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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Communication Creates Partial Organization: A comparative analysis of the organizing practices of two climate action movements, Youth for Climate and Fridays for Future Italy

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**ABSTRACT:** This article focuses on a neglected aspect of the climate action movement Fridays for Future, namely, the relationship between its mediated communication practices and its early organizational processes. Drawing from a strand of organizational communication that underscores the constitutive dimension of communication to organizing processes, we analyze the significance of mediatized leadership and networked communication for the foundation and early development of two national chapters of Fridays for Future: Youth for Climate (YFC) Belgium and Fridays for Future Italy (FFFI). Whereas YFC begun as a leader-centered movement, the movement's founders went on to include a wider group of organizers in the national team. Conversely, FFFI begun as an ostensibly leaderless movement but evolved into an increasingly structured organization with elected delegates and national spokespersons. We argue that the two movements partially structured themselves in order to reconcile two conflicting sets of aspirations and requirements: the open, inclusive, and egalitarian ethos of social movements, and the need of navigating the complexities of a type of activism that is cognizant of media exposure, relies on expert knowledge, and manages an advanced division of political labor between local, national, and international groups.
**KEYWORDS**: Climate action movement; Fridays for Future; Youth for Climate; partial organization; communication
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## 1. Introduction

Since 2018, the youth climate movement Fridays for Future (FFF) has become a key player in the international mobilization and debate on climate change. Taking inspiration from the exemplary school strike started by Swedish pupil Greta Thunberg in summer 2018, FFF emerged as a leading transnational youth movement, organizing four Global Climate Strikes (GCS) in 2019, which mobilized millions of students around the world. After a lull due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions on gatherings and demonstrations, FFF resumed its mobilization in late 2020, and continued its protest actions in the following years. Scholars have analyzed the social, cultural, and political significance of FFF along several dimensions, including its demographic composition, generational character, digital repertoires of action, movement building strategies, and the evolution of the activists' motivational, diagnostic, and prognostic frames (Fisher 2019; de Moor et al. 2020, Kenis 2021; Sorce and Dumitrica 2021; de Moor et al. 2021).

In this article, we focus on a relatively neglected aspect of FFF, namely, the relationship between its mediated communication practices and its early organizing processes. More specifically, we investigate whether and how the mediatization of the climate action movement affects its organizing processes. Drawing from a strand of organizational communication that posits the constitutive dimension of communication to organizing processes (see Schoeneborn et al. 2019), we analyze the significance of *media exposure* and *networked communication* to the foundation and early development of two national chapters of FFF, Youth for Climate Belgium (YFC) and Fridays for Future Italy (FFFI). This line of inquiry is particularly relevant insofar as the media representation and the scholarly literature on FFF have either focused on the figure of Greta Thunberg and other FFF leaders or on the seemingly spontaneous participation of millions of youth. At a closer look, however, the first mobilizations of FFF produced relatively stable networks of climate activists who have been playing a key role in shaping the organization and strategic vision of the movement. Focusing on the communicative practices of these networks allows us to grasp social media-based communication not only as a means to communicate preformed beliefs *to* a public but also as a sociotechnical process *through which* movements come into being. Indeed, as we will see, YFC and FFFI were born from social media pages and campaigns rather than the other way around. However, as they began to structure their organization, the two chapters adopted a wider array of digital tools to debate ideas and coordinate their actions.

Certainly, as several scholars have argued, media activists and social media managers deserve attention because of their "connective leadership," that is, for their ability to connect people to information (Della Ratta and Valeriani 2012) and steer "protest activity through the careful construction of a general protest framework" (Poell et al. 2016, p. 1004). At the same time, traditional forms of mediated representation do not disappear because of the rise of social media. While connective leaders perform a type of organizing work that is mostly invisible to the general public, the representational logic of the media tends to select a few activists and transform them into celebrities (Altheide and Snow 1979; Gitlin 1980). To be sure, activists have always been critical of the mainstream media's tendency to enhance the visibility and elevate the authority of few individuals. For example, Micó and Casero-Ripollés (2013) show that the indignados movement was initially skeptical and recalcitrant to communicate with the media. In contrast, Greta Thunberg's massive media exposure suggests a return of mediatized leadership after the "horizontalist" movements of the early 2010s (Azzellini and Sitrin 2014). This raises in turn the question of whether and how mediatized leadership affects the internal organization of the climate action movement. In order to answer this question, which remains underexplored in the scholarly literature, we compare an originally leader-centric movement such as YFC to an originally leaderless movement such as FFFI to see how the presence or absence of mediatized leaders has affected the early organization of FFF and the development of its strategic vision.

On a second level, we conceptualize the activists' communicative practices as constitutive of the organizing process. Building on Ahrne and Brunnson's useful definition of organization as a "decided order" (Ahrne and Brunnson 2011), we ask how the decisions taken by YFC and FFFI activists shaped the emergence of their respective organizations. Because these organizational dynamics are heavily dependent upon the Belgian and Italian political cultures, we first carefully describe the contextual factors that affected each decision. By relying on a most different systems design, we find that while the two movement branches started from

seemingly diverging organizing models, they ended up converging toward a similar model of distributed leadership. Our findings are based on fourteenth semi-structured, in-depth interviews with core organizers and social media managers of FFFI and YFC. The interviews reveal that in spite of the many differences that characterize the Belgian and Italian contexts – as well as the specific ideological tensions and organizational dynamics proper to each chapter – certain variables remain constant. In particular, the arena of climate change politics has prompted the two organizations to adopt an advanced division of political labor where designated individuals act as liaisons with the media, the scientific community, institutions, and civil society organizations. At the same time, lacking a formal governance and membership structure, YFC and FFFI are not completely structured organizations. On the one hand, the hybrid and flexible nature of this model is dictated by the practical necessities of running an organization that remains as open as possible to youth participation. On the other hand, organizational flexibility appears to be mirrored by an ideological flexibility aiming at holding together different components of the movement through the widely inclusive frame of climate justice.

## 2. Connective and mediatized leadership, partial and complete organizations

There is little doubt that the mediatization of Greta Thunberg has allowed millions of pupils around the world to identify with her exemplary gesture of civil disobedience. Such identification is manifest, for example, in the widespread use of personal protest signs at the FFF demonstrations. These draw inspiration from Thunberg's original handcrafted sign *Skolstrejk för klimatet* (School strike for climate) and are frequently shared on social media platforms via the hashtag #FridaysforFuture, which was also introduced by Thunberg. From this perspective, the youth-led climate mobilizations seem to follow a logic which is more *connective* than *collective*, that is, self-motivated participants connect to one another and join protest events without the need for the intermediation of formal organizations. According to Bennett and Segerberg (2013), as platforms now provide much of the communicative infrastructure for the coordination of collective action, formal organizations, whose resources were foundational in the pre-digital era, become less central. The logic of collective action theorized by Mancur Olson (1965) thus gives way to the emergence of a new logic of connective action where self-organized participants leverage the reduced coordination costs afforded by digital media and digital platforms (Earl and Kimport 2011). From this angle, the logic of connective action dovetails with the emergence of seemingly spontaneous and "leaderless" movements such as the Arab Spring, Occupy, the indignados and the Hong Kong movement, among others (Bennett, Segerberg, and Walker 2014; Mercea and Funk, 2016; Wang and Zhou 2021).

Contra Bennett and Segerberg, a number of scholars have argued that even as digital platforms provide an infrastructure that lowers the transaction costs of collective action, they do not fully serve as "organizing agents" of the crowd insofar as activists still need to make some collective decisions about the management and editorial line of collective accounts (Coretti and Pica 2015; Kavada 2015; Treré 2015). Furthermore, activists leverage the affordances of social messaging applications such as Telegram, Whatsapp, Messenger, WeChat, and Signal in ways that have often not been foreseen by the platform designers (Bonini and Treré 2024). In this respect, media activists and core organizers are the ultimate organizing agents of online and offline crowds, not the media platforms. Specifically, these connective leaders have the ability to network different activist communities (Juris 2008), enable online mobilizations (Earl and Kimport 2011), "choreograph" street protests (Gerbaudo 2012) and experiment with innovative forms of organizing and decision-making (Postill 2018; Hall 2022; Deseriis 2024). Thus, assessing the relationship between connective leadership and mediatized leadership can be useful to understand how a movement develops its organization and vision. On an organizational level, while connective leadership tends to distribute power among a wide range of actors, mediatized leadership tends to concentrate power in the hands of a few. At the same time, the organizational form of a movement whose theory of change is predicated on mass mobilization is inevitably shaped by its openness to newcomers and a broad-based development of the movement's vision and action frames (Snow and Benford 1988).

A relatively recent strand of communication studies known as Communication Constitutes Organization (CCO) holds that organizations emerge from the overlapping, or imbrication, of informal everyday conversations and the transactional texts that fix and codify the organization (Taylor and van Every 2000; Kavada 2015). In this sense, communication does not occur *inside* organizations but constitutes them, that is, it is a meaning-making process whereby organization takes shape. Not all organizations, however, are equally structured and present the same degree of formalization. One strand of CCO scholarship focuses on social formations "that one would not necessarily classify as organizations but that can nevertheless be studied in terms of the degrees of organizationality that they reach" (Schoenenborn et al., 2019, p. 487). Ahrne and Brunnson (2011) have theorized these degrees of organizationality through the concept of partial organization. In contrast to networks, which are sustained through informal relationships, organizations are "a particular kind of social order," which is structured by different types of decisions. "We see decision as the most fundamental aspect of organization," write Ahrne and Brunnson (2011, p. 85). It follows that a complete organization is a decided order that typically features five elements: 1) a *membership,* which is instituted to formally set the boundaries of the organization; 2) a *hierarchy* through which authority is established and defined; 3) a set of *rules*, which bind member behavior; 4) a *monitoring* activity aimed at ensuring that rules are enhanced and followed; and 5) a set of *sanctions*, including both positive incentives (*e.g.*, promotions and pay raises) and negative incentives (*e.g.*, demotions and expulsions). Partial organizations, on the other hand, are an *emergent* social order where some of the five elements outlined above have not been fully decided (Ahrne and Brunnson 2011). It follows that social networks, crowds, social movements, NGOs, and political parties can be analyzed as different typologies of social order characterized by *varying degrees of crystallization*, ranging from the spontaneous and emergent (social networks, crowds) to the partially structured (social movements) to the fully decided and completely structured (NGOs, parties).

Drawing on the partial organization framework, social movement scholars have argued that social movements are, indeed, partial organizations insofar as they routinely mix elements of a decided order with elements of an emergent order (Den Hond, De Bakker and Smith 2016; Laamanen et al. 2020). For example, whereas social movements tend to rely on voluntary participation, they often incorporate social movement organizations (SMOs), which rely instead on a formal membership structure. Furthermore, although many social movements eschew formalized leadership, informal hierarchies can emerge through the delegation of tasks to specific individuals or the formation of cliques where some individuals have greater decision-making power than others (Sutherland, Land, and Böhm 2013). Furthermore, as noted, in a context in which the organization of collective action is increasingly mediated by digital networks, tech-savvy individuals tend to acquire a leading role or "leadership function" for their ability to mediate between different organizational nodes (Nunes 2021) within a broader media ecology (Treré and Mattoni 2016). This last point raises in turn the question of how digital media practices affect and shape the structure of partial organizations. Odilla and Mattoni (2023), for example, adopt the concept of partial organization to describe the overlapping of multiple organizational patterns within a Brazilian digital anti-corruption initiative, ranging from the consensus-oriented decision-making of the core group of organizers to the implementation of a defined hierarchical structure between core organizers, collaborators, and followers. They also find that some of the organizational challenges of anti-corruption initiatives derive from the difficulty of coalescing the motivations and expectations of participants into a cohesive collective identity.

In the case of FFF, the development of the movement frames went instead hand in hand with the formation of a cohesive youth identity. Whereas FFF did not introduce the climate justice frame – which had emerged in the preceding decade through a gradual process of "climatization" of NGOs and "movement spillover" of the global justice movement (Hadden 2015; Ayut et al. 2017) – by emphasizing the generational aspects of climate justice, Thunberg and colleagues initially constructed the youth as the main subject and ideal recipient of the transition to a low-carbon economy. This is particularly clear in the case of Youth for Climate, whose very name and slogan "One Generation, One Voice" implicitly called for intergenerational responsibility. In doing so, however, generational claims initially risked clouding the responsibility of established targets of climate justice mobilizations such as the fossil fuel industry, the governments of the industrialized North, and the post-political consensus for engineering and market-oriented solutions to climate change (Kenis 2021; de Moor et

al. 2021). What is more, generational action frames call into being specific repertoires of action and organizational ecologies, ranging from the organization of student-led strikes to the birth of allied associations such as Parents for Future, Grandparents for Climate, and so on. This means that action frames can hardly be separated from the organizational processes that are meant to actualize them. For this reason, although this article is not strictly focused on action frames, we will address the role that the climate justice frame has played in the organizational evolution of FFFI and YFC.

## 3. Research design, data and methods

Our research is based on fourteen in-depth qualitative interviews with ten core organizers of FFFI and four core organizers of YFC collected between the summer of 2020 and the spring of 2022.[1] We selected our case studies on the basis of a most different systems design (Przeworski and Teune 1970; della Porta 2008). Our aim was to understand whether notwithstanding organizational, ideological, and contextual differences YFC and FFFI share some common features and to identify the factors underlying such commonalities. First, on an organizational level, we wanted to understand how the mediatization of the climate action movement affects its organization and decision-making processes. In this respect, Belgium and Italy offered two ideal case studies to assess how an organization in which connective leadership coexisted with mediatized leadership (YFC) and an organization in which connective leadership coexisted with an ostensible lack of recognized leaders (FFFI) were internally structured. Whereas our expectation was that YFC should have presented a more centralized structure than FFFI, we set out to verify whether this was actually the case and whether connective leaders – and in particular activists in charge of social media accounts – played a role in shaping the organization of the movement. Second, we were interested in understanding how the two chapters interpreted the climate justice framework. In particular, we had learned about the presence of an organized anti-capitalist wing within FFFI but had no comparable information about YFC. Understanding how the two chapters expressed and mediated potential differences and tensions – both internally and publicly – was important for grasping the relationship between communication and organization. Third, on a contextual level, we knew that the Belgian mobilizations were among the most significant in Europe and that they had anticipated the first FFF Global Climate Strikes organized in 2019. In particular, our interest was in understanding why YFC had acted as a vanguard and whether other contextual differences played a role in shaping the organizational evolution of each chapter.

Due to travel restrictions enforced by European governments to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, all the interviews were conducted remotely. Most informants were recruited through snowball sampling and belong in the national core group of organizers. This bias toward elite organizing is justified by the research questions, namely, understanding the role of spokespersons and core organizers within the climate action movement. More specifically, we selected informants who are visible to a higher or lesser degree in the national media and can thus be categorized as mediatized leaders, and informants who manage the social media pages of the climate action movement and can thus be considered connective leaders. In the case of YFC, we interviewed one national spokesperson and three core activists belonging in the national team of organizers meeting in Brussels. In the case of FFFI, we interviewed four national spokespersons and six core activists involved in the management of the FFFI social media accounts.

The templates of the semi-structured interviews were divided into four sections. The first part was devoted to understanding the role of the interviewee within the context of the climate mobilizations and map out the sociopolitical conditions within which YFC and FFFI emerged. The second section explored the social media

[1] The timespan of our data collection allows us to address the empirical issue of this article, namely the emergence and organizational consolidation of YFC and FFFI. Our data does not contain information about the subsequent development of the actors. Research shows that YFC significantly declined after the pandemic (Vandepitte 2023) while FFFI, though with lower numbers, persisted (Zamponi, Ferro, and Cugnata 2024). No significant organisational restructuring has been reported on the two cases.

practices, focusing on the organizational necessities dictated by the practical management of the social media accounts as well as the development of specific strategies aimed at communicating the action frames of the movement. The third part of the interview deepened the question of the relationship between the movement and other actors at a national and international level. This set of questions also explored YFC and FFFI's organizational structure and decision-making procedures, and the identification of actual or potential opponents of the movement. Finally, the fourth section was aimed at understanding how YFC and FFFI construct their action frames in relation to the media and political institutions as well as the ability of the climate action movement to address non-strictly environmental issues such as economic, racial, and gender inequalities. On average, the fourteen interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes each and were supplemented with documentary sources, providing background material that informed the analysis. In particular, we followed the Instagram and Facebook accounts of both organizations from summer 2020 through the Global Climate Strikes of fall 2021. These, however, reveal very little about the organizational dynamics internal to the chapters. For this reason, our analysis is centered on the interviews, which are highly significant for understanding the organizational effects of specific communicative choices. Interviews were systematically transcribed and inductively coded with the goal of identifying patterns of relationship between communicative and organizational practices. Although the concept of partial organization did not inspire the formulation of the research questions and the design of the interview guide, it became useful for interpreting the data.[2] Whereas we expected the presence of a hierarchical structure in YFC vis-à-vis a relative lack of hierarchies in FFFI, and the absence of formal membership in both organizations, we did not have particular expectations about the presence or absence of the three remaining dimensions of partial organization outlined by Ahrne and Brunsson (rules, monitoring, and sanctions). Thus, we did not include explicit questions about these dimensions in the interviews. However, as we will see, these dimensions emerged organically from the conversations, allowing us to compare the organizational trajectories of the two chapters. The next two sections present the results of the analysis.

## 4. Birth and early organizational structure of YFC and FFFI

In this section, we first describe the political contexts and opportunities that set the conditions for the emergence of YFC and FFFI. We also analyze the first organizational steps undertaken by the two movements, focusing on two dimensions: 1) The role played by social media in facilitating the protest; 2) The relationship between the leadership structure of the two movements and the mainstream media. On the first dimension, we find that social media played a key role in aggregating large amounts of individuals in Italy and Belgium through networks of friends and acquaintances who were at their first political experience and were by and large disconnected from organized political collectives (Juris 2012). On the second dimension, we find that while the YFC core organizers indulged the Belgian media's tendency to represent the movement mostly through the faces of three, then two, girls, the FFFI organizers initially eschewed the emergence of a mediatized leadership. However, this initial difference was not set in stone once and for all. Rather, as we will see in the following section, as the two movements consolidated their organizational structures, they converged toward a model of distributed leadership.

[2] For example, as we will see, various interviewees note that FFFI and YFC were not born out of preformed collectives and social movement organizations but of student networks who were connected in "real life" or via social media. Others point to the presence, especially in the early organizational stages of FFFI, of organized actors, but also to the movement's choice to adopt an organizational structure aimed at limiting the influence of such actors. Thus codes and themes such as "social networks" and "structured organization" and "social media-enabled mobilizations" induced us to look for a theory that could explain the hybrid nature of this emerging organizational form. The theory of partial organization suits this purpose exceptionally well.

## 4.1. Mediatized and connective leadership in YFC

From a motivational standpoint, the YFC mobilizations were triggered by a specific event: the Belgian government's refusal to join the High Ambition Coalition, an intergovernmental initiative which was pushing for an ambitious climate agenda at the COP24 Conference on Climate Change. Held in Katowice, Poland, in early December 2018, the Conference had been preceded by a record-breaking demonstration on climate change organized by several NGOs in Brussels, which had been attended by 65,000 people. Enraged by their government's position, Anuna De Wever (aged 17) and Kyra Gantois (aged 19), two students based in Antwerp, decided to set up a Facebook page called Youth for Climate and make a video along with their circle of friends, calling on the Belgian youth to continue the protests. The video went viral in the Flanders in late December 2018.[3] On January 10, 2019 the first YFC demonstration was held in Brussels, drawing an unexpected crowd of 3,000 pupils, mostly from the Flanders.

The idea of organizing a school strike was clearly inspired by Greta Thunberg, whose landmark speech at the COP24 had also been widely shared online.[4] Rather than skipping school on Friday, the students decided to demonstrate every Thursday, which is the designated day for the Belgian Cabinet's meetings, until May 26, 2019, day of the regional, national, and European elections in Belgium. Thus, the nascent movement decided to take advantage of the window of opportunity provided by the election campaign to gain visibility and invite all Belgian parties to articulate their position on climate change. In the following weeks, the number of protesters in Brussels grew from 12,000 on January 17 to 35,000 on January 24 to 70,000 on January 27 for the Rise for Climate demonstration, which set a record for a climate demonstration. After reaching this milestone, the organizers decentralized the protests to several Belgian cities – including Antwerp, Leuven, and Liège, among others – where the number of demonstrators never passed 30,000 (Kenis 2021). However, on March 15, the day of the first Global Climate Strike, YFC mobilized 75,000 people in Brussels, setting a new record for climate action (De Wever and Gantois 2019).

As noted, the first protests had been attended almost exclusively by Flemish students. Thus, after the first strike, De Wever reached out to Adelaide Charlier, a high school student based in Namur, Wallonia, with the intention of expanding the movement's reach to the Francophone part of Belgium. Charlier recalls that her first organizational step consisted in setting up a network of potential participants via Facebook:

> I just created Facebook groups actually on Messenger and started adding every single friend I had from all different kinds of schools. And it ended up with a group of like 300 people, which I thought was huge, but I think it had an even bigger influence on the outside because between them, they reached out to their friends (YFC1).

Thus, since the beginning, the organization of YFC *assumed a networked structure* as the first Messenger group created by Charlier included students from different schools and often based in different cities. Those students went on to invite their friends to the Facebook events publicizing the demonstrations, including, for example, appointments for catching the trains to Brussels (YFC1). The Belgian capital became the chosen location of the first strikes for both political and geographical reasons. Politically, Brussels hosts a variety of governmental institutions, including the Belgian Federal Government, three Regional parliaments, and the main European institutions. Geographically, the city is within an hour train ride from most Belgian cities.

Whereas Brussels functioned as a protest hub, the idea of demonstrating for twenty consecutive weeks required a diversification of the mobilizing strategy. Thus, the core group of organizers soon began to respond to requests to host protest events outside of Brussels. Significantly, however, the decentralization of the protest events relied on a centralized organizational structure. Such centralization was partly the organic result of De Weaver, Gantois, and Charlier's activism, and partly derived from the media coverage, which exposed the three girls as the YFC leaders, making them the movement figureheads. Although Charlier rejects the qualification of leader, preferring that of core organizer, she does not consider lending her face to the

[3] https://www.facebook.com/anuna.dewever/videos/2186076611610175.
[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFkQSGyeCWg.

movement a problem. On the contrary, she recognizes that part of the reason why she started YFC was because she identified with Thunberg's personal story and message:

> I think it's really helpful for people to be able to recognize themselves in a face and in a person. Because for myself when I really got conscious and I thought 'Oh, I actually can do something' it was because I looked at Greta and thought 'Okay, this girl is like two years younger than me and she was brave enough to strike, and I can do the same thing.' So, I think that having a story behind a movement and having a story behind a person really helps you to get engaged (YFC1).

Charlier's point is supported by survey data, which show that a significant motivational factor for many participants in the first GCS, in Belgium and other European countries, was precisely Thunberg's exemplary story and message (de Moor et al. 2020: 23–26). It is no accident that Thunberg herself joined the Belgian demonstrations during the seventh and eighth strikes, further amplifying their visibility (Wouters, De Vydt, and Staes 2022). And it is no accident that the Belgian media framed the protests by elevating the profiles of girls such as Charlier, De Wever, and Gantois. At the same time, by setting up the first YFC Facebook page and using social messaging applications such as Messenger and Discord as organizing tools, the three girls also acted as connective leaders. In this way, however, the combination of media exposure and connective leadership had the effect of creating a significant power imbalance between the initial group of core organizers and other activists, especially those organizing outside of Brussels, who received no comparable media exposure. Before discussing the repercussions of mediatized leadership upon the internal organization of YFC, we should consider that not every chapter of FFF is led by public figures. Thus, it is worth contrasting the case of Belgium to a case country such as Italy, where the mobilization of the student body reached comparably high levels but remained, for all intents and purposes, "leaderless."

## 4.2. The leaderless organizational structure of FFFI

A notable difference between YFC and FFFI concerns the political circumstances that led to their birth. Whereas YFC was launched in response to a specific political event – namely, the Belgian government's lack of initiative at the COP24 – the Italian FFF emerged in the context of the transnational mobilization leading up to the first GCS of March 15, 2019. In this respect, YFC served as an inspiration to FFFI, whose organizers were initially more motivated to take part in the nascent transnational movement than mobilizing against the Italian government. Yet, if the political circumstances differ, the organizational dynamics appear in many respects similar. In particular, our interviewees report that FFFI was not born from preexisting student collectives and organizations but mainly from the spontaneous aggregation of pupils who had learned about the protests through acquaintances and newborn social media accounts. Indeed, the name "Fridays for Future Italia" surfaces for the first time as a set of social media pages in March 2019. As an FFFI organizer based in Sassari explains,

> This is one of the curious things about the history of FFF, the social media pages were born *before* any organization of FFF in Italy. A social media group, a website, was there long before I joined the national organization. I did not see the dawn of this group. In the beginning, it functioned by cooptation: *Do you want to help out? Go ahead*. (FFFI1).

Over the course of time, admission to the management of the FFFI national social media accounts became subject to a more structured selective process. Yet our informants point out that, similar to Belgium, setting up social messaging channels and social media pages was one of the first organizational steps they undertook both locally and nationally. Unlike Belgium, however, this process was not started by a single group of activists but was instead a polycentric process which brought together students located in different Italian cities. Whereas some of the activists had a background in environmental organizations such as Greenpeace, student unions,

and occupied social centers, the majority of participants had no prior political experience (FFFI5). As we will see, the relationship among these components was not always frictionless. However, in the beginning, the organizational needs preceded, and in a certain sense preempted, political and ideological differences. Indeed, the participation to the March 15 strike was so massive that it caught the organizers by surprise. Overall, the strike saw the participation of 400,000 people in nearly 200 Italian cities, 100,000 of which took to the streets in Milan alone.[5] Our interviewees point out that organizers expected participation to be approximately ten times smaller than what it turned out to be (FFFI1 and FFFI7). This unexpected success had the double effect of setting in motion dozens of local FFFI chapters, the vast majority of which coalesced after the strike, and generating significant media interest in the movement. However, as of March 2019, FFFI still lacked a logistical and political structure at a national level. This quickly became a pressing issue as organizers had to make important decisions, ranging from how to address the national media to how to develop a shared political line.

In order to address such issues, FFFI held its first national assembly in Milan in April 2019. The meeting saw the emergence of two cleavages. First, on a political level, the discussion focused on the centrality of the economic system to the climate emergency and on whether the movement had to take a clear anti-capitalist position. Second, participants debated whether the movement had to adopt an informal or a more formalized organizational structure. The organizational question was a proxy for how the nascent movement was going to mediate between pre-established political groups, such as the student unions and the social centers, and activists who were often at their first political experience. Whereas the organized groups tended to be more at ease with the framework of a loosely structured organization, the inexperienced activists supported the creation of a more formalized structure. The groups were reluctant to create a formal organization for different reasons, including the desire to retain their autonomy and anxieties concerning the possible hegemony of other political groups. The compromise that was reached held together the refusal to implement any substantive transfer of power to the national level with the creation of an organization which presents a certain degree of formalization. In particular, the constituent assembly of FFFI laid the foundations for the institution of a delegate-based structure, which was subsequently implemented through the creation of a Telegram chat, whose access was reserved to two city delegates per chapter.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, given the impossibility for activists to meet in person, the Telegram chat acquired a central function, quickly becoming the main organizational backbone of the movement.[6] Besides using Telegram, FFFI activists relied on a variety of digital applications, including the videoconferencing platform Zoom, and Trello, a project management and collaboration tool. The use of these tools was strictly integrated. For example, Zoom was used to facilitate meetings where decisions were taken based on discussions that had emerged in the Telegram chat. Trello was used to keep track of specific projects and campaigns. And the Telegram chat was often employed for direct consultations of the delegates via the distribution of polls. Before using Telegram, the activists relied on Whatsapp and, for a relatively short period, Discord. As a spokesperson based in Rome points out, the latter had been considered for its ability to support subgroups and an advanced division of political labor:

> Discord allows you to organize your work well, but it is less immediate to understand how to use it than WhatsApp or Telegram, so it happened that the work was organized but there were only sixty people compared to the two hundred that were supposed to be there, so every time we had to make a decision, we didn't understand if it was legitimate or whether we had to wait for this channel to grow a little more. But it never did because many people didn't download the application. . . and so we had to switch to another platform again. We arrived to Telegram and Telegram worked, even if it does not enable the creation of subgroups in the strict sense [FFFI2].

Because Telegram does not support discussion threads or subgroups, a variety of Working Groups (WGs), each with its own chat, were created to coordinate specific campaigns and organizational tasks. Access to the

[5] Fridays for Future Italia, Lettera aperta "A chi sostiene Fridays for Future" [Open letter "To those who support Fridays for Future"], 18 March 2019. https://fridaysforfutureitalia.it/letteraaperta18marzo.

[6] The first post-Covid19 assembly of FFFI was held in the port city of Civitavecchia in April 2022.

WGs is typically limited to delegates, especially when sensitive political issues are at stake "such as the relations with the unions, other European FFFs, campaigns, and so on. Other groups are open, everyone can join, and those are the hands-on groups [which include] writing articles, graphic design, videomaking, etc." (FFFI1). Access to the politically sensitive groups was originally limited to delegates in order to avoid that organized factions could take over some of them. At the same time, the proliferation of groups raised the question of how to coordinate them so as to avoid duplicate processes and potential conflicts. To this end, core organizers use Trello to keep track of the active WGs:

> We have a Trello board that lists all the working groups, divided by categories, with a description of what they do, what you are supposed to know in order to join them, who takes part, and so on. . . Ideally, everyone should be able to understand what they can do, how they can be useful, and then contact the group coordinators. . . In practice, however, there is a double filter, that is, on the one hand the delegates do not know about this thing, so they do not share it with the local groups, and on the other hand it is still an additional tool that not everyone wants to use [FFFI2].

If these reflections point to the structural limitations of bottom-up organizing within a networked movement, as we will see in the next section, such limitations were to be partly compensated by the emergence of a soft leadership and the establishment of a rule-bound decision-making process. For now, it is sufficient to observe that during the first six months of the Italian protest cycle, the initial spontaneity of the mobilizations gave way to an increasingly organized movement whose digital infrastructure acquired a central function for the coordination of the vast majority of FFFI activities, especially in the years of the Covid-19 pandemic. Such an infrastructure allows organizers to communicate on a daily basis, make decisions concerning the proposals coming from the local level, coordinate the strikes with the international branches of FFF, manage the social media accounts, and develop a cohesive national agenda and communication strategy.

## 5. Organizational consolidation in FFFI and YFC

If in the initial phase the two movements built their internal organization on the practical necessities of organizing protest events, as time went by, they begun to structure some of the elements that make up a partial organization. As noted, according to Ahrne and Brunsson (2011), a complete organization is a decided order based on five components: membership, hierarchy, rules, monitoring, and sanctions. The less these elements are formally defined the more the organization tends to be partial, that is, unstructured. Whereas *membership* in both YFC and FFFI has remained informal, insofar as none of these organizations requires participants to own a membership card, our findings show that some of the other elements were formally or informally decided as time went by. In particular, in this section, we show how both YFC and FFFI saw the emergence of an internal *hierarchy*, and, as time went by, adopted *rules* and norms aimed at defining specific decision-making procedures, powers, and responsibilities. Further, both movements strictly *monitored* their communication strategy, which led to significant organizational adjustments and restructuring as time went by. Finally, although given the lack of formal membership, YFC and FFFI do not levy formal sanctions on participants, they did in some cases distance themselves from self-styled spokespersons who were in fact not authorized to speak on behalf of the movement.

### 5.1. Soft leadership and rule-bound decision-making in FFFI

As noted, the organizational consolidation of FFFI coincided with the emergence of a technopolitical infrastructure whose backbone is a national Telegram chat. This hosts city chapter delegates and functions de facto as a permanent online assembly, mediating between the input coming from the local level, the national student unions, and the international branches of FFF. As we have seen, this decision-making infrastructure was born out of a compromise between diverging proposals concerning the degree of centralization and

formalization of the nascent organization. In this section, we describe the internal decision-making procedure of the chat and consider how the definition of the movement's action frames and their representation in the public sphere have had the effect of partially structuring FFFI after the initial spontaneous mobilizations.

To begin with, as noted in the previous section, the constituent assembly of FFFI had established the principle that the power to make final decisions rests with the local chapters of FFFI. This means that the Telegram chat was meant as nothing but a coordination network whereby delegates, whose terms of appointment were determined by the chapters themselves, relay the outcomes of such decisions. One of the national spokespersons describes this process as such:

> When a proposal arrives [in the Telegram chat] everybody [the delegates] forwards it to their group, the groups say what they think and they [the delegates] bring it back. Obviously, this procedure is very long so quite often in reality things do not work that way. It happens that the groups delegate the assessment to their point person and then we proceed even in the presence of a limited de facto feedback (FFFI2).

Although the spokesperson points to a gap between the formal procedure and its actualization, it is clear that such procedure is governed by *rule*s which all delegates are required to follow, even though the definition and degree of formalization of such rules may change over the course of time. Furthermore, it is also clear that the Telegram chat entails a *hierarchy*. To be sure, our informants frequently qualify FFFI as a horizontal movement. Yet the spokesperson's words suggest that delegates may not always have the time to consult the local chapters on every single decision. It follows that delegates have more decisional power than the average participant in a local FFFI chapter and must be considered for this reason "soft leaders" (Spini 2023). Certainly, delegative democracy differs from representative democracy mainly because delegates are subject to instant recall, that is, they do not enjoy the same level of autonomy as elected representatives (Held 2006, p. 120). Nonetheless, there is little doubt that delegative democracy entails a hierarchy, which is formally absent only in the variant of direct democracy based on the assembly open to all citizens (della Porta 2013).

Further, since 2021, the Telegram chat has been used to coordinate the election of six and then eight national spokespersons that have the function of representing FFFI in the media. If the very existence of an election procedure indicates that FFFI is a rule-bound organization, the collective decision to appoint authorized spokespersons was dictated by a very practical need, namely, ensuring that the media, in their search for the "Italian Greta," would not select their preferred spokespersons. Indeed, since 2019, the Italian media had been trying to identify someone who could speak on behalf of the movement. As an FFFI activist based in Rome recalls, this had had unintended consequences:

> There was this person who often went on TV, gave interviews, etc., on behalf of FFF, declaring to be the Italian spokesperson of FFF. But nobody knew her. She was in Rome, but she did not do anything, she never came to the strikes, I have seen her once or twice in my life. And that is only because she was the only Italian who managed to get into the UN Climate Summit of 2019, which was also attended by Greta. And so, she decided to proclaim herself Queen of the World (Interview FFFI9).

As a result, FFFI explicitly requested the (self-styled) spokesperson *not* to speak on behalf of the movement and disowned her again when she run for office in 2022.[7] Similarly, in early 2021, FFFI issued a joint press release with the Milanese chapter of FFFI to disown a self-styled FFFI organizer who had made an unauthorized endorsement of the Democratic Party's candidate to Mayor of Milan.[8]

Taken altogether, these actions suggest that organizers *monitor* the public image of the movement and *sanction*, albeit informally, individuals who are not authorized to speak on its behalf. Moreover, the choice to elect spokespersons – that is, individuals endowed with a mandate – clearly installed a new *hierarchical layer* within the organization. To be sure, as compared to the Belgian chapter, in FFFI the symbolic power derived

[7] See https://www.affaritaliani.it/politica/federica-gasbarro-la-cocca-di-di-maio-attaccata-dalla-sua-fridays-for-future-811054.html.

[8] See https://fridaysforfutureitalia.it/il-fff-non-sostiene-alcun-partito.

from media exposure is more widely distributed. Yet to speak of a completely horizontal movement, as FFFI activists often do, would be inaccurate given also the informal hierarchies that emerged organically through the movement's internal structuring. As one of the national spokespersons points out, "right now [in 2021], we are experiencing this fossilization of the same persons who have been staying in the same groups for a long time because they understand how they work, while the newcomers are unable to integrate themselves" [FFFI2]. If organizational consolidation goes hand in hand with the emergence of de facto leaders and informal elites – a well-known phenomenon in social movement research (Freeman 1972) – some WGs exert their influence by virtue of the specific activity they perform. Such is the case of the WGs in charge of running the social media accounts. As mentioned in the previous section, while access to these groups was initially based on self-selection, as time went by, the teams became more selective and organized. In 2021, the national Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter FFFI accounts were managed by three teams of five-six members each [FFFI3; FFF8]. Each team ran the accounts for an entire week:

> Like all working groups we organize ourselves on Telegram and then we have a Trello board where posts are written in advance and images are uploaded. Before publication, each post must be checked by at least a couple of people outside the team, who can comment under the post and say what doesn't convince them. And so, each post is usually prepared by a single person but then gets checked by at least five other people as each of us is perhaps more expert in one thing rather than another [FFFI8].

This process, which is clearly rule-bound, allows the social media teams to produce posts based on a wide range of sources. The teams also play a key organizational role in preparation of the strikes and of specific campaigns as they launch the hashtags associated to each action. The hashtags, however, are not designed by the teams, but are first discussed in a dedicated international FFF group that prepares "sets of proposals on the dates, slogans, hashtags and other aspects related to the Global Strikes" (Spini 2023: 172). From there, the proposed dates and hashtags are subject to the approval of the national organizations through polls that are distributed via Telegram (FFFI2). In this way, various components of the movement contribute to shape its narrative and action frames.

Among those frames, as noted, the climate justice frame plays a central role in inspiring and motivating FFF activists (Schlosberg and Collins 2014; Wahlström et al. 2013). On the one hand, in demanding climate justice, FFF and the new climate movements expand the traditional scope of environmentalism by including social and economic issues within it. On the other hand, the expression climate justice avoids the risk of being perceived as markedly ideological. This is evident from the fact that many of our interviewees do not characterize the political cleavage inside FFFI as ideology-based, but rather as communication-oriented. One of our interviewees points out that instead of discussing whether FFFI should take a clearly anticapitalist position, organizers prefer to discuss whether a movement whose theory of change is based upon mobilizing large numbers of demonstrators would be strategically savvy in using an ideologically charged language:

> Perhaps history will prove me wrong and FFF will disappear tomorrow, but [I think] we were capable of becoming more radical without losing appeal. On September 27 [2019], we were a million, whereas a major risk is that as soon as you radicalize you no longer bring anyone to the streets [FFFI1].

Thus, rather than expressing an ideological critique of capitalism, FFFI activists prefer to highlight the uneven effects of climate change on different social groups. As a Naples-based FFFI spokesperson, points out, "for us social justice and social climate are more or less the same thing [...]. We want the ecological transition to a different system, a system based on human rights, on indigenous people's rights, on LGBTQ rights" (FFFI6). The latter is a demand that is not only aimed at transforming economic and political institutions but also the internal modus operandi of the movement. As Spini (2023) points out,

> One of the most relevant discussions at the global level of FFF is the demand coming from self- defined MAPA (Most Affected People and Areas) and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People Of Colour) activists to decolonize the movement. This demand has gained prominence with the burst of the COVID-19 pandemic. In practice, it means

> recognizing the privileges of activists from White, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democracies (WEIRD), redistributing power by giving more (safe) spaces and resources to MAPA and BIPOC, giving priority to their narratives and demands, democratizing decision-making and access to media, as well as eradicating racism and white saviourism (Spini 2023, p. 171).

Yet a national spokesperson based in Milan underscores that even if FFF is at its core an intersectional movement, empowering MAPA activists is less simple than it may seem:

> Unfortunately, in Italy we do not have MAPA representatives, I have not seen migrants or second-generation Italians in FFF yet. The hope is that the movement will grow and that those who are active in organizations and movements that deal with other aspects of social justice may find in FFF a field [of action] they want to be involved with (FFFI4).

Although FFFI clearly values the presence of MAPA representatives, the organizer's words indicate that their participation is voluntary as that of any other activist. Thus, the lack of formal *membership* brings with itself the lack of a formal recruiting strategy, which is present instead in more structured organizations such as Extinction Rebellion. In this respect, there is little that the digital strategy of FFFI can do to close the gap between its aspirational composition and its actual one. This does not mean that the movement is isolated and self-referential. Quite the contrary, over the past few years, FFFI has organized joint actions and demonstrations with a variety of actors, including factory workers and the feminist movement Non Una di Meno. At the same time, the organizational practices of FFFI are more driven by the practical need of coordinating a wide range of groups, than the result of a strategic calculus concerning the sociodemographic composition of the movement.

As we have seen, these practical necessities have produced a partial organization where the presence of *soft hierarchies* goes hand in hand with the implementation of a *rule*-bound decision-making process aimed at ensuring that all participants can have a say either directly or via the delegation of power to specialized WGs, appointed delegates, and elected spokespersons. By contrast, the lack of a membership structure brings with itself the inability of *sanctioning* members, other than disowning unauthorized spokespersons. The act, of disowning, however, suggests that the movement *monitors* its public image, and has empowered specific individuals with the responsibility to protect it (Fig. 1).

## 5.2. Power-sharing and the internal reorganization of YFC

Whereas in the case of FFFI a hierarchy emerged over the course of time, and through a series of collective decisions, as we have seen, YFC begins as a movement immediately led by three, then two, mediatized leaders.[9] Although such leadership was never sanctioned by a formal organizational decision, the media made a decisive contribution in conferring authority to figureheads such as De Wever and Charlier. The media exposure had the effect of increasing the social capital of the entrepreneurial leaders who had started the mobilization on at least three levels.

On a first level, the core organizing group was recognized as a legitimate actor by other movement organizations that had been working in the field of climate action since 2008 and had organized the large pre-COP climate protest in Brussels in late November 2018. On a second level, since the very beginning, the core organizers forged relationships with climate scientists who offered to provide expertise to the emerging youth movement. In this respect, as compared to the early stages of FFFI, YFC has developed action frames that are more strictly focused on policy change and the implementation of specific policy proposals. The drafting of these proposals, however, required the activation of a type of expertise that was not immediately available within the movement. In order to fill this gap, the organizers recruited high-profile figures such as the Flemish Government Architect Leo Van Broeck and the former President of the IPCC Jean-Pascal van Ypersele to

[9] Kyra Gantois left the movement for personal reasons in 2020.

coordinate a panel of 120 experts who eventually assembled a report containing 27 policy recommendations to be directly implemented into Belgian law.[10] Although these measures were never implemented, they had the effect of raising the credibility of YFC as a legitimate interlocutor on climate change policy. Thus, on a third level, De Wever and Charlier gained access to prominent institutional actors such as party leaders and high-ranking government officials both nationally and internationally.[11]

Whereas this fervent public activity validated and reinforced the symbolic authority of the movement leaders, such authority was not codified into a formal organizational power. As we have seen, Charlier prefers the qualification of core organizer to that of leader and all our informants confirm that the internal organization of the movement is indeed horizontal. This does not mean, however, that power is equally distributed within the organization. As an activist who joined YFC in 2022 points out,

> There isn't a leader practically speaking. But for me there is a leader without saying there is a leader because of course Anuna De Wever is clearly leading everything because she is the most aware volunteer of the group so everybody is listening to her, which is quite logical because most of the time what she is saying is very relevant (YFC4).

The activist's words underscore that elite organizers hold a significant informal influence within YFC, a capacity which as we have seen was also recognized by FFFI through the creation of a delegate structure. The question of power distribution, however, was particularly significant in YFC for the relationship that the core organizers entertained with other YFC groups. As noted, the 20-week-long strike of 2019 had been conducted by alternating highly visible mobilizations in the Belgian capital with protest events in other Belgian cities. As a member of the national team recalls, the latter had been organized with the support of "seven or eight local groups" located in the main Belgian cities, featuring five-to-ten activists each (YFC3). However, the small size of the groups and their decentralized position created a significant power imbalance vis-à-vis the national team:

> [Because] you have like a national team that acts on the national level and there are local groups that can only do it in their own city, there was this huge hierarchy and the local groups started to find it hard when the national team decided on things on their own . . . [as] everything came a bit from the top. And since we wanted to keep as much youth in the group as possible and not lose anyone, we decided to make it more horizontal so that everyone had the same voice, and everyone could be heard (YFC3).

The organizer also specifies that the hierarchy between the national team and the local groups remained by and large unspoken and informal. Whereas in theory, Discord, which became the main organizing platform of the movement during the 2019 YFC strike, allowed everyone to join any group and any campaign, in practice, the national team often had direct access to journalists, government officials, scientists, and experts that were by and large unavailable to the local groups. Differently put, mediatized leaders belonging in the national YFC group had accrued a social and symbolic capital that was perceived as excessive by other activists. According to the organizer, this situation changed abruptly in August 2019 when, meeting the demands of the local groups, the national team decided to be more transparent and forthcoming in sharing access to information and in allocating responsibilities to other activists (YFC3). As a result, in the following months, the local teams gradually disbanded while the national team expanded to include approximately fifteen members.[12] In line with the choice of other international FFF chapters, YFC's main coordinating platform became Telegram. Similar to FFFI, the use of Telegram is supplemented by the use of video calls to facilitate meetings of the Council, the main assembly and decision-making body of YFC:

[10] https://www.klimaatpanel.be/laravel-filemanager/files/shares/Binnenwerk%20klimaat_OK_NL_HgR.pdf.

[11] For example, in 2020, De Wever and Charlier joined forces with Greta Thunberg and German climate activist Lisa Neubauer to co-author an open letter to world leaders, demanding the immediate halting to all institutional investments in fossil fuels and the adoption of radical policy measures to fight the climate crisis. The letter received wide media coverage, allowing the activists to meet German Chancellor Angela Merkel and other world leaders.

[12] See https://youthforclimate.be/members.

> Every month we have a Council meeting, everyone is invited to join from the whole group and it's mostly the call where most people join in. And we update on everything that's happening. We also propose new campaigns in these meetings. And in each meeting, everyone has the chance to say 'okay, I would like to join and work on that campaign.' And then a working group in Slack is made and everyone who would like to join can join. From that moment on, the working group has the power to decide whatever needs to be decided on that campaign [YFC3].

While these remarks indicate that there is no formal hierarchy within the organization, it is clear that soft *hierarchies* persist either through the competence and reputation acquired by mediatized leaders [YFC4] or through the functional differentiation of tasks that put some WGs in the condition of leading on specific campaigns. At the same time, our interviewees acknowledge that as the Covid-19 unfolded YFC begun to experience a contraction of its activist base [YFC3 and YFC4]. Because WGs are chronically understaffed and face significant organizational challenges, it is clear that YFC does not need to adopt a delegative structure comparable to that of FFFI. Nonetheless, the organizational 'crisis' of summer 2019 demonstrates that YFC was capable of restructuring itself first through a *monitoring* process whereby local organizers criticized the excessive power, especially in terms of uneven access to information, of mediatized leaders and elite organizers. By informally *sanctioning* the movement leaders for their centralizing behavior, the activists obtained the implementation of new *rules* which guaranteed that all organizers could have equal access to information and the relative decision-making processes. In this way, the first national team of YFC evolved from a restricted circle of activists to a more distributed network of core organizers. Thus, similar to FFFI, YFC is a partial organization where soft hierarchies, rules, and monitoring mechanisms are clearly present and stand in contrast to the absence of a membership structure and of formal procedures for implementing sanctions (Fig 1).

| | Membership | Hierarchy | Rules | Monitoring | Sanctions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Youth for Climate** | No | Yes<br>Initial informal hierarchy, then power-sharing within expanded national Council. | Yes<br>Regulation of the Council meetings and of its relationship to the working groups. | Yes<br>Internal monitoring to guarantee equal access to information. | No |
| **Fridays for Future Italia** | No | Yes<br>Initial lack of leadership, then appointment of city delegates and election of national spokespersons. | Yes<br>Regulation of appointment and election procedures; structuring of decision-making processes within WGs. | Yes<br>External monitoring of media coverage and authorized access to the media. | No<br>Disavowal of unauthorized organizers as an informal sanctioning strategy. |

Figure 1. Comparative assessment of YFC and FFFI as partial organizations.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the main finding of this research is that YFC and FFFI followed two inverted organizational trajectories. Whereas the former begun as a leader-centered movement, over time, its co-founders decided to include a wider group of organizers in the national team. Conversely, FFFI begun as a leaderless movement and evolved into an increasingly structured organization, featuring local chapter delegates and national spokespersons. In this respect, the two movements adopted an organizational model that is, to say it with Nunes (2021), "neither vertical nor horizontal." Our findings suggest that the adoption of this hybrid model is the result of the intersection of two opposing logics: the inclusive, participatory, and egalitarian ethos of a youth movement and the countervailing pressure to produce an informed and authoritative type of public discourse. In other words, while the movement wants to remain as open and receptive as possible to youth participation, it also needs to be considered a credible actor in the arena of climate change politics. *Our claim is that these conflicting sets of aspirations and requirements transcend the specific political cultures of Italy and Belgium, providing an explanation for why YFC and FFFI take the form of partial organizations with similar features* across the five dimensions identified by Ahrne and Brunnson.

In particular, we have shown that the emergence of soft leaders and informal hierarchies resulted from both external and internal factors. Externally, both movements had to confront the fact that the news media select their own spokespersons according to their preferences and logics. Whereas in Belgium the movement had recognized spokespersons since the outset, FFFI was forced to adopt them in order to prevent the media from enlisting unauthorized spokespersons. Internally, soft leaders emerged partly as a result of specific organizational choices and partly as a result of organizational consolidation. In the case of FFFI, the decision to adopt an organizational structure based on delegated representation created roles such as the local group delegate and the national spokesperson. In the case of YFC, although *hierarchies* were not formally present, the division between the national team and the local groups led to a significant power imbalance. Yet the emergence of soft leaders was also the result of the competences acquired by specific individuals in the arena of climate change politics. Because YFC and FFFI organize campaigns whose main goal is to affect legislation on climate change and decarbonize the economy, the movement must advance credible proposals in a variety of institutional and non-institutional settings. This means that organizers who are capable of entertaining relations with the media, the scientific community, environmental and civil society organizations, can easily take on a leading *or leadership function* within the organization.

The last point raises the question of how the variety of abilities, skills, and competences required to address the climate crisis are integrated with one another. We have shown that FFFI and YFC activists adopt a wide range of *rules* in order to manage a complex division of political labor. Although they are not formally codified, the procedures that structure decision-making in deliberative bodies such as the FFFI Telegram chat and the YFC Council meetings are clearly rule-bound. Rules are also essential to organize the work of the FFFI social media teams as well as the division of labor between the international FFF groups setting the dates and hashtags of the Global Climate Strikes and the national chapters in charge of selecting them. Unwritten rules such as the one that does not allow individuals to speak on behalf of the movement, unless explicitly authorized to do so, were enforced by *monitoring* the media and access to the media of specific individuals. Finally, although it is not possible to enforce sanctions within organizations devoid of a formal membership structure, the disavowal of public statements made by unauthorized spokespersons is an informal or unofficial form of sanctioning.

Certainly, digital tools and platforms helped the activists manage the tension between "keep[ing] as much youth in the group as possible," to use the words of one of the YFC organizers, and the need of producing a competent and authoritative public discourse. In this respect, platforms such as Telegram, Discord, Slack, and Zoom facilitated the coordination of a myriad WGs distributed over vast geographical distances. Whereas digital and social messaging applications reduced coordination costs, it is also clear that activists make decisions on how to allocate tasks and responsibilities, not the platforms. In this respect, this article aligns with authors such as Coretti and Pica (2015), Kavada (2015), Treré (2015), and Bonini and Treré (2024), among others, who emphasize the importance of analyzing media practices in all their complexity, rather than

assuming a linear causal relationship between digitally-reduced transaction costs and social movement mobilizations. In this respect, our findings suggest that the argument advanced by Bennett and Segerberg (2013) on the logic of connective action can be revisited in light of two findings. First, as we have seen, social media accounts and FFF hashtags *precede* the birth of FFFI and YFC as partially structured organizations. This means that social media can set the conditions for the emergence of new organizations rather than simply bypassing them. Second, FFFI and YFC's choice of adopting Telegram, among other tools, for coordination purposes suggests that the logic of connective action can be supplemented by a logic of *connective organizing* insofar as Telegram allows FFF to coordinate strikes and campaigns internationally. Thus, social messaging applications are critical for lowering the costs of *organized* action, a factor that is as significant as lowering the costs of seemingly unorganized action, and that points, once again, to the importance of examining the role of connective leaders.

Finally, the article has shown how the climate justice framework mirrors on an ideological level the hybrid nature of partial organizations. On the one hand, the climate justice demand has the function of holding together and mediating between a variety of more or less radical beliefs concerning the role of the capitalist system in the climate crisis. On the other hand, climate justice raises the question of how the movement is going to forge alliances and give voice to subaltern actors such as representatives of the most affected people and areas in the European and global South. This reflection calls in our view for a deeper analysis of the relationship between the theory of change developed by the climate action movements and the organizational steps needed to achieve such change. More in general, while the current article has contributed to the literature on the relationship between digital communication and organization in social movements, the generalizability of our findings needs to be subject to verification. Thus, additional research on other case studies would be useful to verify whether the partial organization model examined in this article can be fruitfully extended to other FFF chapters or needs to be revised and supplemented with additional explanatory factors.

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**Interviews (conducted online via Google Meet):**

FFFI1 – Interview with Fridays for Future Italia (FFFI) activist, June 6, 2020.

FFFI2 – Interview with FFFI activist, March 22, 2021.

FFFI3 – Interview with FFFI activist, March 23, 2021.

FFFI4 – Interview with FFFI activist, March 25, 2021.

FFFI5 – Interview with FFFI activist, March 26, 2021.
FFFI6 – Interview with FFFI activist, April 10, 2021.
FFFI7 – Interview with FFFI activist, April 12, 2021.
FFFI8 – Interview with FFFI activist, April 13, 2021.
FFFI9 – Interview with FFFI activist, April 15, 2021.
FFFI10 – Interview with FFFI activist, May 8, 2021.
YFC1 – Interview with Youth for Climate (YFC) activist, August 26, 2020.
YFC2 – Interview with YFC activist, November 26, 2020.
YFC3 – Interview with YFC activist, May 14, 2021.
YFC4 – Interview with YFC activist, on May 10, 2022.