5: How Civil Society Can Help Civil Society

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Introduction

Today many different definitions have been offered in sociology about the nature of contemporary society: 'advanced modernity' (Giddens, 1990), 'reflexive modernity' (Beck, Giddens & Lasch, 1994), 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000), 'post-modernity' (Lyotard, 1979; Jameson, 1984; Donati, 1997; Martelli, 1999), etc. Despite these differences, a trait is common to all definitions: the recognition of the increasing importance of media. As a result, contemporary society is the first 'mediated' society in history.

The process of mediatization of society brings about a lot of consequences: the globalization of informations, the transformation of politics and leadership, the digitalization of the industrial production, the need for media education and so on. It is too hard to establish whether this mediatization of society is an *advancement* of society on its way to progress – in the universalistic sense of the term, indeed. Changes are in progress *now*, and it is difficult to think beyond the flow in which we all swim.

Communication has acquired an increasing importance in all sectors of society: the state and its administration, the market and its enterprises, the 'third sector' and the many organizations, which operate in the space between the first two sectors. The 'third sector' is the space in which civil society organizes and produces itself; it is shaped by the network of private-social organizations (PSOs), which promote the life quality of a community and help the poor, the sick and the weak (Donati, 1993b; Donati & Colozzi, 2002; 2003).

Since the public sphere is today a 'mediated' sphere, the 'third sector' too has to communicate. In fact, communication is the pre-condition for the visibility of all organizations; but, while the state and the market have their own channels and are often given great attention by the media, the 'third sector' has few channels of its own and basically receives no attention by the media. As a result, it risks being invisible to everybody's eyes.

In this chapter, I will try to describe an experiment of communication through information and communication technologies (ICTs), which is still in progress in Palermo (I).[1] On November 2003 four civil society institutions founded the *Telematic Portal for the communication of the 'third sector' in Palermo* (the *Portal*), in order to promote the visibilization of the pro-social activities carried out by the PSOs.

First, I will try to describe the social nature and the composition of the 'third sector' in Italy. I will also point out the PSOs' need to communicate within the

'mediated' public sphere. Secondly, I will show the first results reached by a research action on the communication activities of the Sicilian PSOs carried out by a team of sociologists of the University of Palermo as a part of a national network of several Italian universities working on the 'third sector' and the social capital in Italy (Donati & Colozzi, 2004). Finally, I will describe the *Portal* and the role of the 'communication account', a new figure that may give some help to the 'third sector' in its efforts to communicate better.

Between the State and the Market: The Quest of Private-Social Organizations (PSOs) to Communicate within the 'Mediated' Public Sphere

What is There Between State and Market?

As many sociologists have pointed out, a 'third sector' exists between the state and the market. Therefore, the social actors of the welfare politics are

- the state (the *first* sector of society), which offers *public* goods and services;

- the market (the *second* sector), which offers *private* goods and services;

- the *third* sector, which is the most organized part of civil society – it offers a new type of goods and services, i.e. the *relational* ones (Donati, 1993b; Donati & Colozzi, 2002; 2003).

Relational goods and services are not *material*. They are produced by the pro-social action and enjoyed by both the members of PSOs and the *Alter* according to a vision of life based on reciprocity (gift, mutual help, wide exchange, etc.).

Indeed, the social relation *is* the main good – the most important resource for the people living in a post-modern society. Without the *Alter*, I cannot produce trust, well-being and a sense of belonging to any community. In order to produce relational goods, many people gather in the various groups and associations of the 'third sector' – i.e the PSOs.

What are the Pillars of the 'Third Sector'?

There are five pillars of civil society which shape the 'third sector' (see figure 1):

- Associations for the social promotion;
- Associations of families;
- Organizations of volunteers;
- Social cooperatives;
- Social foundations.

All the organizations belonging to these five pillars are PSOs. They produce those relational goods (offered neither by the state nor by the market), which are necessary for people's well-being and for an increasing quality of life in the whole society. The number of PSOs operating in each pillar as well as the type of their activity are quite different, as you can see from figure 1.

Figure 1: The five pillars of the 'third sector' in Palermo (I)
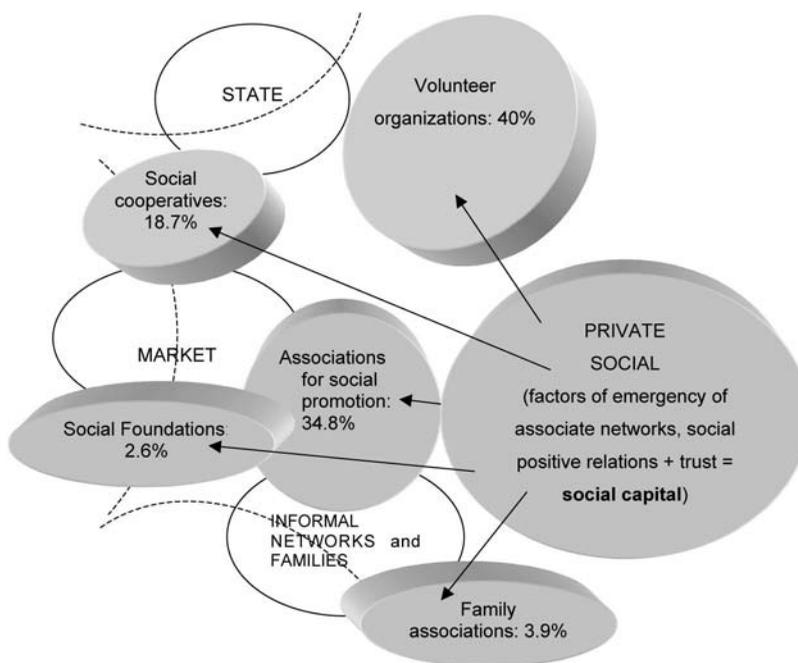
Source: my elaboration from Donati and Colozzi (eds. 2004: 16).

Figure 1 shows the position of the 'third sector' between the state, the market, and the informal networks and families operating in the private-social sphere; it also shows the size of the different pillars in Palermo. Three out of four PSOs are voluntary organizations (40%) or associations for the social promotion (34.8%); the remaining are social cooperatives (18.7%), family associations (3.9%) and social foundations (2.6%). This distribution is quite similar in the largest Italian cities.

'Third Sector' or No-Profit Organizations?

Is 'third sector' an equivalent word for no-profit organizations (NPOs)? The answer is negative: social foundations, a lot of family associations and some volunteer organizations are not NPOs, therefore the term 'third sector' stands for a more general concept than NPOs.

The ISTAT (Italian Institute of Statistics) has estimated more than 210,000 active PSOs (Istat, 2000), but the total number of 'third sector' organizations is much higher. In Italy about 1,000,000 volunteers are involved in pro-social activities, therefore the whole 'third sector' most probably amounts to about 3,500,000 people.

A Research Action on the Communication Activities of the PSOs in Palermo

A Recent Survey in Italy about the 'Third Sector'

In the years 2001–2002, six Italian universities[2] carried out a national survey on the culture and the organization of the 'third sector' in Italy. This research was approved and co-financed by the Miur, the Italian Ministry of Education University and Research. The national sample was formed by 2.326 PSOs' individual members and by 588 PSOs; it was the first statistically representative sample of the 'third sector' in Italy. For the final findings, see the book edited by Donati and Colozzi (2004).

One of the most important findings obtained by this survey shows that the PSOs would like to communicate, but they do not know how to do it. In fact a lot of them do realize that in the society of global communications this activity is necessary, yet they often have neither the tools nor the communicative competence to do it successfully (Martelli, 2004).

The research activity on the Italian 'third sector' is still going on. In the period 2003–2004 one more Italian university – the University of Padova (North Italy) – joined the first six ones. The common goal is to study the social capital in Italy and the local dynamics of the 'third sector'. This research program, too, as the previous one, has been approved and co-financed by the Miur. More specifically, the research program of the University of Palermo intends both to study the PSOs of this large town (about 700,000 inhabitants) and support their effort to communicate better through the information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Some Findings on the Communication Activities of PSOs in Palermo

In this first phase of our research action in Palermo, my research team and I contacted more than 150 PSOs. We gave to the managers of these PSOs three different questionnaires to fill out and to return to us.

i) a questionnaire to describe their values and attitudes, and the social goals of their voluntary action (individual data);

ii) a questionnaire to describe the organization of the PSO (structural data);

iii) a questionnaire to describe the communication activities of the PSO (organizational data).

Whereas the first two questionnaires are the same as those used in the national survey (2002), the third one is a new and original contribution of the University of Palermo to the national research on the social capital in Italy.

The Communication Activities of the PSOs in Palermo

Less than one out of ten PSOs puts *communication* at the top of its activity planning. As you can see from table 1, for the PSOs in Palermo the most important activities are: *internal organization* (30%), *formation and refresher courses*

(29.1%), *planning and development of new services* (18.5%). Only a few of them (8.1%) regard communication as an important activity. *Fund-raising*, *Relationships with public administrations* and *Recruitment of new members* are regarded as important activities by even less PSOs (4.7%) and so on.

Table 1: The importance of communication within the activities carried out by the PSOs of Palermo

How important are the following organizational activities? (apart from the specific activity of the PSO)	1st 'very important'	4th or 'Not at all important'	No activity at all
Internal organization	30.0%	38.0%	0.7
Formation and refresher courses	29.1%	32.5%	5.3%
Planning and development of new services	18.5%	34.4%	11.3%
Communication	*8.1%*	*60.4%*	*5.4%*
Fund-raising	4.7%	47.3%	34.5%
Relationships with public administrations	4.7%	58.1%	6.1%
Recruitment of new members	4.7%	66.9%	12.8%
Relationships with other PSOs or third sector organizations	2.0%	67.3%	15.6%
Relationships with private companies	0.7%	54.1%	43.9%

Respondents: from 147 to 151 PSOs. Non respondents: from 4 to 8 PSOs, depending on the items. The total is less than 100, because the 2nd and the 3rd choice do not appear in this table.

The Problems of PSOs in Carrying Out their Communication Activities

Many PSOs in Palermo face a lot of problems in carrying out their communication activities. As you can see from table 2, most of the difficulties come from the mass media indifference, both at the national level (70%) and at the local one (62.5%): almost two out of three PSOs report that mass media indifference to their efforts is the first problem. The scarcity of resources, especially *tools* (67.1%), is considered another great problem.

Table 2: The problems of PSOs in Palermo in their communication activities

Which of the following problems is more frequently faced by a PSO in its communication activities?	1st 'Much '+ 'Enough'	4th 'Less' + 'None'
Indifference of the national mass media	70.0%	30.0%
Scarcity of resources: tools	67.1%	32.8%
Indifference of the local mass media	62.5%	37.5%
Scarcity of resources: staff	37.0%	63.0%
Difficulties in the organization	23.4%	66.6%
Low importance of social communication	14.4%	85.6%
Other problems (only 2 respondents)	40.0%	60.0%

Respondents: from 154 to 155 PSOs. Non-respondents: 1 or 2 PSOs for the first six items, 153 for the last one (open question). The total is less than 100, because the 2nd and the 3rd choice do not appear in this table.

The Communication Office

Only one out of two PSOs has a communication office (48.7%). A third of them do not have an office of their own, but rather use the communication office of the central organization they belong to (16.1%). A fifth of them use both the central office and its own (9.7%). Only one out of five PSOs carries out the communication activities through its own office (20.6%).

The Communication Activities

The main communication activities developed by this minority of PSOs through their own offices are threefold:

- The spokesperson of the PSO manager (carried out by two out of three PSOs – 66.7%);

- Information to the mass media (carried out by seven out of ten PSOs –70.2%);

- Communication to users (carried out by four out of five PSOs – 82.5%).

The PSOs and the Use of the New Media

A large part of the PSOs in Palermo owns both old and new media technologies. The questionnaire contained a lot of questions about them: i.e. the frequency of their use, who were the persons that used them more frequently, and so on. As you can see in table 3, the more diffused new media technologies in PSOs' offices are the *computer* (*online pc:* 79.9%; *offline pc:* 75.3%), and the *video cassette recorder* (60.4%). The other listed new media technologies are present in less than a half of the PSOs offices: *digital video camera* (42.9%), *video projector* (35.7%), *digital photo camera* (39.6%), *DVD player* (29.2%), *digital TV* (*broadcasting TV*: 11.7%, *satellite TV*: 11%). More than seven PSOs out of ten use the *online pc* at least once a week (71.9%), and about 60% use the *offline pc* (62.4%) with a similar frequency; but the *video cassette recorder* is used weekly only by a quarter of PSOs (26.7%). Much fewer in numbers are the PSOs that use all the other new media at least weekly.

Table 3: The use of the new media technologies in the PSOs in Palermo

Which of the following new media is present in the PSO office? And how frequently is it used for the PSO activities?	This medium is present in…	This medium is used at least weekly by…
Computer offline	75.3%	62.4%
Computer online	79.9%	71.9%
Digital photo camera	39.6%	7.8%
Digital video camera	42.9%	6.5%
DVD player	29.2%	7.1%
Broadcasting digital television	11.7%	2.6%
Satellite digital television	11.0%	1.9%
Video projector	35.7%	5.8%
Video cassette recorder	60.4%	26.7%

Respondents: 154 PSOs. Non-respondents: 1.

Do the PSOS have some kind of communicative competence on online communication? The following data, collected in Palermo, seem to authorize mild optimism. Almost all the PSOs in Palermo have members who know how to use the new media technologies. Basically all PSOs have members who can use a *mobile phone* and an *online computer* (99.4%), an *offline computer* (94.2%) and a *video cassette recorder* (93.5%). The PSOs having members who can use a *video camera* and a *video projector* are respectively 85.2% and 76.7%. Only a 51.5% of them can use a *video mobile phone*. On the basis of these findings, I do hope that the *Portal* can be a welcomed initiative: a lot of PSOs have members with a basic communicative competence on the new technologies.

Some Remarks on these First Findings

During this research action the team and I have been collecting much other data: about, for instance, the internal communication of PSOs, or the accountability of their financial spending for social activities, and so on. All these first findings indicate that the PSOs operating in Palermo need to improve their communication and find new channels. The new technologies may help them for the following reasons:

a) ICTs require low costs of access and management;

b) ICTs have a structural homology with social networks, hence with the structure itself of the PSOs.

Therefore, in comparison with the mass media, the ICTs offer to PSOs a greater chance to communicate.

A Research Action to Provide ICT-Support for the Communication of the PSOs in Palermo

A Practical Answer to the Need to Communicate

As mentioned before, the 'third sector' is an important part of civil society; it is indeed the most organized part of it. The PSOs produce relational goods and increase the social capital, but they have little or no visibility in the public sphere. Therefore, the question is: What can be done to promote and support the PSOs in their efforts to communicate?

A practical answer comes from Palermo. On November 2003, four institutions of the civil society founded the *Telematic Portal for the 'third sector' communication in Palermo* in order to help the local PSOs to communicate better through the ICTs; they are:

• The Department of Social Sciences of the University of Palermo;

• The Com.Pu.Lab. – the Public Communication Laboratory of the University of Palermo;

• The Office for Social Communications of the Archdioceses of Palermo;

• The *Caritas* Office of the Archdioceses of Palermo.

The *Portal* is the most visible outcome of this assistance, carried out through a research action, i.e. a sociological survey, which transforms the phenomenon it observes.

The Telematic Portal for the Communication of the 'Third Sector' in Palermo[3]

The main features of this *Portal* are

a) up to November 2004, i.e. after almost one year from the beginning of this research action in Palermo, more than 130 PSOs have asked and obtained to be included in the *Portal*. Nearly every single day other PSOs are identified in the metropolitan area and invited to join the *Portal*;

b) one webmaster and 12 'accounts' (see 3.3) are working together with the managers of the PSOs in order to provide each organization with its own web page on the *Portal*. Therefore, the *Portal* is currently hosting in the section 'Organizations' more than 130 web pages, each one of them presenting the following five communication elements:

the PSOs' logo;
the PSOs' location on the digital city map;
some digital photos introducing the PSOs' activities;
a selection of self-produced papers and documents;
the PSOs' communication plan.

In addition to the section 'Organizations', the *Portal* consists out of nine other sections, the most important being

- 'Third Sector', which gathers papers and documents produced by academic researchers all over Europe;

- 'Forum', a virtual exchange area where every PSO operating in Palermo can share ideas and suggestions about the topics proposed, such as, for example, 'The relationships between the 'third sector' and the City of Palermo';

- 'Chat line', a virtual room in which the volunteers can talk about their experiences;

- 'Informations', where each PSO can find news and legal advice about the proclamations issued by the Mayor of Palermo for provisions on social activities;

- 'Links' gives an easy access to the national centres and institutions operating in the 'third sector';

- 'Searching/Offering pro-social work' is a space where the offer and the search for pro-social work can meet.

A New Type of Voluntary Action: The Account of the 'Third Sector'

As advertisers know, the account is a well-known role in the organization of an agency: he or she is a person who takes care of the client, who helps him/her to define aims and targets, and who ultimately realizes the advertising campaign.

The *Portal* adopted this role from the for-profit sector and played it into the no-profit field. Therefore, the *account of communication* is a voluntary agent who helps the members of the PSOs in Palermo to communicate better both with other PSOs and with the civil society environment, especially the local authorities.

Therefore, this new interface of communication (the *Portal*) is not simply a new technological channel, but it is also a way to spread the culture of communication and reinforce the social ties both within the PSOs, and between them and the metropolitan area of Palermo. Moreover, the *Portal* gives visibility to the 'third sector' in the public sphere offering it new types of virtual presence and public debate.

Further Developments through Three Socio-Communicative Tools

As I mentioned above, the data about each PSO operating in Palermo were collected through three sociological questionnaires: the first two, exploring the culture of the 'third sector' and the organizational aspects of PSOs' activities, had already been used during the national survey of 2001–2002.

In this chapter, I have described some of the first data collected through a third questionnaire – a new one, tested by my research team at the University of Palermo – exploring the communication activities of the PSOs in Palermo.

In the near future it is my intention to extract new knowledge from this data; for

instance, by comparing the national findings with the local ones, I hope to generate the profile of both the volunteers and the PSOs in Palermo.

Moreover, new qualitative data are going to be collected through the study of the activities connected to the 'Forum' or to other virtual presences in the *Portal*. Briefly, this interface of communication is a yard of experiments, a continuous challenge for the sociological imagination ...

An Interim Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the first findings obtained by a research action promoted by the University of Palermo within a larger project, which includes seven Italian universities working on the 'third sector' and the social capital in Italy. The research action promoted by the University of Palermo consists of a survey on all the PSOs operating in the capital of Sicily, and is aimed at helping the PSOs in their efforts to communicate better. For this purpose, a web interface has been implemented: the *Telematic portal for the communication of the 'third sector' in Palermo*. The research action is still going on, and other findings will arrive when a second survey is completed in spring 2005. On that occasion, the most important question will be answered, that is whether this research action will have succeeded in its main goal: the improvement of the PSOs' communication through ICTs, on the one hand, and the empowerment of local civil society, on the other.

Notes

1   Palermo is the capital of Sicily, the largest island in the Mediterranean Sea. With about 700,000 inhabitants, Palermo is the fifth city in Italy, after Milano, Roma, Torino and Napoli. Sicily has about 5 million inhabitants, and it is the third Italian region for population.

2   The University of Bologna (chair – North Italy); the Catholic University of Milano (North Italy); the University of Verona (North Italy); the University of Trento (North Italy); the University of Molise (Middle Italy); the University of Palermo (South Italy).

3   You can visit the *Portal* by clicking on the following url: http://www.terzosettorepalermo.it. The *Portal* has been officially presented to the civil society of Palermo on October 21, 2004, during an academic symposium on the theme: *The communication of the 'third sector' in Palermo and in the emerging net society*.

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