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BOOK REVIEW

Un attentato “quasi terroristico”. Macerata 2018, il razzismo e la sfera pubblica al tempo dei social media (*A 'quasi-terrorist' attack. Macerata 2018, racism and the public sphere at the time of social media*), edited by Marcello Maneri and Fabio Quassoli, Roma, Carocci Editore, 2020, 144 pp., €16, ISBN: 978-88-290-0285-6.

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What counts as a terror event in contemporary audience societies? And why are certain forms of terrorism treated differently than others? The volume edited by Marcello Maneri and Fabio Quassoli examines how unexpected or otherwise traumatic events shape the content and functioning of the public sphere in advanced democracies, shedding light on the mechanisms driving public debates “in times of crisis” (Della Porta et al. 2020).

This short but richly detailed volume focuses on the configuration of increasingly complex media ecosystems. The authors seek to uncover the consequences of dramatic events in the public sphere, and notably the public construction of meaning around terror events. This, they argue, requires enquiring the functioning of the public sphere across multiple channels, including mainstream newspapers and news broadcasting, but also the social media and other digital platforms for citizen participation. Hence, they offer a detailed and instructive empirical analysis of the public debates that followed the drive-by shooting of five men and one woman of African origin, which was perpetrated in February 2018 by a 28-year-old far-right activist named Luca Traini in the city of Macerata, Italy. Unlike other terror attacks that shook Europe over the last years (Solheim 2021), this event triggered tepid political reactions, obtained inconsistent visibility in national media, and – ultimately – was not framed as an act of terrorism.

The reason, the authors argue, has mainly to do with the reconfiguration of the (Italian) media sphere, which is an increasingly complex ecosystem whereby traditional and new media coexist, interact, and feed on each other. On the one hand, the authors compare the reactions unfolding on the web and in social media, to the coverage of the events emerging in mainstream news and TV broadcasts. On the other, they look at the interplay between bottom-up political engagement in the social media sphere, and traditional forms of political communication in electoral campaigning and the legacy media. In the opening chapter, Guido Anselmi, Marcello Maneri and Fabio Quassoli situate the volume in research on digital citizen participation and *connective* action in new communication environments (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Rainie and Wellman 2014). They show how traditional media have neutralized the *digital movement of opinion* that emerged in the aftermaths of the attacks (Barisone, Michailidou, and Airoidi 2019), contained alternative interpretations of the events, and realigned the discussion in line with established cleavages and frames.

The following chapters take a more in depth look at the interplay between the social media, the print media (Chapter 2 by Monica Colombo and Fabio Quassoli) and news broadcasting (Chapter 3, Flavio Piccoli). The chapters show how legacy media have been able to preserve their role as gatekeepers in news selection processes: while there is intense communication across the different components of the Italian media ecosystem, autonomous citizen voices in social media are obfuscated by the digital activities of mainstream politicians and professional journalists. Not only is the impact of digital discussions on the broader public sphere limited, but also heavily reliant on classic news production logics and journalistic routines (De Vreese, Esser, and Hopmann 2016). In Chapter 4, Federico Pilati examines the process of diffusion of junk news about the events, highlighting the infrastructural conditions of their circulation and the joint role of the web and traditional media agendas in spreading disinformation (Gray, Bounegru, and Venturini 2020; Rojecki and Meraz 2016). Oscar Ricci uses the talk pages of the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia to reveal how knowledge about Macerata was created, which offers a broad comparative account of the strategies to produce worldviews across different entries in Italian, English, French, German and Spanish. Finally, Annalisa Frisina and Andrea Pogliano consider the Italian media's portrayal of race, and disentangle the political and cultural mechanisms that led to de-politicising the Macerata shooting, showing how the denial of racism and the expression of white innocence hampered the construction of the events as a terror attack (Wekker 2016).

Overall, the volume has three main merits, in that it combines (1) an advanced theoretical understanding of the linkages between mainstream media and digital counter-publics; (2) a deep understanding of the dynamics and actors of this process, supported by a rigorous empirical analysis of online and offline political participation; and (3) a thorough analytical toolbox for the study of public reactions to unexpected, dramatic events.

A first merit is theoretical: the authors combine notions developed by cultural sociologists, scholars of communication and researchers in social movement studies, to develop a framework that can be applied to different communication channels, and help make sense of the linkages between online and offline discussions, local events and national debates. By doing so, the book does not indulge on overly simplified understandings of the impact of digitalization on the functioning of the public sphere. On the contrary, it sheds light on the logics and dynamics driving the relationship between mainstream discourse and “fringe” collective action in complex media systems (Bail 2012). Notably, the book illustrates how the political mainstream may resist cultural change, and the conditions under which new forms of digital participation, such as digital movements of opinion or networked publics, albeit successful in mobilizing online crowds in social media platforms, may fail to alter the contours of mainstream discourse.

A second main merit of the volume is empirical. The authors offer a deep, empirical examination of a single event, which took place in a relatively small city in Italy, but successfully link it to the broader comparative literature on the consequences of dramatic junctures on public debates, and the transformations brought about by digital media in political communication. In this regard, the book implicitly rests on a deviant case study analysis (Castelli Gattinara, O'Connor, and Lindekilde 2018), exploring the conditions for which a “media event” (Dayan and Katz 2009) that would ordinarily be expected to occur, did not actually happen. If the authors make regular parallels with the case of Charlie Hebdo, future research could also link

to other attacks committed by White perpetrators, such as the Halle synagogue or Christchurch mosque shootings, which saw disproportionate attention to the mental illness of the perpetrators rather than their ideological motivation (Kunst, Myhren, and Onyeador 2018).

The final merit is analytical, in that the analysis of the differences between “terrorism” and what the authors call “quasi-terrorism” offers valuable insights for the understanding of eventful temporality and the potentially disruptive effects of dramatic events. The argument proposed by the authors effectively straddles the conceptual distinction between normal and exceptional times (Della Porta 2014), by pointing out that no event is, in and of itself, a “focusing” event, and no juncture a “critical juncture”. Even though acts of political violence such as terror events can work as turning points, whether they trigger an accelerated rupture, an incremental change, or enduring stability, crucially depends on the way in which events are interpreted. The transformative capacity of events is thus performatively created, but it is also structurally restrained by its own implications throughout society and by the rules and practices that organize the functioning of the public sphere.

Overall, the authors’ effort to integrate systematically the analysis of online and offline debates, and the argument that collective reactions to dramatic events take place at the intersection between different arenas of political participation, sets this book apart from other studies on the digitalization of the public sphere. While more comparative work is needed to put some of the major claims made in the book on more solid empirical ground, this does not call into question the quality and usefulness of this study in assessing the mechanisms by which the political mainstream resists cultural change and neutralize the digital movements emerging from social media platforms.

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