Matrix Activism:
Media, Neoliberalism, and Social Action in Italy

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Using the case of the Rome-based media group ZaLab, this article examines the articulations that shape and define the multiple dynamics of connected activism in contemporary societies. The first section engages the existing literature on convergence, commodity activism, and connectivity as theoretical frameworks of my analysis of ZaLab. The second section provides some context on the Italian mainstream and activist mediascapes, both of which shape ZaLab's media practices. The last section examines a few specific examples of ZaLab's productions and the activist campaign created to promote them. I conclude with some reflections on the nature of contemporary media practices as part of what I call "matrix activism."

Keywords: activism, Italy, documentary, social change, new media, matrix

On August 30, 2008, former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi signed a Treaty on Friendship, Partnership, and Cooperation between the two countries that was meant to normalize Italian-Libyan relations and settle the cultural and economic disputes resulting from the Italian colonial experience in Libya.[1] Part of the agreement required Italy to pay $5 billion over the course of 25 years as restitution for its military occupation between 1912 and 1947. In exchange, Libya committed to monitoring illegal migratory flows to Italy and taking charge of those migrants who were pushed back by the Italian Coast Guard. Although the "push-back policy" resulting from this treaty decreased the number of illegal migrants who succeeded in crossing the Mediterranean, the fate of (mostly sub-Saharan African) refugees in Libyan prisons was abominable and violated basic human rights (Manrique, Barna, Hakala, Rey, & Claros, 2014).

The impact of Italy's push-back politics is the focus of Andrea Segre and Stefano Liberti's documentary *Closed Sea* (2012) and the human rights campaign "No More Push-Backs" that was created to petition the cancellation of the Italian-Libyan agreement on immigration while also promoting the newly released film throughout Italy. On June 20, 2012—World Refugee Day—Segre, Liberti, and their media organization ZaLab coordinated more than 100 concurrent public screenings of *Closed Sea* in more than

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[1] The original Italian full text of the treaty can be found at
http://www.camera.it/_dati/leg16/lavori/schedela/apritelecomando_wai.asp?codice=16pdl0017390

60 Italian cities and towns to draw attention to the plight of rejected refugees. This campaign, which was supported by numerous human rights associations, such as Amnesty International, also included a screening of the same documentary on the satellite channel Cielo. Through the use of social media (Facebook and Twitter), more traditional media, such as film and television, and community gatherings, this campaign succeeded in bringing public attention to Italy's push-back policies and redirecting the political conversation around immigration and refugee rights. The convergence of different modes of participation and representation is central to contemporary forms of local and transnational activism, which often rely on the complexity and multimodality of what Van Dijck (2013) calls the "culture of connectivity" to promote their vision of social change. In the case of *Closed Sea* and the ZaLab productions I discuss in this article, the activist drive of their videos is always clearly embedded in the commercial praxis of film marketing and distribution. ZaLab's work epitomizes the ambiguous and double-edged nature of participatory media practices today and highlights the convergence of commercialism and consumption, on the one hand, and social activism and citizens' empowerment, on the other hand. Using the case of this Rome-based media group, this article examines the articulations that shape and define the multiple dynamics of connected activism in contemporary societies. This research is based on a series of interviews with one of ZaLab's founders, Andrea Segre, and ZaLab's long-time collaborator Stefano Liberti, conducted between 2012 and 2014.[2] My argument is built on a critical analysis of ZaLab's documentary films, website, and social media presence. The first section engages the existing literature on convergence, commodity activism, and connectivity as theoretical frameworks of my analysis of ZaLab. The second section provides some context on the Italian mainstream and activist mediascapes, both of which shape ZaLab's media practices. The last section examines a few specific examples of ZaLab's productions and the activist campaign created to promote them. In the conclusion, I reflect on the nature of contemporary media practices as part of what I call "matrix activism."

Convergence, Connectivity, and Activism

In his groundbreaking book *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins (2006) defines *convergence* as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (p. 2). Focusing on numerous examples of the circulation of media content across different systems and national borders, Jenkins' reading of *convergence* elaborates on the central role of consumers in contemporary media ecosystems. "In the world of media convergence" Jenkins says, "every important story gets told, every brand gets sold, and every consumer gets courted across multiple media platforms" (ibid., p. 3). In this phrasing, the commercial and commodified nature of media suggests an almost democratizing potential, since, as Jenkins argues, all relevant stories will be revealed and each consumer will become central in the (re)telling of such narratives.

While Jenkins and other theorists of convergence (Bolter & Grusin, 2000; Manovich, 2002) acknowledge the crucial and unique role played by the corporate media culture, their analysis often overlooks the clearly uneven relationship between commercial media and citizens' creative engagement

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[2] Andrea Segre is an Italian filmmaker and documentarian. Stefano Liberti is a journalist and film director. Both are human rights activists engaged in migration and minority issues.

with new technologies. The economic and sociopolitical frameworks of new acts of creativity are just as central in analyses of convergence cultures, particularly in a context like Italy, whose media culture is still, to this day, dominated by a bureaucratized monopolistic system. Media theorists such as Fuchs, Andrejevic, and Lovink have cautioned us against a celebratory endorsement of social media as participatory tools that would bypass power inequities to create new social formations. On the one hand, scholars have pointed to the "corporate colonization" of social media, which has turned digital platforms into multimedia marketing and surveillance tools (Andrejevic, 2010; Fuchs, 2014). On the other hand, the ambivalent nature of the "social" in social media has led to critical inquiries into the community-building mechanisms of new media. Lovink, for example, argued that

> the social organizes the self as a techno-cultural entity, a special effect of software, which is rendered addictive by real-time feedback features. . . . The social is precisely what it pretends to be: a calculated opportunity in times of distributed communication. (2012, para. 23)

As Banet-Weiser (2011) states in her study on convergence and street art,

> This is not to say that the role of corporate or commercial culture is ignored within theories of convergence culture, but it is to say that in many accounts, the economic role that commercial culture plays in convergence is downplayed, so that the relationship between creative practices and commercial culture is often considered as a cooperation rather than a kind of competition in which some creative practices are obscured at the expense of others. (p. 644)

Thus, in this article, I will use the ideas behind "convergence culture," but I situate this concept within the specific social, cultural, and political transitions that characterize modes of activism in Italy today. In this sense, the form of convergence I will discuss is located at the intersection of commercial culture and activist practices, and digital and public spaces.

Mediated practices of social change in Italy have traditionally relied on the collective nature of local and translocal movements (Downing, 2001; Mattoni, 2008). In the 21st century, the collective (and activist) organization of social change has been partially shaped by and shifted to a mode of digital connectivity that ultimately (re)casts the meaning of "change" and the analytical interstices between commercial and activist media. Today's culture of connectivity, as Van Dijck (2011) reminds us, is "a culture where perspectives, expressions, experiences and productions are increasingly mediated by social media sites" (p. 2). The act of mediation here is not a simple enabling of conversations and creative exercises; indeed, sites such as Facebook or Twitter are not mere technical repositories of information. Rather, the specific characteristics of different media platforms inevitably shape sociality and collectivity and, ultimately, re-design the contours of social change (Van Dijck, 2013). Using Gibson's (1979) concept of affordances, Hutchby (2001) argues that technologies "possess different affordances" (p. 447) that mold the meanings and the uses these technologies can have. The analytical shift proposed by Hutchby includes a necessary account of the "material substratum" that frames the individual and collective use of media: "When people interact through, around or with technologies, it is necessary for them to find ways

of managing the constraints on their possibilities for action that emerge from those artefacts' affordances" (ibid., p. 450). In this sense, media practices for social change in Italy must be contextualized both within the specific platforms that shape the production and distribution of their messages as well as within the commodified nature of such media interventions.

Furthermore, as Postill (2010) elaborates, technological affordances should always be understood in conjunction with the affordances of "social formations" (groups, families, communities, etc.), whose own actions are, in turn, reflected in and reflexive of the media tools they adopt.[3] In my analysis of ZaLab's practices, I am particularly interested in the dialectic between the social and technical affordances of this media group and their engagement with a form of activism that is clearly connected to neoliberal practices of consumption as valid modes of protest and resistance. The sale of DVDs and the promotion of nonactivist work, such as Segre's feature film *The First Snowfall* (2013), are widely accepted juxtapositions to links of civic distribution and social engagement. The ambiguity that connects consumer-based practices to (re)newed modes of social action promises to reveal interesting insights into the *modus operandi* of contemporary forms of activism in Italy.

One of the earliest analyses of oppositional cultures in capitalist societies is Hall and Jefferson's (1976) edited volume *Resistance through Rituals* In their analysis of youth subcultures in postwar Britain, the contributors to this volume reflect on the complex relationship between hegemonic cultures and movements of opposition and resistance. In particular, the crises in "dominant society" are understood in light of the "new cultural-ideological ethos" embedded in "modern capitalism," which inevitably give rise to different forms of resistance and opposition:

> Movements which seem "oppositional" may be merely survivals, traces from the past. Some may be merely "alternative"—the new lying alongside the old. Marcuse observed that 'the simple elementary negation, the antithesis . . . the immediate denial' often leaves "the traditional culture, the illusionist art, unmastered" (Marcuse, 1969, p. 47). Others are truly "emergent"; though they, too, must struggle against redefinition by the dominant culture and incorporation. (2006, p. 52)

While the sociopolitical context of Hall and Jefferson's study is definitely distinct from today's mediated activism in Italy, their suggestions about various forms of social engagement are still effective to unpack the complex layers of activism in the 21st century. Are ZaLab's media practices "alternative" tools of social change, which fundamentally rely on a tested connection with the "old" traditional culture? Or, could they instead be seen as "emergent" practices of resistance with the potential to (re)define the relationship between center(s) and margin(s) in the Italian mediated public sphere? And, as I mentioned earlier, how does the convergence of social action and consumption rearticulate the purpose of resistance in Italy today?

The popularity of consumer activism is at the center of *Commodity Activism,* Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser's (2012) work on forms of cultural resistance in neoliberal times. This anthology presents a

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[3] See http://johnpostill.com/2010/06/04/new-media-and-social-change/

series of case studies on the complex and fraught form of social activism that has flourished in the past decade and that is inextricably tied to the market logic of the neoliberal era. As the authors declare in their introduction, the most common form of social participation and activism is buying and consuming goods. The analyses in *Commodity Activism*, centered on U.S. case studies, point to "the promise and peril of consumer-based modes of resistance" (p. 2) and engage in the interesting dynamic between "cultural co-optation" and "popular resistance." Rather than adopting a binary logic of either condemnation or celebration of this new mode of social engagement, the contributors to this volume theorize on the numerous ways in which consumer-based activism has become part of media (and life) practices in the contemporary era and how these discourses have shifted the relationship between citizenship and civic action, marginality and resistance.

It is particularly Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser's emphasis on the ambivalent nature of today's activist consumption that I find compelling in my own analysis of ZaLab's social change practices. Although originating from an activist drive to actuate change in an apparently stagnant Italian social sphere, ZaLab is, however, a for-profit media group whose commercial enterprise is molded into the civically engaged format of their productions. In this and many other cases in the Italian context, the boundaries between dominant and alternative cultures and between social advocacy and profit are tenuous; indeed, one may ask whether the existence of such boundaries is still practicable in neoliberal times in which "rituals of consumption increasingly stand in for other modes of democratic engagement" (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 9). The case of ZaLab points to a mode of activism that weaves together connected media practices, a capitalist notion of civic resistance, and traditional rituals of community gathering. Understanding the affordances of the Italian social formations and practices of social activism is central to define the mediascape within which ZaLab operates. The next section situates activist practices within the Italian media system. Although a comprehensive overview of Italian media is beyond the scope of this analysis, some key characteristics of this media context must be addressed to fully grasp the space ZaLab occupies—at the intersection of activism and commercialism, and alternative and mainstream cultures.

The Italian Mediascapes

Television Industry

In 2015, television is still the most popular form of entertainment and, to a lesser extent, source of information for the Italian public. Its centrality in public conversations on contemporary cultural and political climates remains undisputed, and it is therefore essential, in the context of my analysis, to provide a brief excursus of the Italian television structure here. Since the early 1980s, for two decades Italian broadcast television was defined by a duopolistic system divided between the public broadcaster RAI, whose ties to the political establishment are well documented (Padovani, 2005), and the private network Mediaset, owned by Fininvest, a financial holding company in the hands of the Berlusconi family. For many years, Italian television was thus structured around the three RAI channels and their counterparts in Mediaset.

        This framework presented several problematic features. On the one hand, as part of worldwide trends affecting public service broadcasters (Padovani & Tracey, 2003), RAI's competition with Mediaset, which initially focused only on light entertainment, was extended to news and public affair programming in 1991. This inevitably led to the dominance of commercial imperatives for both broadcasters and the waning of RAI's public service mission. On the other hand, the ties between television and politics and the popularity of Mediaset were all invigorated during Berlusconi's three mandates as prime minister (1994–1995; 2001–2006; 2008–2011). In this period, Berlusconi's virtual control of the Italian television system resulted in an even more politicized use of public and private networks, as highlighted by the 2002 incident known as "Editto Bulgaro" ("Bulgarian Edict"), a clear act of censorship against anti-Berlusconian views[4] (Ardizzoni, 2007; Rothenberg, 2009).

        This status quo was only marginally altered by the introduction of satellite platforms in the early 2000. After several years of political debates and failed attempts at creating the "single national platform,"[5] in July 2003 the merger between Telepiù and Stream—the first two ill-fated pay-TV platforms that had operated since the mid-1990s—was implemented under the aegis of Murdoch's News Corporation (D'Arma, 2009). The new platform, named Sky Italia, became a main challenger to the duopolistic system that had governed Italian television for more than two decades. As some scholars argue, the introduction of Sky Italia has shifted the structure of the Italian television industry from a duopoly to a "triopoly" (D'Arma, 2010). As the largest television group in Italy in terms of revenue,[6] Sky Italia has permanently altered the ecology of Italian television with the introduction of pay-TV services targeted at specific segments of the population. Thus, rather than being a competitor in the mass audience market, this relatively new platform has proven particularly successful with affluent sectors of the population, for whom the logic of paying for specialized television programming (such as key soccer matches and extremely popular U.S. series) makes economic sense. In the 2000s, the Italian mediascape was altered further by the introduction of Mediaset's own pay-TV service, using the recently launched digital terrestrial network, and the switch from analogue to digital (completed in 2012). Although multichannel digital television in Italy is expanding the TV menu for many viewers and contributing to the globalization of Italian television, one could also argue that the playing field is still dominated by global and national corporations (News Corp. and Mediaset, respectively), whose media offering provides little space for alternative and/or

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[4] In April 2002, during a press conference in Bulgaria, Berlusconi condemned some journalists' "criminal use" of public television and advocated their "removal." After this declaration, RAI's administration fired Michele Santoro, Daniele Luttazzi, and Enzo Biagi, three popular and well-respected journalists who had expressed their public concern about Berlusconi's role as prime minister and media mogul.

[5] What became known as the "single national (or digital) platform" was a proposed agreement between RAI, Mediaset, and Canal Plus (Telepiù's parent company) to create an integrated infrastructure to transmit signals and define standards for collective access to pay-TV services (AGCM Press Release: http://www.agcm.it/en/newsroom/press-releases/1264-agreement-on-the-launching-of-a-single-digital-platform-advisory-opinion-.html). Several factors contributed to the failure of this venture, such as disagreement among the involved parties, opposition of the Italian Competition Authority AGCM, and the European Commission. For more details, see D'Arma (2009).

[6] According to the Agcom Annual Report, in 2012 Sky Italia had a revenue stream of €2,631,000,000, while Mediaset's profits were at €2,487,000,000 and RAI's at €2,343,000,000 (Agcom, 2013).

oppositional programming. This is particularly significant if one bears in mind that television—free and pay TV—is regularly watched by 97.4% of the population and is still the most influential entertainment medium (Censis, 2013).

Media Activism

The history of alternative and activist media in Italy is characterized by acts of social engagement that used traditional media to counteract and expose the fallacies of mainstream mediated discourse. Although a comprehensive overview of media activism in Italy goes beyond the scope of this article, a few salient cases are worth mentioning because these provide a useful context for a more in-depth understanding of ZaLab's position in the Italian mediascape. Some of the earliest examples hail back to the 1970s, when radio was used by marginalized left-wing groups to bring attention to underground youth cultures and the revolutionary politics of the 1968 and 1977 movements. After the 1976 landmark ruling of the Italian Constitutional Court that opened up the market to private broadcasters at the local level, several so-called free radio stations went on the air with programs that challenged the monopoly of the national broadcaster RAI and its intricate ties to government.

Radio Alice in Bologna, Controradio in Florence, Radio Popolare in Milan, and Radio Città Futura in Rome, for example, advocated for more freedom of expression, the right to creativity and art, and the fight against conservatism and bourgeois ideals (Downing, 1984; Ludati, 2005). Despite some differences among these radio stations, their common experience was characterized by the centrality of art as a form of political protest, the participatory and spontaneous framework of their programming, and the absence of norms and rules, seen as the *sine qua non* to reach their intellectual and political goals in 1970s Italy (Ludati, 2005). In this sense, the first local radio stations experimented with a model of direct participation and public involvement that would later become central to other, different forms of alternative and activist communication, such as the Telestreet project.

In the early 2000s, some of the founders of Bologna's Radio Alice set up the first street television channel in Italy. Orfeo TV, named after the street in which it originated and broadcast, had a footprint of 164 yards, was on the air for two hours a day, and featured an interview with a local bartender in its first program. Despite its humble beginnings, Orfeo TV paved the way for the creation of more than 150 street television channels that developed across the country between 2002 and 2008. Intended as community media, the Telestreet network aimed to expand local citizens' access to information by using a simple technology for viewers to engage in both the production and consumption of television programs. Although Italian street TV channels differed in their goals and scopes, they all shared a similar concern about the arbitrary consolidation of media in the hands of a few companies and the repercussions this system had on the quality of information accessible to viewers. The phrase "street television" refers to a micro-television channel with a very small footprint and produced through the use of inexpensive technology. Telestreet operated in the empty frequencies between regularly licensed channels. In this sense, street television did not take over the frequency allotted for another broadcaster; at the same time, though, its operations were not legally licensed through the Ministry of Communication. The level of precarity of these micro-television stations, with their surreptitious operations and uncertain funds, is reminiscent of the early years of free radio in Italy, with their impetuous desire to recenter public

discourse around the local. Rejecting the statist approach of RAI, which overlooked the micro-realities of Italy's varied regions, both the free radio of the 1970s and the more recent Telestreet network contributed to a redefinition of the public and the social in Italian society. Almost half a century after the introduction of television as a tool use to standardize language and identities, recent activist media in Italy have alerted citizens to the need to use a local lens to engage in and, ideally, solve specific sociopolitical and cultural matters.

These alternative tools have thus engaged media power on different levels: At the semantic and semiotic level, they have introduced codes that challenge the dominant mainstream discourse; and at the civic level, they have empowered groups who would otherwise remain at the margins of society (Atton, 2001; Mattoni, 2008; Rodriguez, 2001). In the Italian context, the unevenness in the distribution of power is marked by the precarious political and economic conditions during specific time periods (the short-lived governments and political instability of the 1970s and the 2000s economic recession, for example). Precarity[7] is indeed an emblematic feature of contemporary media activism in Italy, as highlighted in Mattoni's analysis of the mediated strategies in the Euro Mayday Parade (Mattoni, 2008).

This protest campaign, which began in 2001 and spread to several European countries after 2004, was created to give visibility to precarious workers and "to establish a composite collective identity for this new social subject" (ibid., p. 6). As a transnational movement, the Euro Mayday Parade saw the collaboration of diverse activist groups, who adopted new symbols and icons (such as the adoption of a fictitious patron saint of all precarious workers, San Precario) that would directly relate to precarious workers and engaged in alternative and social media tools to promote civic rights (ibid.). What is particularly interesting in the case of the Euro Mayday Parade is the use of new media codes that relied on alternative and oppositional imageries—the creation of a precarity's patron saint, the false fashion designer Serpica Naro, and the Imbattibili's (literally "Unbeatable") sticker cards—while also engaging mainstream media infrastructures to promote their protest. Rather than dismissing the basic frameworks of the dominant political and media discourse, the Euro Mayday campaign in Italy chose to operate in autonomous ways within the existing mediascape (ibid.). In the words of the Chainworkers Crew, the Milanese activist group that began this campaign, "the *media sociale* hangs on the mainstream media, by infiltrating each of their gorges and by appearing as something that is neither homologous with nor reducible to profit" (quoted in ibid., p. 8). The convergence of these multiple and mixed strategies seems particularly viable in the Italian context and is central to ZaLab's activist practices.

Before moving on to an analysis of ZaLab, I would like to propose a conceptual framework that can be applied to contemporary ambivalent spaces of resistance and activism, and I will do so by borrowing Michael Curtin's idea of "matrix media." In his analysis of television in the postbroadcast era, Curtin (2009) describes the current media era as a "matrix era": an era "characterized by interactive

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[7] *Precarity* is defined by Neilson and Rossiter "as all possible shapes of unsure, not guaranteed, flexible exploitation: from illegalized, seasonal and temporary employment to homework, flex- and temp-work to subcontractors, freelancers or so-called self-employed persons. But its reference also extends beyond the world of work to encompass other aspects of intersubjective life, including housing, debt, and the ability to build affective social relations" (Neilson & Rossiter, 2005).

exchanges, multiple sites of productivity, and diverse modes of interpretation and use" (p. 13). A matrix, in this sense, is a complex web of interactivity and connectivity that generates a renewed space for media practices—a space in which the "social" and the "public" acquire meaning through the convergence of different media tools and cultural references. This understanding of "matrix" reconciles its etymological meaning of "womb" (from "mater"/"mother") with its more recent and broader connotation as a space where something develops. The "flexible, dynamic, and horizontal" (ibid., p. 15) nature of today's media has thus resulted in a mode of social engagement we can call *matrix activism*: This form of activism complicates the relationship between production and consumption, intersects private spaces and commercial platforms, and engages in an exercise of cultural mixity that gives rise to a nuanced matrix for social action. As we try to locate and analyze emergent forms, practices, and aesthetics of activism in the era of convergence and connectivity, we need to take into account the complex and ambivalent ways in which social actors imagine the terms of their engagement and calculate the risks of their interventions. What we are left with is a critical practice, which, through its nomadic appropriation of media techniques and networks, is able to produce arguably new zones of protest and contestation in postindustrial societies of control.

ZaLab's Media Practices: An Ambivalent Form of Activism

In his 2012 book *Media, Society, World*, Couldry focuses on media practice theory as a compelling direction in media studies that accounts for the ways in which media are used in everyday routines and interactions (Couldry, 2012). Of particular relevance is Couldry's argument that we, as social individuals, engage with media to satisfy our human needs and participate in a social, and ethically necessary, conversation on how we should live with the media. Although Couldry's attention is mostly on practices of media use and consumption, I find his questions on media practices—"what range of practices are oriented to media and what is the role of media-oriented practices in ordering other practices?" (Couldry, 2004, p. 129)—decidedly useful to unravel the various layers of matrix activism.

In the early 2000s, six filmmakers (Alberto Bougleux, Matteo Calore, Stefano Collizzolli, Maddalena Grechi, Andrea Segre, and Sara Zavarise) collaborated on the creation of an association that would use video workshops and documentary cinema as a tool to give voice to marginalized groups in contemporary Italian society. The inspiration for this group is revealed in the choice of its name ZaLab, an acronym of "Zavattini" and "Laboratory." As the reader may know, Cesare Zavattini (1902–1989) was a prominent Italian screenwriter and one of the leading exponents of Italian neorealism. Zavattini's view on neorealism emphasized a documentary approach to cinema, with the use of nonprofessional actors and a preference for location shooting and everyday subject matters. Zavattini's view of cinema informs ZaLab's participatory filmmaking practices and carefully punctuates the different sections of their website, which open with various quotes from Zavattini:

> One can produce a short story or a documentary, one cannot accept genres as such, the
> story is as important as the non-story, the investigative report is as important as the
> non-investigative narrative, one meter equals one thousand meters of film.

> For us everybody is a filmmaker, you just need the consciousness and desire to express
> yourself through cinema, you then have the freedom and autonomy to choose the
> avenue you want. (my translation)

Transposing this neorealist view of cinema in the 21st century, the creation of ZaLab would ostensibly have the binary goal of enabling these communities to use videos to speak from a nonsubaltern position and informing the general public about groups that are often silenced in mainstream discourse. This approach is clearly articulated in the mission statement on ZaLab's website: "ZaLab documentaries emerge either from these workshops or from one of the participants' individual experience. These documentaries tell lives largely ignored by mainstream media, marked by today's conflicts; our desire is to make these stories accessible for everybody" (www.zalab.org). As I discuss later in this article, the purely activist intent outlined here is, however, complicated (although not completely forsaken) by the commercial focus of some productions and the dominant position of certain filming practices. Couldry's idea of voice as a connecting term, which challenges neoliberalist claims of market triumphalism while also providing spaces for an alternative view of politics, is a useful framework to understand ZaLab's engagement in the social (Couldry, 2010). Before I move forward with this argument, it is important to provide more background on ZaLab's productions and social campaigns.

Participatory Workshops: Lapa TV

ZaLab has approached video production through a mode of participation with the subjects of their narratives. This strategy, ZaLab argues, allows them to focus on the lives of a multitude of individuals, who are often able to offer an original view of reality, one that is free from the aesthetic and commercial pressures of traditional broadcasting (personal communication, 2013). Participatory videos rely on the convergence of the subjects and makers of visual content and are essentially based on the phenomenological paradigm that sees knowledge as a result of collaborations and interactions (Odutola, 2003). The social, in this sense, is framed by the space given to marginalized groups to speak up and by the contingent production demands, which require the achievement of certain objectives (often established well before the shooting begins). This apparent contradiction defines the ambivalent nature of ZaLab's media practices, straddling the social from the position of activists and entrepreneurs, simultaneously.

One of ZaLab's earliest participatory workshops is the 10-year long collaboration with some of the most destitute schools in the Aeolian Islands, which resulted in shorts and animation features about life on the islands. This project, titled "Lapa TV," saw the participation of more than 150 children who created two-dozen videos featuring various visual approaches and themes, from stop-motion animation on pollution and the effects of tourism to visual postcards addressed to friends and teachers in Northern Italy and meta-shorts on the role of personal film for local children. In "L'isola dei Barbasassi" four fourth- and fifth-graders use stop-motion animation to create a two-minute video on beach pollution and their imaginative approach to recycling. Using the plastic bottles, soda cans, hair curlers, yogurt cups, and newspaper pages they found on the beach, the protagonists of this story—three anthropomorphic stones, vaguely evocative of the 1970s French cartoon "BarbaPapa"—build an original merry-go-round for all kids to enjoy. Another video, "Cartolina alla maestra che non c'è," is a video postcard for a teacher who

worked in Alicudi and recently moved to Milan. In this three-minute documentary, children on the island reflect on the impact of the memorable teacher who has left the school district. A young boy's voiceover narrates the daily routine of children since their favorite teacher left: We see them in the morning walking through the narrow alleys that lead to their small school, looking for the teacher who is not there in the classroom, reminiscing about all the projects they had completed with the teacher, and finally visiting the teacher's now-vacant house and stopping to play nearby.

Both modes—animation and documentary—shared the same goal: "to unveil the children's hidden gaze and bet on their imagination in order to narrate a marginalized school that, despite all odds, succeeds in overcoming the stifling dimension of its marginalizing landscape" (ZaLab's website; my translation). The pedagogical component of this project reveals an activist inclination to recenter the Italian social peripheries and re-evaluate the meaning of the local in national discourses on identity and citizenship. Such inclination is, however, always embedded in a weighted collaboration between filmmakers and islanders that irrevocably shifts the presumed balance of this participatory exercise. Editing and soundtrack choices, for example, are clear editorial interventions that tarnish the professed "purity" of the children's voices. Although I am not arguing that such purity ever existed or that it is pivotal for the success of the project, this seems to be the marketing thrust adopted by ZaLab to promote the project. In aiming to counteract what Couldry (2010) considers neoliberalism's attempt to undermine social and individual voices, Lapa TV reaffirms the central role of narratives in human development. Hence, the decision to include the short videos in the local museum archives (overseen by Alberto Bougleux, one of ZaLab's founders) furthers the practice of social engagement beyond the confines of specialty festivals or ZaLab's website.

Yet, as Couldry (2010) eloquently argues, increasing the number of platforms through which more voices can speak is hardly sufficient in the neoliberal era. What is needed, instead, is an understanding that these voices matter and that voice is an imperative value for the success of democratic communication in neoliberal times. In other words, equating mediated visibility with a practice of recognition proves too reductive and fails to catalyze meaningful social change. In this respect, the Lapa TV project provided a much-needed window into a region often neglected by mainstream media, but its significance remained circumscribed within the islands' geographic locale and the niche spaces of museum archives and fringe festivals. ZaLab's more recent productions have pursued partially different avenues and, in so doing, have engaged in the dialogue between voice as process and voice as value.

Mediterranean Migrations

In 2006, ZaLab began work on the issue of Mediterranean migration with a particular focus on the role of Libya in regulating the flows of refugees from the Horn of Africa. The first feature-length documentary on this subject, *Like a Man on Earth*, was released in 2008 and saw the collaboration of Andrea Segre, an Italian filmmaker, and Dagmawi Yimer, an Ethiopian refugee who witnessed firsthand the consequences of the Italo-Libyan treaty on migration. Adopting the traditional documentary style of storytelling, Segre and Dagmawi emphasized the participatory nature of this project, whose narrative was strengthened by the central role of Dagmawi behind and in front of the camera. Indeed, in the film Dagmawi is at times the interviewee who narrates his own path to exile and at other times the interviewer

who facilitates the conversation with other fellow refugees. The film opens with a close-up shot of Dagmawi sitting on a bench in a Rome train station and reflecting on the role of colonialism in the current migration flows to Italy. Here the viewer also learns about Dagmawi's decision to leave Ethiopia and his need to retell this story from a variety of viewpoints. Thus, starting at minute 6:15, the camera alternates between medium and close-up shots of Dagmawi interviewing Senait, one of his fellow refugees, as she recounts her story sitting at a kitchen table with a map of Africa between them. This setting is repeated several times throughout the documentary as the voices of other young men and women—Mimi, Tighist, Negga, Fikirte, John, Tsegaye—are added to the conversation on the plights of refugees from the Horn of Africa.

As I have argued elsewhere, the participatory mode here is a successful strategy to underscore the complexity of migratory flows between East Africa, Libya and Italy, while also avoiding the traps of the emotional spectacularization of suffering (Ardizzoni, 2013). ZaLab's choice to adopt the fairly traditional mode of documentary to advocate the plight of African refugees proved successful in reaching Italian and international audiences and promoting the ZaLab brand in the field of socially engaged cinema (Nichols, 2001). *Like a Man on Earth* received more than a dozen awards and prizes and was featured at more than 30 festivals worldwide. Partly as a result of this success, ZaLab received a substantial grant from the Open Society Foundations, which would later be used to finance (among other projects) the highly successful follow-up *Closed Sea*. The production of these documentaries, which can be purchased on popular online platforms such as Amazon, Rizzoli, Feltrinelli and others, encapsulates a neoliberal notion of civic resistance, which cannot afford to reject the capitalist mechanisms of Italian society and has instead opted to operate from a more ambivalent position—a position straddling civics and profits. Yet, one needs to question whether this increased visibility in the media circuit has resulted in a heightened recognition of the urgency of the issues framed in the films. A look at the case of *Closed Sea* and the "No More Push-Backs" campaign will help us understand the connections between commercial media practices, the activist drive to promote social change, and collective action.

Human Rights Campaigns

As mentioned in the opening of this article, Segre, Liberti, and the ZaLab group produced the documentary *Closed Sea* in 2012 as a response to the continued practice of refugee expulsion to Libya. Filmed mostly in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) camp of Shousha (Tunisia), *Closed Sea* centers on a group of migrants who were able to flee Libya during the recent civil war and found temporary asylum in the camps on the border with Libya. This award-winning documentary opens with images of an Eritrean refugee who survived the perilous journey across the Mediterranean and is now an asylum seeker in Southern Italy. The long shots of the immigrant as he swims in calm Italian waters are accompanied by the voice-over from the European Court of Human Rights as the trial against the Italian government begins. Actual footage from the court in Strasbourg follows, as the legal ramifications of the push-back policies become the main frame for the events presented in this documentary. As the viewer learns, two dozen migrants from East Africa succeeded in bringing the Italian government to court with the accusation of human rights abuses, thus establishing a historical precedent in the European context. As the final sequences of *Closed Sea* document, in 2012 the European Court of Human Rights found the Italian government responsible for paying €15,000 to each plaintiff in the push-back case. In

this sense, the legal framework functions as the container for individual stories narrated from the refugee tents in Tunisia and from two small towns in the South of Italy.

Using the same filmic composition found in previous documentaries—use of close-ups and television news footage—Liberti and Segre focus on a handful of protagonists, whose narratives expose the complexity of Mediterranean migration, especially after the outbreak of the Libyan civil war. Unlike previous productions, though, *Closed Sea* resorts to the juxtapositions of mainstream news images and cell phone footage shot by the migrants themselves as they attempted the clandestine crossing to Italy. The rough and raw nature of these images, along with the original commentary by the refugees, provides a stark contrast to the polished coverage by television news and the out-of-touch analysis of government officials. Although long shots of the overflowing clandestine boats approaching Italian coasts are common television images, seldom has the audience been able to view the actual circumstances of navigation inside these boats. It is precisely this desire to bare the details often obscured by a biased coverage that motivated some migrants to smuggle their cell phone videos to Liberti and Segre as a further evidence of the abuses (personal communication, 2013).[8]

This exercise in culture jamming, in which the absurdity of nightly news reportages is unveiled by the deafening reality captured on cell phones, provides a heterotopic space for the representation of the impact of push-back policies on actual individuals. As Alain Touraine noted, long before the advent of new and social media, "marginality, considered for so long a failure of integration, becomes the hallmark of an opposition, a laboratory in which a new culture and a social counterproject are being elaborated" (Touraine quoted in Lievrouw, 2006 p. 118). In the case of ZaLab and in the context of the Italian mediascape, such marginality must necessarily operate within the frameworks of mainstream media, whose visual and discursive codes are recognized by the audience. The juxtaposition of different forms and levels of news—broadcast television and cellular phones, mainstream journalism and iReports— functions as a discursive strategy aimed at critiquing and recontextualizing the meaning of Italian migration politics. In this regard, ZaLab's position is neither at the center nor at the edges of mainstream discourse; rather, it occupies an ambivalent space, which, in the specifics of the Italian context, allows for their voice to be heard and arguably recognized. As Banet-Weiser (2012) persuasively argues in her analysis of brand cultures, in neoliberal societies "ambivalence," rather than betraying weakness and unaccountability, carries the notion of possibility:

> Ambivalence, its lack of certainty, its inconsistency, the way it both harbors and is defined by doubt, is generally understood as a problem, something to avoid. Yet, it is important to take seriously the cultural value of emotion and affect and the *potential* of ambivalence, its generative power, for it is within these spaces that hope and anxiety, pleasure and desire, fear and insecurity are nurtured. (p. 218)

What interests me in the case of ZaLab is the "generative power" that results from the intersection of activist practices, commercial platforms, and social gatherings. ZaLab's practices emphasize a kind of collective action that is less interested in any modernist ideas of "seizing power" and

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[8] An earlier version of this paragraph was published in Ardizzoni (2013).

is rather more attuned to social participation and active engagement—what Melucci (1996) sees as preeminent characteristics of contemporary societies "without centers." The complexity deriving from this status quo demands that Italian social actors do not completely reject the commercial logic of neoliberalism or the commodified platforms of satellite television or social media. The "No More Push-Backs" campaign I mentioned in the opening of this article was developed by ZaLab with the goal of bringing to light Italian immigration policies, while also promoting the release of *Closed Sea* on DVD. On the same day that more than 100 groups and associations throughout the country screened the documentary in their own communities, *Closed Sea* was also part of that day's programming on Cielo, a satellite channel owned by Rupert Murdoch's Sky Italia.[9] In the case of this campaign, the convergence of grassroots actions (organized via Facebook, Twitter, and other social platforms) and television broadcasting produced a discursive synergy that engaged the affordances of both media tools (national and global) and the Italian public. In this respect, ZaLab relies heavily on Twitter and Facebook to publicize their campaigns and promote their video products, draw attention to the incessant waves of migrants reaching the Italian shores (through the use of the hashtag #maipiùrespinti), and alert followers to petitions and events they can participate in. Like most organizations of this kind, ZaLab also uses YouTube and Vimeo as social platforms to present short videos (such as the ones made by young students in Padova), trailers of their feature-length documentaries, interviews with filmmakers, and audience interactions at public screenings. This kind of cross-fertilization, which mixes different media strategies and sociopolitical imperatives, provided the framework for a successful campaign that forced the then Minister of Internal Affairs Anna Maria Cancellieri to release a statement acknowledging Italy's responsibilities in the abuses of refugees and to promise to revise the existing push-back policies. Furthermore, in April 2014 the European Union voted to outlaw the practice of sending refugees back to their port of origin in the attempt to devise less punitive migration policies. Although the ZaLab campaign was not directly linked to the results of the EU vote, one can certainly include it in a larger collective action aimed at raising awareness on dubious political practices. As Segre (2013) reaffirmed during one of my interviews,

> The goal of these documentaries is to tell stories of contemporary Italy, while, at the same time, unveiling socio-political contradictions that often go beyond the problem of immigration. . . . When we juxtapose demagoguery to personal, individual stories, we are able to create a dialogue, a conversation on themes that are often stereotyped and pigeonholed in mainstream media discourse. And while the logic of fear seems always victorious in public discourse, the current interest in our work is a good indication that people are yearning for a more articulated understanding of Italian society today.

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[9] Cielo was launched in 2009 as a free channel on the digital platform Sky. Its current schedule includes sports programs, reruns of popular U.S. series, and local adaptations of global formats, such as *The Apprentice* and *X-Factor*.

Conclusion: Toward Matrix Activism?

The case of Rome media group ZaLab evidences a model of activism that follows in the footsteps of earlier forms of media activism in Italy, which relied on the tested centrality of traditional media, such as radio and television, to funnel new cultural codes and creative tactics of social engagement. ZaLab's use of documentary filmmaking, in this sense, has created a space where different views on migratory identities are presented as a sensible alternative to the alarmist sensationalism of mainstream news or current political discourse. Yet, unlike other instances of media activism, ZaLab is also a for-profit media group that produces and sells documentaries as well as feature films. ZaLab's video materials are used to support their activist campaigns, which are, in turn, accentuated by the popularity of their award-winning films. The weaving together of civic engagement and financial profit along with social action and consumption suggests a form of activist resistance that is necessarily embedded in the neoliberal logic of contemporary societies. Rather than rejecting all (or most) of the codes and rules of mainstream culture— as we saw in the example of free radio in the 1970s—today's activism seems to operate from within such norms. Clearly, ZaLab evinces the generative power embedded in the ambivalent space between production and consumption, activism and commercialism, center(s) and margin(s), the local and the transnational. The convergence of these different layers of action points us to Couldry's complex articulation of voice as both value and process: ZaLab's voice as a process embodied in the specifics of their history and social status paradoxically acquires value when it speaks from within the confines of neoliberal logics.

In their extensive literature review on media practices and social movements, Mattoni and Treré (2014) point to the one-medium bias that frames much research on activism and social movements. Existing studies, they argue, insist on "prioritizing the analysis of one medium or platform over the others, also with regard to the differentiation concerning the type of content—mainstream versus alternative— vehiculated through the medium or platform" (ibid. p. 254). This theoretical approach inevitably leads to fragmentation and compartmentalization and risks overlooking the generative power that lies in the interaction among different types of media, production, and consumption practices. As Mattoni and Treré remind us,

> Restricting the focus to only one of the many online technological manifestations of
> social movements can risk overlooking important aspects such as the role and evolution
> of different platforms within a movement and the connections between multiple
> technologies, actors, and their practices. (ibid., p. 255)

The theoretical lens of matrix activism I use to discuss ZaLab's engaged practices addresses such concerns by foregrounding the deeply ambivalent spaces occupied by contemporary forms of media activism. Rather than confining the analysis to a single platform, a single technology, or a single social actor, matrix activism allows us to explain the hybrid nature of new forms of dissent and resistance, as they are located at the intersection of alternative and mainstream, nonprofit and corporate, individual and social, production and consumption, online and offline. The concept of "matrix"—a multilayered, complex web of interactivity and connectivity—provides a rich conceptual framework that can better respond to the

demands of contemporary activism, while engaging with the shifting boundaries of today's media practices.

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