

The Digital Inclusion of Vulnerable People in the Community Development Process: Action Research in Reggio Calabria in Southern Italy*

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This paper presents the first results of a research action in progress in the Pellaro district of Reggio Calabria (South Italy). This action research aimed to activate a process of community development within a city district with both a large vulnerable population and a high density of organised crime employing a theoretical approach that refers to urban and media practices and the mediated construction of social reality (Blokland, 2017; Couldry, 2004; 2012; Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Stephansen & Trerè, 2020).

The activation of the community development process focused on the interweaving of deep mediatisation and the daily life of people in the district (Hepp, 2015; 2020). In particular, actions have been developed that have allowed the growth of social skills and digital/social skills among the most vulnerable people. From an edu-communication perspective (Barbas, 2020), these people have been facilitated to become protagonists of the process of territorial and digital relational development also thanks to the use of participation and community platforms both of a commercial nature (e.g., Google Maps with some tweaks) and co-constructed by citizens and made easily accessible also to those who had fewer basic digital skills. Despite a high density of organised crime (*'ndrangheta*), no obstacles were impairing the development of digital/social relations, at least in this first phase of the work.

We will examine three aspects, with particular attention within the paper: a) the ability to develop dual relationships (social and digital) within a peripheral, marginal and vulnerable community context such as that of Southern Italy; b) the deep interweaving between traditional and mediated communities (Hepp, 2020) even if these mainly consist of vulnerable people; c) the potential of the digital media to meet specific needs of the population (Couldry, 2012) ensures its realisation with the most vulnerable part of the population only if the latter is made the protagonist of its actions through voice processes (Couldry, 2010) and bottom-up empowerment and edu-communication (Freire, 1970; Barbas, 2020).

Keywords: digital inclusion; edu-communication; mediatised community; media practices; digital divide.

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This action research aimed at activating a process of community development in the Pellaro district of Reggio Calabria (southern Italy), which contains both a large vulnerable population and a high density of organised crime, using a theoretical approach based on urban and media practices and the mediated construction of social reality (Blokland, 2017; Couldry, 2004; 2012; Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Stephansen & Trerè, 2020).

The main objective was to increase both the relational density and bridging of social capital (Woolcock, 2001) through a perspective and methodology that interweaves social (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001; Schatzki, 1996; Spaargaren, Weenink & Lamers, 2016) and media (Couldry, 2004; 2012) practices for the social and digital inclusion of people (vulnerable and not) residing in the communities of the Pellaro district in Reggio Calabria.

Which community in the development process? Between familiarity and deep mediatisation

The plural communities to which we refer are based on

an idea of community as a fundamentally liquid structure, with relationships not necessarily lasting in time where the most important aspect is the relationship with the territory. In other words, the spatial dimension has become prevalent over the temporal one. (Sorice, 2019, p. 121, our translation).

This type of community experience also seems to have taken on some characteristics of the workers' mutual aid societies of the late 19th century, even if focused on the territory rather than work (Volterrani, 2016). The communities we put at the centre of a community development process are places where we aspire to build a high relational density (Andorlini, Basile & Marmo, 2019, pp. 9-16) and, above all, a social capital that can serve as a resource for people (Hanifan, 1916), support for increasing capacities (Sen, 1985) that create not only bridging (Field, 2003) but also linking (Woolcock, 2001) to cover the "relational gaps" (Burt, 1992) present in community grids.¹

In our approach, social and media practices are deeply intertwined and constitute the "core" of social ties found within territorial communities. Blokland (2017, p. 73) identifies a typology of social links based on four variables: a) transactions; b) attachment; c) interdependencies; and d) bonds.

Not all these social ties can be traced back to social and media practices that build community, even in the fluid sense described above, because they refer to personal networks or relational spaces of belonging where, according to Blokland, we can find that public familiarity that

characterises a social fabric of the city where, thanks to repeated fluid encounters and enduring commitments, individuals are able to place others socially, recognise them, and even expect to see them: the homeless man sleeping under the bridge, who passes by every day, may one day no longer be there,

and one may find oneself wondering where he has gone. (...) It can induce a sense of community (2017, pp. 119-120).

According to Blokland (2017, p.121), public familiarity is highly relevant, even in areas with high intensity and presence of crime (organised or not), because it allows us to feel the community, also where it is neither pleasant nor welcoming, making it possible to understand the cultural codes and social practices to survive and build the community, despite the danger.

To complete the delimitation of our idea of community, we also used other concepts. The first concept that seemed applicable to our reasoning, even though developed in the context of the emergence of nationalism due to the development of the daily press, is Anderson's (1983) concept of the imagined community: we are often unable to live daily with all those who inhabit a territory, whether real or digital, in order to exchange ideas, opinions and values, but we easily 'feel' that we belong to a community precisely because we share ideas, opinions, values and symbols with those we may never have the opportunity to meet in person. Each type of territorial community has built up and stratified over time an imagined form that permanently resides in the collective imagination of the people who inhabit it and, partially, in those who have relations with it. This imagined form undergoes a sudden change only on an occasion that causes a sudden rupture: a natural disaster, an epidemic, a terrorist attack, a significant economic and social crisis, etc. (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Schwarz, Seeger & Auer 2016). The capacity to aspire is grafted onto the imagined community (Appadurai, 2004), of which we highlight two dimensions. The first refers to aspirations as desires, preferences, choices and plans that are never simply individual but are embedded in societies and cannot be understood without placing them in the broader framework of cultural norms. The second derives from the first: the capacity to aspire is expressed in the ability to construct a narrative of the future and in the future, which (using the elements of the culture in which one lives) allows people to define their path. Developing this capacity requires realistically exploring the future itself and sharing this knowledge. Since less privileged individuals live in situations that do not allow them to experiment with alternative futures, they have a more fragile and precarious horizon of aspirations.

Paying attention to inequalities in the capacity to aspire within communities is fundamental to their development because, as we shall see, if in the growth of a collective self-awareness, desires and imagination for the future play an important role, then it becomes crucial to work on this aspect, especially in the most vulnerable, fragile and marginal parts of the community.

These ideas about communities cannot be seen independently of the paradigm shift we are experiencing: by highlighting the intertwining of social and media practices, the deep mediatisation (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hepp, 2020) transforms the very idea of community and contributes to its translocalisation (Hepp, 2015).

For our research, it is essential to emphasise that the communities

are not, in the first place, something that is not physical, but are instead created by people in repeated interactions (...). Locations are, materially and physically, socio-culturally defined places that have a shared space through human interactions. Secondly, the construction of this type of location is not something that can be simply opposed to the use of media. It is more likely that nowadays localities are created by media-related practices, and therefore in this sense they are themselves mediated. Thirdly, when considering localities as appropriate places by the media, it is crucial to keep in mind that they themselves are trans-localised, not bound by the act of media appropriation, but are instead connected in communication networks that go beyond the local. (Hepp, 2015, p. 187).

Moreover, Hepp (2015, pp. 208-209) suggests that local communitarisation² remains central. Mediatisation transforms communities' sense of belonging by making them mediated communities.

This combination of community characteristics, communication networks and relationality makes the context of the communities in which we carried out the action research more complex. This means that we cannot ignore the role played by the media (digital and otherwise) in community development processes. Nevertheless, it is equally clear that we cannot attribute to the media a saving role or a transformative role in territorial cultures. Nevertheless, we can identify at least three aspects to consider (Couldry & Hepp 2017, pp. 175-176):

1. Media content is an important resource for defining communities.
2. Media are a means of community building.
3. Media trigger dynamics in communities.

According to Couldry and Hepp, all three elements are relevant for understanding the central role of media in community building in an era of profound mediatisation.

Which vulnerability?

What kind of vulnerability are we talking about in this complex community panorama? According to Castel's (1995) conceptual scheme, the path of the impoverishment of a potential subject can take place by shifting from the area of integration (stable insertion in employment circuits and availability of solid relational support, especially family support) to the area of disaffiliation, in which subjects in a condition of extreme poverty find themselves (characterised by processes of decomposition and abandonment of the self, inability to control physical space, profound rupture of social ties, loss of the ability to transform goods into life opportunities). This transition takes place through micro-fractures in the experience of individuals, both at work and at the relational level, which generate situations of precariousness and fragility: this is the area of social vulnerability. Therefore, many people can become vulnerable by positioning themselves differently in the deconstruction of both capacities (Sen, 1985; 1987) and spheres of life (work, health, housing, sociality, family and leisure).

In the action-research, we decided to classify people mainly for sociality, with particular reference to the relational isolation (physical and/or digital) in which individuals or groups of people may live. This aspect, which we will discuss later, highlighted the need for a joint intervention in both spaces to fill relational gaps and promote the bridging of social capital in a context historically poor in social capital and partially infiltrated by organised crime.

What does it mean to involve the most vulnerable people in digital spaces?

Within the framework of the approach we have described, it is also necessary to illustrate what it means to involve the most vulnerable people in face-to-face activities and digital spaces. At least three types of involvement represent, albeit partially, the different degrees of people's participation in the community development process.

The first one concerns the spectators, i.e., those who observe without taking part in what is happening. It is, to some extent, the first stage of involvement, but it is also the behaviour of those who do not yet trust the proposals made. For digital spaces, this is a paradoxical situation because people trust more "remote" commercial proposals (e.g. Facebook, Instagram), which are certainly less transparent in their privacy policies (Couldry & Mejas, 2019), than "proximity" proposals. For face-to-face gatherings, the paradox is that even illegal situations are preferred in relationships rather than forming new relationships where trust is needed. This attitude is consistent in a context where one of the popular expressions used to understand whether to trust or not is "cu apparteni", which expresses the idea that every action you take originates from an interest (i.e., your family, your master, your spouse, and so on). This phrase, which is very difficult to translate from the regional dialect into Italian (and therefore into English), could mean: who are you, to which family do you belong, what are your origins, where do you come from? We believe that this Calabrian phrase expresses the true meaning of the word 'belonging', hence ownership. The question does not tend to clarify who you are, what you do, or where you come from, but only to know who your master is, who can manage your life and dispose of it.

The second type concerns the users. They have overcome their mistrust and can take advantage of the proposals made by face-to-face activators and on the platform. They play with digital spaces and are willing to get involved in fun and non-formal aggregation proposals, but they must still make those activities their own.

The third and last type of involvement is related to the protagonists. They are those who propose activities and experiences, either face-to-face or on the digital platform, and who have "activated" themselves in the community context.

The three typologies do not exist on an ascending scale (from spectators to protagonists) but, rather, are the different degrees of involvement of vulnerable people with respect to digital spaces and are not of a community nature.

The context of action research: the district of Pellaro in the city of Reggio Calabria

The Pellaro district has approximately 10,000 residents and is in the south-eastern part of the city of Reggio Calabria, in one of the poorest and most vulnerable regions in southern Italy (Svimez, 2019). The choice of the district was made together with the Macramè Consortium³ on the following criteria: spatial delimitation, degree of sense of belonging, and poverty level. The delimitation of the Pellaro district was very simple because some streets delimit it both from the rest of the city and the countryside and other suburbs. The sea closes the last side of the trapezoid (figure 1).

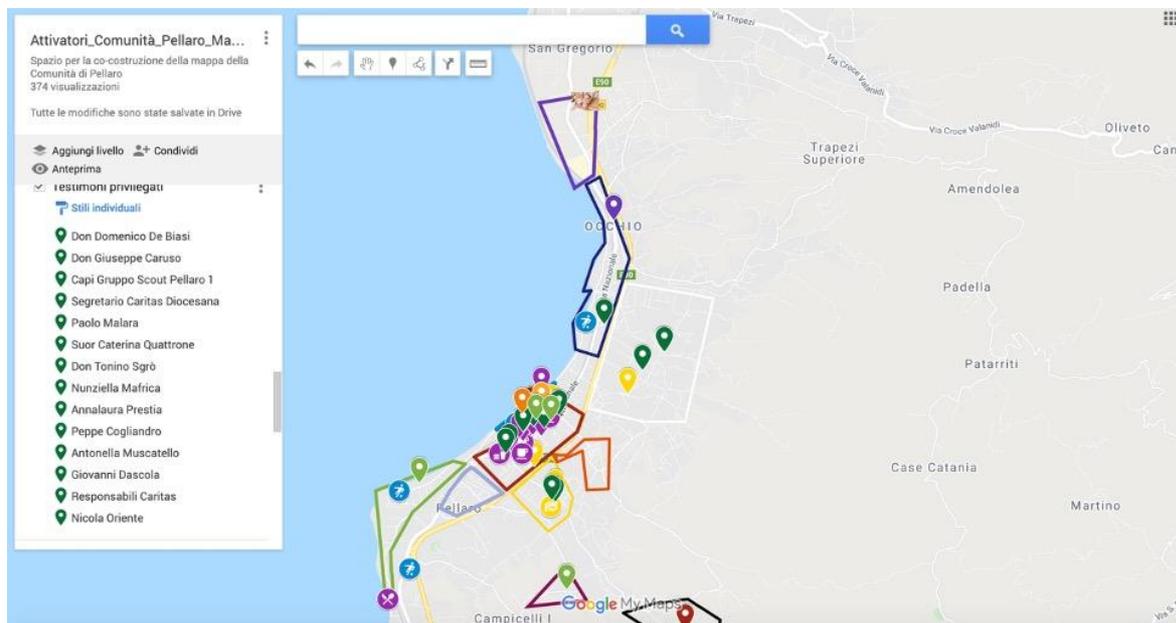


Figure 1. The Pellaro district in the Google Map reconstructed by community activators.⁴

The sense of belonging to Pellaro is powerful because the neighbourhood had been a separate municipality before being merged with Reggio Calabria in 1927. This means that, in the memory of the older generations, there is still a historical period when the district had political and administrative autonomy, a memory passed to the following generations that represent a source of pride. Its poverty level places Pellaro in a median position compared to other districts in the city of Reggio Calabria. It is crucial to highlight this aspect because interventions in situations where poverty is widespread or, on the other hand, in neighbourhoods where poverty is rare, it would not have been possible to properly assess the dynamics of community development, digital inclusion and the possible increase in social capital.

From a research-action perspective, working with vulnerable people within communities living in a territorial context such as Calabria, is even more difficult. There are at least three reasons for this. Firstly, the strong presence and infiltration of organised crime (*'ndrangheta*)

in almost all economic activities means that, for most of the population, illegality, extortion, usury and threats are part of everyday life and take on the character of public familiarity (Blokland, 2017, pp. 119-120), which presupposes widespread knowledge and 'liminal attention' ready to become 'imminent danger attention' quickly and automatically. Secondly, the territorial context is characterised by the proximity of degraded areas (uncollected waste, dilapidated houses, etc.) and seamless residential areas. In the case of Pellaro, vulnerability coexists with areas of social inclusion, making work with the community more complex and articulated. Thirdly, the way of thinking and living everyday life is pervaded by deep mistrust and a substantial absence of trusting ties, for reasons partly linked to long-term historical and cultural factors that have shaped the identity of the Calabrians of Pellaro and, more generally, of all those living in the regions of southern Italy.

Rather than referring to the well-known concept of amoral familism (Banfield, 1958), we believe it is more important to emphasise another aspect. The processes of economic development that have been imposed so far since the end of the Second World War have not allowed an actual process of modernisation; much less have they allowed a process of profound cultural and social change that would have been possible by working on the growth of social cohesion, rights and legality (Borgomeo, 2013). Let us also consider the extensive migration processes from the southern regions to the regions of northern Italy, the northern European states, the Americas and Australia. It is clear how the southern regions have suffered - and still suffer - an impoverishment of the youngest energies that have decided to leave their land (Della Torre, 2010).

Action research methodologies

The methodological approach was based on edu-communication (Barbas, 2020), where both action-research and related educational and communicative processes are integrated. Our point of view focused on face-to-face and online social environments and practices.

In particular, there are three phases in the edu-communication process:

- a) listening and participatory observation of the face-to-face and digital community;
- b) facilitation of face-to-face and digital participatory processes in the community and of citizens' activation;
- c) support and accompaniment of potential outcomes of the participatory process with possible policy recommendations.

In our case, we selected a group of 6 social work experts from Reggio Calabria, including one from the Pellaro district. These people, whom we called "community activators", were trained on the methodological aspects of action research to be carried out on the territory and digital environments and platforms. In particular, they were trained on active listening (Sclavi, 2002), participant observation (Balsiger & Lambelet, 2014, pp. 144-172), digital ethnography (Caliandro, 2018; Hine, 2015; Gambetti, 2021; Patterson & Ashman, 2021), use of informal and in-depth interviews (De Blasio, Quaranta, Santaniello & Sorice, 2017,

pp. 74-89), focus groups (Della Porta, 2014, pp. 289-307). Activators were also trained on processes of facilitation to participation, such as open space technology (Owen, 2008), to intervene in support of people's activation within the Pellaro district.

Further to this, we co-constructed EKEI,⁵ a digital proximity platform (figure 2) to accompany the research-action process with the intention of activating a virtuous circle between face-to-face and digital processes. Indeed, the platform mainly encourages encounters and relations between people living in the same streets of Pellaro, allowing them to ask for "friendship" from those who live nearby. The interface is similar to commercial social media platforms to facilitate familiarity from the first access, but at the same time, it has to make it clear that the purposes are different. Firstly, it is a place to innovatively collect the data obtained through the work of the activators (for example, capturing the different relational density of the various parts of the Pellaro district in terms of number and quality, age and social position). Secondly, it is a place where the inhabitants of Pellaro can be protagonists, with particular attention to those in more vulnerable situations.



Figure 2. Homepage of EKEI digital platform.

In the first phase of the action-research, the social and media practices of the people living in Pellaro were analysed and reconstructed to understand different items:

- behaviours, attitudes, languages and cultures shared in the neighbourhood;
- conflicts between people and between people and institutions;
- places of public familiarity;
- presence of places colonised by common and/or organised crime;
- presence of recurrent visual and/or ritual elements with particular meanings shared in the community;
- public expressions of religiosity.

The first step was the selection and training of community activators. They were a fundamental resource for providing an easy route into the neighbourhood for several reasons: they know the inhabitants, speak the same language, and thus can "camouflage" within the district and the initially active digital spaces. The preliminary work of listening to and observing the participants lasted about four months. It was possible to identify the most vulnerable individuals within the community during this period, reconstructing their personal history and the network of relationships they were embedded in (or, often, the almost total absence of relationships). Rebuilding a relational fabric around people who have been lost is not easy (Devastato, 2016; Allegri, 2015). In addition to face-to-face spaces, proposals in digital spaces contributed decisively to "hooking" vulnerable isolates. The activities proposed in the digital spaces were initially very simple: support in understanding the digital spaces (accessibility, functioning); updating an individual's data; adding an old photo to one's profile; a face-to-face game to be played in the digital spaces to give a sense of continuity in the relationships; contact at unusual times (e.g. late in the evening after dinner) to make the activators' presence felt. Although slow, the focus on building and maintaining face-to-face relationships was helpful for engagement in digital spaces. Conversely, active presence in digital spaces strengthened real relationships, creating a virtuous circuit that amplified the density of positive relationships around the most vulnerable people.

In this phase of the action-research, we used informal and in-depth interviews to increase the knowledge of the stories of the people of Pellaro and establish a deeper connection between the activists and the community. In these first months, the supervision work by the researchers and their weekly exchange with the activists was particularly complex, both because of logistical issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic and the need to 'calibrate' (Alfano & Volterrani, 2020) each other's views on the community. It is interesting to underline that this constant work has consequently led to a fine-tuning and a partial reformulation of the initial objectives of the action-research and the activities to be carried out, especially regarding the difficulties encountered with the most vulnerable people, as we will see in the discussion of the first results.

In the second phase, some focus groups were carried out with the aim, on the one hand, to deepen the collective perception of some problems that emerged about the community of Pellaro, and on the other hand, to develop moments of aggregation among "strangers". In this phase, there were moments of facilitation of participation in both face-to-face⁶ and online⁷ ways.

In the third phase, we aimed to expand activities by supporting policy proposals, using the PAR4P methodology (Laenens, Mariën & Walravens, 2019), an adaptation of Participatory Action Research (PAR), with a focus on policy development. Thanks to a bottom-up approach, this methodology allows for intensive collaboration between citizens and policymakers to translate citizens' concerns into policy actions.

First findings of action research

The work of the community activators in the first 12 months of their work allowed for a twofold involvement of citizens. The work of participant observation and the informal interviews made it possible to contact about 2000 people (20% of the total resident population), some of whom (about 200) were non-residents who nevertheless frequented the neighbourhood. The interesting aspect to highlight was the ability to construct a “snowball” effect which, starting from initial contacts with people known to the activators and with whom there was a relationship of trust, made it possible to expand the number with relative ease. The participation growth in the digital platform did not follow the same exponential trend. After 12 months, the number of people included in the platform is 600, just over 5% of the total. Of these, 120 are considered vulnerable (1%). The result is particularly relevant because there were two main difficulties to overcome. The first is linked to the traditional digital divide: access to the platform, although simplified, requires some initial operations. The second, more important, is the difficulty in understanding the “benefits” of participating in a digital platform alongside the commercial ones (Facebook and Instagram).

The work carried out by the activators and the researchers to find the most appropriate ways to share the digital platform's possible uses and future possibilities has produced two possible ways. The first is the advantage of building relationships linked to one's street of residence to discuss and share problems, opportunities and important events. The second is expressing one's opinion on issues and problems even when one cannot physically participate in face-to-face meetings, with the consciousness that others consider it.

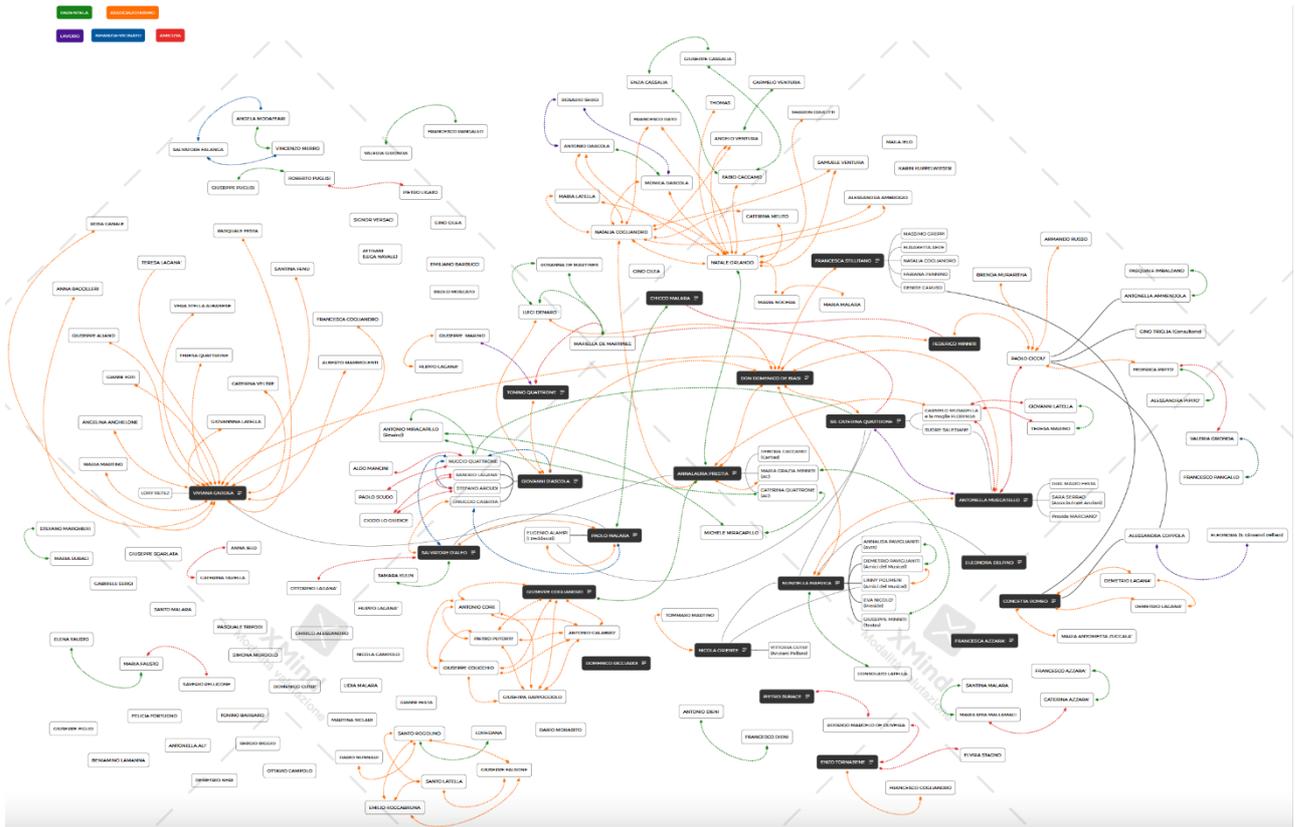


Figure 3. Example of reconstruction of relationships in a street in the Pellaro district (X-Mind software).

The quality and density of relationships built in the neighbourhood spaces and on the platform are linked to the qualitative result. Figure 3 is an example of the network of relationships (face-to-face and digital) of two streets located within the Pellaro district. The map highlights the typology of relationships between people. In green are kinship relationships, in purple those in the workplace, in orange those within associations, in blue those related to childhood acquaintances and, finally, in red those of friendship. What is noticeable is that some people do not have relational ties with others even though they live in the same context. The relational vacuum is often connected to the presence of older people who have no relatives living on the same streets. However, in other cases, the void is not filled by relationships with people who live further away. The latter cases also correspond to the most vulnerable people in some spheres of life.

Through the work of the activators, it has been possible both to reconstruct the situation of relationships and to try to promote a greater density of relationships, as well as to build them where they did not exist before, as we shall see shortly. From the analysis of the in-depth interviews carried out after the construction of the relational networks, a significant result emerges. For the people involved, the quality of the relationships that have been built has characteristics of intensity, meaning, emotionality and closeness greater than before. Being involved in relationships qualitatively perceived as positive and satisfying helps create the conditions to escape from isolation or relational vacuum circumstances.

The integrated use of community work on the territory and in digital spaces has thus enabled the inclusion of marginalised and vulnerable people through qualified, continuous, solidarity-based and close contact, building the trust that is, as we have seen, an integral part of bridging social capital (Woolcock, 2001). Through this widespread activity, people have been able to access digital spaces, thus overcoming, for some, the digital divide and, above all, the cognitive difficulties and cultural deficiencies that previously did not allow them to perceive the opportunities offered by “going digital”. (Choudrie, Tsatsou & Kurnia, 2018; Ragnedda, 2020; Tsatsou, 2011; Zamani, 2018).

Moreover, it is interesting to note a further, partially unexpected result. It concerns the activation of the first two mutualistic circles between marginalised and vulnerable people in the neighbourhood, who found spaces (real and digital) where they could express themselves with equal dignity to the other members. The object of the constitution of the circles was linked to single streets in the district where the inhabitants have similar problems and needs. An ad-hoc space for this kind of initiative was built on the digital platform, which allowed a further exchange of relations and created a space to deposit photos and official documents concerning common street problems. Figure 4 shows a picture posted by one of the activators on the digital platform of the first meeting of one of the circles/committees. The work of the circles started in November 2021. Although it is still too early to assess their impact, their establishment is a sign of meaningful change within the community.

Siamo felici che il **costituendo comitato di Pellaro** abbia scelto di ritornare a trovarci presso la Lega Navale, accogliendo la proposta di condividere anche con noi le loro idee sul futuro e lo sviluppo della comunità pellarese.

È un'altra conferma che il percorso intrapreso è la strada giusta per favorire e stimolare la partecipazione della comunità pellarese.

Ecco alcuni scatti dell'incontro, le parole chiave dalle quali siamo partiti e sulle quali ci siamo confrontati venerdì scorso. **GRAZIE!**

Gli Attivatori di Comunità



Figure 4. Photo of the first meeting of one of the two Pellaro committees.

In an experimental process such as the one described, it is also important to highlight the encountered obstacles. The biggest one, which we must reflect on the most, was the final objectives that people in the community were asking for. It did not seem possible or credible that the goal was “only” to build relationships and social ties in the district. The widespread culture of distrust most likely slowed down the process of opening up and engaging in relationships. However, the digital spaces activated (commercial and non-commercial) played a facilitating role. During the supervision of the action-research group, we identified the need to promote themes on which the people involved could begin to glimpse a possible future for their community. In this regard, the topics that represented a significant turning point for the active involvement of part of the population of Pellaro were the development of tourism related to kitesurfing⁸ and the construction of a public community space.⁹

A second obstacle, which turned into an opportunity, was Covid-19. As soon as the lockdown began, the face-to-face relationship-building activities undertaken came to a halt. However, the digital proximity platform allowed the relational weaving work to continue. It has also become concrete support for the Pellaro district, representing an unexpected and, above all, handy space for exchange and relations, favouring the exchange of information, requests for help and concrete support that would otherwise have found no other channels other than the (more limited) commercial ones.

Finally, organised crime was present in our activities without direct intervention, but - as emerged in some interviews - information was requested on the activities carried out by the activators and the newborn clubs/committees. The growth of relationality outside the direct control of the *'ndrangheta* is one of the direct challenges to the very essence of organised crime, which thrives on the illegal bonding social capital that supports people in the needs of daily life. If people break free from these ties because they build others that are positive, transparent and full of trust, the reaction of organised crime will soon be felt. During the supervision meetings of the action-research work, we shared the concern and the necessity not to trace any kind of activity to a single person who would become a symbolic target. Instead, the group, the circle/committee must be privileged.

Conclusion

We think it might be helpful to discuss four aspects of the work carried out in the Pellaro district.

The first is the capacity to develop dual relationships (social and digital) within a peripheral, marginal and vulnerable community context such as that of southern Italy. Based also on the literature on continuity and, above all, on the intertwining of real and digital in deep mediatisation, we can identify a strong interrelationship in the first results of the action-research. In the case of vulnerable people, it helps build (or rebuild) a fabric of relationships. These relationships increase the density of the relationships themselves and grow the bridging of social capital, mixing the local with the translocal (Hepp, Berg & Roitsch, 2014, pp. 175-180). Putting relationships with people at the centre, in whatever form they take,

makes it possible to lay the foundations for their activation for mutualistic and solidarity purposes, such as establishing sub-territorial mutuality circles or informal grassroots groups (Squillaci & Volterrani, 2020).

The second aspect concerns digital media. They can satisfy the seven needs (recognition, political, participatory, economic, associative, symbolic and social) (Couldry, 2012) in the most vulnerable part of the population only if the latter is made the protagonist of its actions through its “voice” (Couldry, 2010), empowerment from below and education processes (Freire, 1970; Barbas, 2020). Making vulnerable people protagonists, not only through support such as that provided by community activators, is fundamental to activating processes of real inclusion. Fostering the growth of awareness through a continuous process of relationships, non-formal educational processes and support in daily life is one of the cornerstones of our action-research work. Likely, the process of community development in Pellaro is not going in the direction initially imagined, but this, rather than being a problem, is one of the signs that people have accepted the desire to imagine their future.

The third aspect regards an unprecedented tendency to cultivate and increase the capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004), also through the digital proximity platform. In the formal and informal aggregation processes established in the district, suggestions, ideas and proposals particularly emerge on what could be implemented for its social and economic development: the valorisation of Punta Pellaro for kitesurfing, the creation of public space, the concept of the neighbourhood's decision-making autonomy with respect to the city, to name but a few. In all these cases, the digital platform has facilitated discussions and comparisons, initiated through traditional face-to-face participatory methodologies (OST and open focus groups), then continued in a virtuous circle between activism in real life and online. Of course, many steps still must be taken to imagine a strong community awareness (Freire, 1970), but face-to-face and digital spaces have undeniably contributed to a growth of awareness in a considerable part of the community in a relatively short time (12 months).

Finally, the last aspect to highlight is the deep intertwining between traditional and mediated communities (Hepp & Hitzler, 2016; Hepp, 2020), even if these are mainly composed of vulnerable people. In our case, at the beginning of the action-research the 'traditional' community played a crucial role in developing the digital one. Once people took possession of the digital environment, however, the parts were reversed: through the digital platform, it was possible to expand and involve other parts of the community. Here we want to solicit two reflections: 1) digital inclusion processes cannot be separated from face-to-face inclusion processes within communities; 2) non-formal education processes are central and pass through pre-existing and newly constructed relationships within communities.

The Pellaro action-research experience is still in progress. The hope is that it will continue to provide valuable indications to all those who want to undertake a process of dual community development, both real and digital, to ensure that people no longer feel alone.

Biographical Notes

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Note

¹ Community development is the ability to increase the social capital and social cohesion of a community to achieve a greater relational density and make the community a resource for citizens. Going even deeper, we can also use the term “collectivity”, which is any figuration of individuals who share a certain meaningful belonging and provide a basis for action - and orientation - in common (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 168).

² The term “communitarisation” (*Vergemeinschaftung*) was coined by Max Weber to describe processes that could lead to more stable communities: “A social relationship will be called ‘communitarisation’ if and to the extent that the orientation of social action lies in the individual instance, or in the average, or as a pure typification of a subjectively felt sense of belonging (emotional or traditional) among the people involved” (Weber, 1999; our translation).

³ The Macramè Consortium is a consortium of social cooperatives leader of the community development program in the Pellaro district and is financed by the Con il Sud Foundation.

⁴ The map is available at the following address <https://bit.ly/3KOJvBf> (last accessed 7 May 2022)

⁵ Ekei is the name of the proprietary digital platform developed by the Macramè Consortium together with a group of engineers. The word derives from ancient Greek and means 'local'.

⁶ The participatory tools we used were the open space technology (with predefined general themes) and the world café (to discuss themes and share more detailed ideas about the future of Pellaro).

⁷ The commercial platform Qiqochat (<https://qiqochat.com/about>) was adapted by building digital spaces corresponding to some real spaces in the Pellaro community. Thus, it was possible to meet to discuss issues that emerged during the informal and in-depth interviews and, above all, during the focus groups.

⁸ Punta Pellaro is known for being a place where there is wind all year round, a paradise for kitesurfing sports lovers.

⁹ One of the recurring themes in the interviews carried out.