offline) activism of the Front Harsien ODZ. Accordingly, I look at how Front activists perceive online activism and physical activism, and I attempt to examine the importance of internet tools for the organization. In this article, I aim to answer two main research questions. First, do Front activists form part of a social network and, if so, how? Second, how do online and offline activism influence the Front's organization and mobilization? To answer these two research questions, I employ two principal methods. Specifically, I use interviews with Front activists and participant observation from an insider's point of view. I draw on sociological literature on information communication technologies and movements, social networks, online mobilization, media performances, modular repertoires, media ecologies, media strategies, and networked social movements to analyze the role of digital media in environmental mobilization.

Front Harsien ODZ in Context

Front Harsien ODZ was set up in 2015 in reaction to the Maltese government's announcement of the development of a private university at Zonqor in Malta (Briguglio 2016a). Zonqor comprises ecologically sensitive land in a coastal area situated in Malta's ODZ. A few days after Muscat announced the American University of Malta project, environmental activists organized a public meeting, which led to the creation of the Front. This new organization announced that its goals were purely environmental and that it welcomed support from all sectors of society. Its core activists comprised local councilors from the Labour, Nationalist, and Green parties; left, green, and environmental activists; and some newcomers. It was also endorsed by a wide range of organizations (Briguglio 2016a; Front Harsien ODZ 2018a).

The Front announced a national protest—#SaveZonqor—in Malta's capital city, Valletta, which was preceded by a buildup of press conferences, social media announcements, a commercial on state television, and internal and external meetings. The protest was held on 20 June 2015, and it turned out to be Malta's biggest environmental protest and one of Malta's biggest protests with around three thousand to four thousand participants (Briguglio 2016a). Such crowds are usually only attracted when one of Malta's two major parties or two major trade unions organize demonstrations.

Indeed, it should be noted that Malta is dominated by two major political parties—Labour and Nationalist—which have enjoyed exclusive parliamentary representation between 1962 and 2017. Their dominance can be seen in all aspects of life, and various civil society organizations and campaigns have involved the direct or indirect participation of both. These include Malta's EU accession campaign between 1999 and 2003, the divorce referendum in 2011, and the hunting referendum in 2015 (Baldacchino and Wain 2013; Briguglio 2015b, 2016b). The two major political parties have also been dubbed “total institutions” (Baldacchino 2002), albeit now situated within multiple levels of governance (Baldacchino 2014). Hence, the participation of major political parties in environmental campaigns has been identified as a key factor for the success (or failure) of such campaigns (Briguglio 2013).

On 20 August 2015, Muscat announced that the developed footprint of ODZ land at Zonqor would be reduced by 80 percent to eighteen thousand square meters, and that the other part of the private university would be developed in a former dockyard area previously occupied by warehouses and buildings constructed during Hospitaller rule and

under British rule. The Front was therefore partially victorious in its campaign to protect ODZ land in Zonqor, even though it said that it still disagreed with the government's plans to have development on ODZ land (Briguglio 2013). In a way, the Front confirmed that the environmentalist tradition in Malta, which dates back to the 1960s (Boissevain and Gatt 2011; Briguglio 2015a), had now become an important element in Maltese politics. For instance, just a few weeks before the Front was established, Malta had held a referendum on a controversial environmental issue—bird hunting in the spring. The pro-hunting lobby won by a very narrow majority, despite being opposed by only one small, nonparliamentary political party, the Green Party (Briguglio 2015b; Veríssimo and Campbell 2015).

Front Harsien ODZ also confirmed the importance of digital media (Grech 2012; Martin 2016) alongside traditional media and physical protest in the mobilization of support. Yet, the Front's successful mobilization also benefited from the fact that the organization included representatives from different political parties and was publicly supported by the leadership and the media wing of the opposition party in the parliament. Subsequent to the #SaveZonqor protest, Front Harsien ODZ became an established player in Malta's environmental politics, regularly issuing press releases and participating in public consultations on environmental matters (Front Harsien ODZ 2018a). It captures regular press coverage, and its official Facebook page has close to five thousand followers (Front Harsien ODZ 2018b).

Research Methods

As mentioned earlier, this article aims to answer two main research questions. First, do Front activists form part of a social network and, if so, how? Second, how do online and offline activism influence the Front's organization and mobilization? The main research method comprised interviews with Front activists. I am also a Front activist. Therefore, the analysis of such interviews also relies on and is aided by introspective participant observation from an insider's point of view. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews with ten leading activists from Front Harsien ODZ. An email was sent to the Front's internal activist Google Group, and once I reached a good number of volunteers, I proceeded with the interviews. Albeit small, the sample contains a high number of core members. Indeed, very frequently Front meetings had less than ten attendees (though some meetings had more). The

interviews were held a few months after the Front's #SaveZonqor demonstration in informal settings such as cafés, canteens, my university office, and activist meeting places.

I myself am a leading activist in this organization, and therefore I included my own introspective views in the course of the interviews and their analysis. Hence, in this research I occupy the positions of both social movement activist and sociologist. It should be acknowledged that there are arguments for and against such an introspective perspective in qualitative research. As an activist, I have privileged access to knowledge from fellow activists within social networks that would otherwise be harder to obtain. On the other side, the disadvantages of such introspective methods include possible conflicts of interests or issues with the interpretation of the responses. For example, respondents could decide to keep certain information confidential when replying to my questions. They could give very different responses to other interviewers. In addition, my role as a Front activist may lead me to overstate the organization's role in Maltese society.

In response to such dilemmas, I would reply as follows. First, my views as activist and researcher do not necessarily tally with those of the respondents, especially because we come from different political and NGO backgrounds. Moreover, my role as Front activist has enabled me to be informed about the experiences of the organization's activists, while my role as sociologist has enabled me to be reflexive in the interpretation of their responses (see Shaw 2013: 94). As it is the case with feminist standpoint methodology, my experiences should be valued in this research rather than seen as an obstacle, provided that I am responsible, accountable, and reflexive (Shaw 2013: 95). My role as an insider is ever more pronounced, given that Malta is a very small state characterized by a high degree of familiarity and public knowledge. In this regard, Ronald Sultana and Godfrey Baldacchino (1994: 16–17) state that in Malta

nearly every social relationship serves a variety of interests, and many roles are played by relatively few individuals. The same persons are thus brought into contact over and over again in various activities, because each operates and meets the other on the basis of different roles held in the context of different role-sets; decisions and choices are therefore influenced by the relationships which individuals establish and cultivate with others in a repertoire of diverse social settings. Impersonal, non-person specific, standards of efficiency, performance and integrity cannot therefore fail to come into play, modified by the myriad relationships brining the people concerned together . . .

And, given the absence of confidentiality and anonymity, inhabitants learn to manage intimacy: they get along, whether they like it or not, knowing that they are likely to renew and reinforce relationships with the same persons in a variety of settings over the course of a whole life span.

Jeremy Boissevain and Caroline Gatt (2011: 137) add that in Malta one finds a “woven mess of social relations that underpins most environmentalist activism,” in which many activists occupy multiple roles. They occupy these roles in civil society, government, business, and academia.

I thus considered my own plurality of roles to be of benefit to this research. Respondents trusted me and could be open in their responses. I could verify the honesty of their claims and could interpret their responses through my sociological imagination. Our affinity through social networks may thus generate validity in this research. Importantly, I was also accountable to my respondents, as they could verify whether my questions were related to their experience and whether I was being fair and ethical. In addition, should I misquote them, I could immediately be identified by the respondents. The relationship between interviewer and interviewee is mutually regulated within a small-island context.

There was another major methodological ramification of Malta’s small size and intricate web of multiple relationships. The physical and digital dimensions of activism are even more strongly connected with each other in Malta, as online and offline communication are never too distant from each other. Activists might email each other in the morning, have a Front meeting in the afternoon, and follow this with a coffee in the evening. This would presumably be different from communication among activists who are separated by huge physical distances. In the latter case, online interaction may be more predominant.

Data and Analysis

Do Front Activists Form Part of a Social Network and, If So, How?

“I don’t feel like I’m a cog in a big machine.”

— Front activist

There were various commonalities and differences among the activists who were interviewed. Seven activists were over thirty-five years old, while four were younger, three of whom were under twenty-five years

old. Seven activists were male, and three were female and described themselves as “other.” Almost all activists had a high level of education. Five had tertiary qualifications, and three of these had PhDs. Two others were students, and all others held professional jobs in areas such as education, journalism, information technology (IT), and NGOs. When Front activists were asked questions regarding their sense of belonging to their organization, they expressed a sense of shared identity with other persons committed to the cause. One activist emphasized that within the organization “a small number of people, with different motivations, are motivated. It is quite a feat that after recent environmental failures, the environmental movement has something supported by the media, by the people, a three-thousand-person protest.”

Another activist added that “Malta has never seen anything like it. It is a much more inclusive movement than anything we’ve ever done,” though he added some critical observations, saying that “there are certain nuances which we are not tackling: part of the problem is that we are not capitalizing on each and every individual’s resources.”

This was also evident in the fact that various activists had multiple and overlapping allegiances to different organizations. Indeed, practically all activists were involved in a movement, organization, political party, or campaign before joining Front Harsien ODZ. Four activists were or are involved in the leftist NGO Moviment Graffiti, three in the Green Party, and three in the Front against the Golf Course, the latter putting on a successful five-year campaign between 1999 and 2004. Other memberships included Friends of the Earth, major political parties, and local councils. In this regard, it is important to note that “links founded on multiple allegiances are also important as they create channels of communication between movements and their environment” (Della Porta and Diani 2006: 126). As one activist put it, “different forces . . . are brought together under one umbrella.” Another activist added that “it is an interesting hybrid . . . people don’t have to go back to NGOs [for approval].”

In this regard, it is important to note that activists were very often connected through multiple memberships in more than one NGO and that some worked together in previous campaigns going back to the late 1990s (Boissevain and Gatt 2011; Briguglio 1998, 2013; Galea 2011) and sometimes in political parties. NGOs such as Moviment Graffiti, which announced the first public meeting that subsequently led to the setting of the Front, were used to working with the Green Party and often denounced the two major parties in Malta, Labour and Nationalist. Sometimes, this led to environmental coalitions involving a wide range

of NGOs (Briguglio 2013). However, a main difference in the Front Harsien ODZ was that it operated under a steady Labour government, whereas most environmental activism had previously been carried out under Nationalist administrations, which were in power between 1987 and 1996 and between 1998 and 2013. Some other Front activists were newcomers, and others hailed from the Nationalist and Labour parties, respectively, most notable among which were two local councilors from Marsascala, where Zonqor is situated.

When asked about their ideological orientations, seven activists responded “left,” which was the most common answer, and four activists responded “Green.” There were also some other replies, including those that emphasized lifestyle rather than political ideology. Most respondents also felt that they shared strong ideological affinities with other activists in the Front. When asked about the aims of the Front itself, most activists referred to protection of the ODZ, followed by the environment in general. Some individual respondents also referred to the party’s anticapitalist position and stance against political party financing, “as otherwise it is useless fighting on individual cases.” On the other hand, the Front Harsien ODZ (2018a) officially describes itself as follows: “Front Harsien ODZ is a citizens’ movement which welcomes support from all sectors of society. The goals of this Front are purely environmental.” It is interesting to note that various Front respondents had common reactions concerning people whom they would not expect to join the organization. Seven respondents referred to developers, executives, and Sandro Chetcuti, a media-savvy developer who cofounded the Malta Developers Association. Three respondents referred to fascists and nonenvironmentalists, while two referred to “party satellites.” On the other hand, some activists noted that parties and NGOs could benefit from each other, as “they are using us, we are using them . . . after all political parties are part of the democratic process, too.”

Front activists were also asked about how they joined the organization. Two respondents said that they were co-organizers who came up with the original idea to combat the proposed development at Zonqor. Six others said that they were contacted either by organizers or through their respective NGOs. Indeed, the first public meeting on the Zonqor issue, which was organized by Moviment Graffiti, attracted around eighty people, including some whom, in the words of an activist, “I didn’t imagine I would work with.”

Some of these activists—six out of eleven respondents—learned about the Front through Facebook. Nine respondents felt that the internet was important for their respective memberships, even though all respondents

knew other activists in the Front. In the words of one activist: “Without the internet I wouldn’t have joined the front. . . . I can’t remember what we used to do before the internet existed.” It is important to point out that one important aspect of digital media is that it can function as a social network. In the case of civil society activism, digital media may enable individuals to feel part of a collective will, which is committed to a specific cause. This will, or identity, may be defined in terms of a “we” in opposition to a “them” (Gamson 1992; Mouffe 2005). Such a social network need not be reduced to digital media or physical social links. Indeed, the two may overlap and create different forms of social capital such as trust and participation (Della Porta and Diani 2006: 129), as well as negotiation and decision making (Melucci 1995: 45). They may also replicate each other. In this regard, Javier Sajuria and colleagues (2015) refer to the replication of offline social characteristics such as homophily and the exclusion of nonmembers.

These results also support the idea that important determinants of such social networks may include a preexisting commitment to specific causes as well as multiple ties and allegiances. The latter determinant may include personal contacts, membership in specific social movement organizations, and shared and overlapping memberships among different individuals (Della Porta and Diani 2006: 118–129). Melucci considers identity in such social networks as being open-ended, dynamic, and diverse, and believes that the term should rather be referred to as “identization” (1996: 77). Hence, once again, the conceptualization of collective action through social networks should be seen as being overdetermined by different factors. In other words, collective action emerges in “interconnected and overlapping texts and conversations that unfold in conversation sites with varying spatialities and temporalities in which people come together to coordinate and act collectively” (Kavada 2015: 876).

How Do Online and Offline Activism Influence the Front’s Organization and Mobilization?

Front activists were asked about the organization’s activism and how they relate to it. Results show that activism was at once online and offline, thus forming a hybrid which was immersed in the “hybrid world” of the contemporary network society (Castells 2012 232). All Front activists use Facebook, and most also use Twitter. The Front itself has its own Facebook community page and website, though Facebook is used the most: the Front has a community of almost five thousand

followers. Internally, Front members communicate through a Google Groups email community and occasional face-to-face meetings.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are considered to be very important by Front activists. Through the interviews, it turned out that they facilitate immediate communication, access, social outreach, and various operations. In this regard, it is important to note that Malta has the second highest use of social media in the European Union, where more than 80 percent of the population aged between 16 and 74 are active on social media (Caruana 2017). At the same time, activists were also wary of perceived drawbacks such as a false sense of engagement and a false sense of progress. As one activist put it,

I believe that protests and the greatest amount of change can happen when people take it out in the streets . . . Change happens when you have concerted action. Change happens when you have politicians who can see people resisting . . . I think one of the major drawbacks of ICT is that it has fueled a sense of self-illusion . . . people believing they are contributing to dramatic change when they are simply online conversationalists.

In relation to such findings, sociological literature on ICTs and social movements emphasizes various potential impacts of the former on the latter's outcomes. As early as 1996, Alberto Melucci posed new questions on the impact of ICTs on "processes of mobilization, organizational forms, models of leadership, ideologies and forms of communications" (1996: 4).

ICTs are said to bring about better coordination and more social access, and extend the outreach of movement communications. This can result in increased connectivity between movements, better mobilization for movement campaigns, and increased political leverage. At the same time, however, such impacts are not guaranteed and can sometimes have adverse outcomes such as information overload and the reproduction of hierarchies among movement activists (Flesher Fominaya 2014: 127–135; 2016). It is important to note that ICTs such as digital media are being considered to be embedded within social networks, thus resulting in the hybridization of online and offline practices, including those of social movements (Castells 2012; Pavan 2014). Thus, digital media "facilitate a constructive crossing between different organizational practices, some of which are established offline (e.g., coordination meetings in headquarters), others online (e.g., the supply of donations through PayPal), and still others cross-dimensionally (e.g., when a demonstration is organized via Facebook events)" (Pavan 2014: 446). Within this new social

context, digital media cannot simply be reduced to an instrument used by activists; it must be seen as a contributor to the contemporary context of cultural production and consumption. Digital media itself is therefore a site of “political demonstration, negotiation and activism” (Shah 2013: 666). This is not to say that social analysis should resort to technological determinism. Digital media is overdetermined (Althusser 1977; Laclau and Mouffe 1985) within historical, social, and cultural contexts, and within concrete political situations and struggles (Bakardjieva 2015: 989), which, for example in Malta’s case, include the strong presence of political parties and the country’s small size. As Cristina Flesher Fominaya puts it, “the best approaches recognize the complexity of new media ecologies, in which online and offline media forms interact, and in which social movement actors engage in crucial face-to-face interactions with one another, as well as virtually” (2014: 147).

Flesher Fominaya (2014: 127–135) adds that ICTs need to be used strategically, as they do not necessarily guarantee success. Indeed, respondents in this study expressed mixed views on whether the internet was important for the recruitment of activists. One respondent said: “Some people just subscribe and put likes on Facebook. I don’t consider them. One out of every two hundred people decides to do something, but it’s minimal.” But another respondent said that “many of our activists are not the type to do door-to-door campaigning,” thus acknowledging the important role of recruitment through the internet. In other words:

It has been totally instrumental and absolutely necessary. Without the internet, we wouldn’t have been able to market, promote or frame what we are doing to the general public . . . we managed to create a sense of identity and belonging amongst people who had been pissed off for years to actually feel a part of something, to feel a part of a movement, and I think this has made history in itself.

Another respondent said that “it is as if the protest is already being held before it is actually held.” ICTs compress time and space, and the protest in the streets is not a singular event, but part of a repertoire, an ongoing campaign. Respondents agreed that the communicating potential and sense of immediacy brought about through ICTs is important for the Front’s identity. Thus, “what we are saying is being presented precisely, and people can comment. . . . It is a call which reverberates more, especially when politics is now more sensitive to the media.”

Front activists therefore tend to confirm the cyberoptimistic view that social media can enable social movements to create their own media, for example through online videos, memes, and slogans. These

important additions to the “tactical toolbox of the modular social movement repertoire” may also include “5 minute activism” (Johnston 2014: 142) such as online petitions, email campaigns, and shared campaign updates. Social media can therefore be seen as a stage on which politics may be performed (Hendriks et al. 2016: 1120) and where counter-narratives to official stories may be produced (Flesher Fominaya 2014: 123). Potentially, this may capture the attention of the mainstream media. Social media forms part of the broader media landscape, and its presence within it is key to exerting influence. Indeed, the media may be considered being “indirect brokers in influencing politicians and the public” (Johnston 2014: 95).

In this regard, social movements may resort to particular performances to capture media coverage and analysis. Sometimes, these may need to be dramatic and to take place in specific locations. For example, protests in cities may win more media coverage than in small towns: despite Malta’s small size, the choice of the capital city, Valletta, for the Front’s protest proved to be an excellent tactical choice. Besides, there may be multiple media portrayals and analyses of social movement activism (Johnston 2014: 95–96). These may include coverage by different media forms, such as the mass media and alternative media, coverage affected by media bias, and coverage affected by the relative resources and power of different social movements and their adversaries (Flesher Fominaya 2014: 119–120).

Respondents also confirmed that Front Harsien ODZ engages within both social media and the mass media, and respondents consider the latter important in terms of coverage, legitimacy, and giving credibility to the Front. Hence, online mobilization is an important factor for collective action. Indeed, results from this research support Alison Dahl Crossley’s view that Facebook “is a unique infrastructure for mobilization and recruitment” (2015: 263). Together with other social media tools such as Twitter, Facebook can be used to promote ideas and events, to communicate with activists and supporters, to recruit new activists, to build identities, to collect funds, and to mobilize the public (Hestres 2014, 2015; Mercea 2012). Such social media tools also enhance reflexivity within social movements and can thus be dubbed “technologies of self-mediation” (Cammaerts 2015: 98), where online crowds come together (Gerbaudo 2015: 920) and perform acts of digital solidarity (Stalder 2013).

The immediacy of such social media tools may facilitate interaction both within online communication and between online and offline forms

of communication. Thus, one “does not need to be a card-carrying and meeting-attending party or association member in order to act on the public stage” (Bakardjieva 2015: 985). Therefore, the impact of the internet in general and social media in particular is that they may reinforce existing activist networks by facilitating communication, and they may also expand networks by reaching out to new and potential participants in collective action (van Laer 2010: 349–350). However, whether the latter results in long-term commitment is not clear (361). At the same time, however, online activism may have its shortcomings. Jeroen van Laer (2010: 347), for example, suggests that online communication networks may end up perpetuating inequalities among activists, especially since “superactivists” might be more predisposed to participate in different forms of activism. Online activism and communication may also impact the dynamics of face-to-face groups such as their meetings (Flesher Fominaya 2016). Moreover, diverse perspectives may become more embedded in their respective positions rather than engage with others (Hendriks et al. 2016: 1120–1121).

This is not to say that offline networks apart from activist networks are not important. Indeed, some activists consider offline networks as having an important social function and as being more important than online activist networks. In a small island society like Malta, such networks may be especially important because of geographical proximity, shared community spaces, and common biographical experiences. One activist said that his seventy-eight-year-old father participated in the #SaveZonqor protest through offline networks. Some activists emphasized that many of them knew each other before forming the Front. They were not only active together, but they also shared common experiences like hanging out in certain bars and at certain cultural events. Face-to-face interaction is a key element of the Front’s social makeup. Some activists added that offline networks can be used better—for example, to recruit local residents—and that online networks can become heavy-handed if used too much.

Therefore, all respondents consider both online and offline networks to be important, especially when used together. On the one hand, “the Front wouldn’t exist without Facebook. If it existed, nobody would know of it.” On the other hand, “it is important to inform, but you need to get down on the streets . . . the Front managed to do both.” One activist summed things up neatly by concluding that “one of the nice things in the Front is that it permits different levels of activism; there is no military discipline.”

Discussion

This article shows that activists within Front Harsien ODZ feel like they are part of a social network. The Front was originally formed by activists who were united in their opposition to the development of the American University of Malta on ODZ land in Zonqor. But the organization quickly grew into something broader, dealing with ODZ development in general and incorporating activists from different political party and social movement backgrounds. The plurality of activist backgrounds enabled the Front to network and reach out to various social, political, and media circles.

Despite their diverse backgrounds, Front activists shared commonalities. These included their high levels of education, and their leftward/greenward orientation on the Maltese political compass. Activists shared a sense of collective identity with other activists in the organization, and this was further pronounced by the fact that many had multiple and overlapping allegiances to different organizations and campaigns. Some activists interviewed in this research were co-organizers of the first public meeting, which eventually led to the creation of the Front in subsequent meetings. But most activists were recruited after being contacted either by organizers or by their respective NGOs. Facebook also played a strong role in the recruitment of activists. Most importantly, all activists knew other activists before the Front existed.

Preexisting social networks and preexisting commitments to other causes played a very important role in the formation of Front Harsien ODZ, as was the case with other social movement organizations (Della Porta and Diani 2006: 118–129). Given Malta's small size, physical social links were very strong, but digital media usage overlapped with them in the development of participation and the formation of trust. It would therefore not be wise to reduce social network analysis to either digital or physical activism (129). In this regard, activists felt part of both a social network and an environmentalist category, thus falling in line with Charles Tilly's (1978: 63) classic notion of cat-net (a network within a category), which assumes two decisive factors in the mobilization of protest participants, namely, network ties and the presence of a sense of belonging to a certain category of people. In the process, a "we" identity was formed in opposition to a "them" identity (e.g., big developers) (Gamson 1992; Mouffe 2005).

With regard to the influence of online and offline activism on the Front's organization and mobilization, this article shows that Front Harsien ODZ is at once immersed in both digital and physical activism.

The fact that Front activists feel that they are part of a social network and the fact of Malta's small size are two very important factors embedded in the modular repertoire of Front Harsien ODZ. Immediacy is present not only online but also offline, given the physical proximity of activists and their preexisting social networks. This opportunity structure might not be otherwise available in larger societies, where physical activism and networking may be hindered by greater physical distances among activists and prospective participants in public events, which may include protesters but also include journalists and meeting attendees. Hence, Front activists interact with each other and with possible new activists both through face-to-face meetings and through "technologies of self-mediation" (Cammaerts 2015: 98) such as email and Facebook.

This hybrid context is also evident in the Front's interaction with the media. As discussed earlier, Front Harsien ODZ and its activists make regular use of social media tools such as Facebook for outreach, propagation, and recruitment, but the organization is also visible in the mainstream printed and online Maltese media through its press statements and its events. For instance, when Front Harsien ODZ decided to organize the #SaveZonqor protest, it did so in a face-to-face internal meeting that was followed up by press conferences, email communications with civil society, face-to-face interaction with prospective participants, face-to-face meetings with other organizations including the parliamentary opposition party, social media announcements and ads, a television commercial, participation in radio and television programs, and other similar means of getting the word out. In turn, these digital and physical forms of mobilization had their own snowball effects. For example, individual NGOs supporting the protest informed their members, and the parliamentary opposition Nationalist Party announced its participation and rallied for the protest through its own media apparatus, which included a daily newspaper, online news, a television station, and a radio station. Hence, the "tactical toolbox of the modular social movement repertoire" (Johnston 2014: 142) varied from instant activism such as the sharing of Front communication on social media, to participation in the #SaveZonqor protest, to recruitment within Front Harsien ODZ itself. Indeed, the Front's activism was very much in line with Flesher Fominaya's (2014: 147) definition of "new media ecologies."

This research also falls within the theoretical infrastructure for the conceptualization of networked social movements and their relation to power. The latter is neither determined by structural power, nor simply

a product of agency. Social movements are reflective agents of change, and the media may be a source of power if movement networks are influential. Manuel Castells's theory of power is very useful in this regard. Referring to movements such as the Indignados Movement in Spain, he conceptualizes power as being embedded in the institutions of society, particularly the state, but also as being subject to counterpower, which is "the capacity of social actors to challenge the power embedded in the institutions of society for the purpose of claiming representation for their own values and interests" (2012: 5). He then goes on to argue that "all institutional systems reflect power relations, as well as limits to these power relations as negotiated by an endless historical process of conflict and bargaining." Social movements' occupation of internet social networks and urban space can create "instant communities of transformative practice" (11) and the collective construction of meanings (Castells 2011). Such practice is at once local and global, as it starts in specific contexts but is connected on the internet, and social movements are inspired by others along the way (Castells 2012: 222).

Despite the influence of ICTs on the Front's activism, one could question whether this could be compared with instances of offline mobilization. The analysis of three earlier case studies shows different outcomes. The Front against Hilton in the late 1990s, which did not rely on the internet and made use of nonviolent direct action as well as public outreach, alliances, and mainstream media coverage, did not stop the development from taking place but led to a legislative change which ensured more transparency (Briguglio 1998). The Front against the Golf Course—which, at the turn of the twenty-first century, relied on Web 1.0 together with public outreach, alliances, and mainstream media coverage—was successful in stopping the development of the course (Galea 2011). On the other hand, a broad coalition against Malta's land rationalization process made use of Web 1.0 and mainstream media coverage, but was unsuccessful in stopping the planning process (Briguglio 2012). The Front against the Golf Course differed from the other two movements in that it enjoyed greater active support from the then Labour opposition and from some voices within the then Nationalist government. Its strategy was also very inclusive of different frames and voices across the political and societal spectrum (Galea 2011).

Conclusion

This article shows how Front Harsien ODZ is characterized by both online and offline activism. Its social networks, recruitment and mobilization strategies, and activism are at once digital and physical. Most Front activists were already part of preexisting social networks before joining the Front, and the new Front network made good use of Malta's political opportunity structures, including the Zonqor controversy, Malta's small size, and a vibrant media landscape.

Within this context, the activists interviewed in this study are examples of reflective agents of change who have been capable of creating "instant communities of transformative practice" (Castells 2012: 11) and the collective construction of meanings (Castells 2011). This is not to say that they will necessarily have the same impact on future protests, or that all similar digital/physical activism will be successful. Indeed, there are many examples of unsuccessful activism and mobilization which involve ICTs (Earl and Kimport 2011; Tufekci 2014). Whether the Front's massive mobilization for its #SaveZonqor protest was successful in terms of outcomes is in itself subject to debate. Its activism has indeed "saved" Zonqor from 80 percent of the proposed footprint of the development. However, as it now stands, the remaining 20 percent will still be developed.

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