Community Development and Communication:
Preliminary Case Studies in Italy

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The article initially develops a theoretical reflection on the relationships between local community development and deep media practices with particular reference to the processes of building community social relations through communications and media. The possible consequences of a communication strategy on increasing social capital and social cohesion are also discussed. It then analyzes and deepens the characteristics of the various types of interconnection between local communities, active communication of citizens, mediated practices and processes, and citizen media (interpersonal proximity communication, communicative trust and participation, connecting communication, communication with the territory, mutualistic communication). Finally, it analyzes some experiences of communication processes for community development in the Italian context.

Keywords: community development, community building, mediatized community, citizen media

Mediatized Community, Translocality, and Citizen Media

Is it possible to imagine a community that does not communicate? And is it possible to imagine that communication can actually be the heart of the community development of such communication?

The question is not academic or speculative, but rather is closely related to a different way of living everyday life in the communities in which we are all immersed, real, and virtual. First, because the continuity between online and offline spaces is now established both in research (Boccia Artieri, 2016; Boccia Artieri et al., 2017) and in personal experiences that highlight a continuous game of smoke and mirrors between what happens online and what we perceive as the main reality of our life, our vision of the territory that surrounds us, and what we experience with all our senses. And the distinction will become increasingly blurred in the near future with the possibility of full immersion in augmented reality, either real or virtual, with all our senses through embedded technological devices, such as subcutaneous chips, so that the dystopian storytelling of the famous BBC *Black Mirror* television series will seem like the technological equivalent of cave painting. Real communities and virtual communities now go "hand in hand" and they will continue going more and more in this way because it will no longer be possible to distinguish between the two worlds, both "full of reality". Second, "social space is not a thing among things, but a relationship between things, something that encompasses their interrelationship in their coexistence and simultaneity" (Lefebvre, 1991). As Couldry and Hepp (2017, p. 86) stated, "the increasing complexity and variety of how, in our contemporary modernities, social and economic relations are sustained across space through globalized communication and exchange

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means that many spatial relations are today not strongly anchored in particular places or localities". One of the themes is translocality, namely the mediated interrelations between various localities (Hepp, 2015).

> Localities do not dissolve: as embodied human beings, we have no choice but to act from a certain locality, even if the resources on which action from that place relies are themselves distributed. But these localities change their meaning in a social world made up of ever more complex translocal connections. (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 87)

For our reasoning, it is important to emphasize that:

> [localities] … are, in the first place, not something that is a given physically but are instead created by people in repeated interaction…. Localities are, materially and physically, socio-culturally defined places with shared space for human interaction. Secondly, the construction of this kind of locality is not something that can simply be contrasted to media usage. It is more likely that nowadays localities are created by practices linked to the media, and so are in this sense themselves mediatized. Thirdly, when considering the localities of media appropriation, it is vital to keep in mind that these are themselves translocally unbounded by the act of media appropriation, linked into communications networks that go beyond the local. To borrow a term from cultural anthropology, we need to take a *multisited* approach. In considering localities of media appropriation we need to keep in mind networks transcending the local to which these localities are open—whether this involves reciprocal, produced, or virtualized media communication. (Hepp, 2015, p. 187)

Still Hepp (2015) told us:

> … of the possibility that in contemporary media cultures we can detect de facto an interaction of local and translocal communalization and corresponding communities. Local communitizations[1] remain central, since humans as physical beings live in a particular place, and local communitizations continue to be the most important means for conveying a sense of belonging. The advance of mediatization does not, therefore, obliterate local communitizations; something else takes place. In fact, in many parts of the world even local communitizations and corresponding communities are mediatized, in the sense that their articulation of a shared sense of belonging is effected through media. Local communitizations are not today "media-free" zones. (p. 208)

What interests us is that:

> … local communitizations—whether as pure reception communitizations situatively, or as a lived community situationally comprehensive—are in this way articulated today through their joint appropriation of media, and can therefore refer to mediatized communities. Mediatized communities are all forms of communities that, in their present form, relate to media but for which media communication is not constitutive, as, for example, with families, friendship groups, and so forth. (Hepp, 2015, p. 209)

It is from this extremely ambivalent (unambiguous) reality that we begin our brief journey into the possible relationships between communication and community development.

Tackling community development today is not simple because it seems that the theme does not excite academic and social debate: It is placed in the past, if it is a matter (but only in some cases) of international cooperation, has an intimate and local flavor, and is seemingly far from the themes and problems of globalization. Yet since the end of the last century, the fate of all communities (ethnic, media, local, and virtual) has become deeply intertwined with the growing globality. Appaduraj (1996) foreshadowed changes that would become much more widespread in our contemporaneity as a result of the impact of not only globalization processes, but also those of communication as well as financial and commercial.

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[1] The term communitization was coined by Max Weber, who introduced the term "communitization" (*Vergemeinschaftung*) to describe the processes that might result in more stable communities: "A social relationship will be called a 'communitization' (*Vergemeinschaftung*) if and to the extent that the orientation of social action rests—in the individual instance, or on average, or as a pure type—upon a subjectively felt (affectual or traditional) mutual sense of belonging among those involved (Weber, 1999)".

In the context, we have described the idea of communicative citizenship action, which is communicative actions through which spaces of communication change or through which new spaces of communication dealing with public issues open up (Hepp, 2015, p. 222), is essential, together with the concept of citizen media, to be restricted to individuals and to collective action. In the first case, as explained by Baker and Blaagaard (2016):

> The concept of citizen media encompasses the physical artefacts, digital content, practices, performative interventions and discursive formations of affective sociality produced by unaffiliated citizens as they act in public space(s) to effect aesthetic or socio-political change or express personal desires and aspirations, without the involvement of a third party or benefactor. It also comprises the sets of values and agendas that influence and drive the practices and discourses through which individuals and collectivities position themselves within and in relation to society and participate in the creation of diverse publics. (p. 16)

In the second case, Rodríguez (2011) extended to collective subjectivities and focused attention on local communities:

> … communication spaces where citizens can learn to manipulate their own languages, codes, signs, and symbols empowering them to name the world in their own terms. Citizens' media trigger processes that allow citizens to recodify their contexts and themselves. These processes ultimately give citizens the opportunity to restructure their identities into empowered subjectivities strongly connected to local cultures and driven by well-defined, achievable utopias. Citizens' media are the media citizens use to activate communication processes that shape their *local communities.* (p. 24)

Rodríguez, Benjamin, and Shamas (2014) then went on to characterize the multiple ways in which collective citizen media can be described in relation to media technologies:

> Many different terms are used to label media technologies appropriated and used by social movements, citizens' groups and grassroots collectives, including: alternative media, social movements media, participatory media, community media, radical media, grassroots media, autonomous media, the French term *médias libres*, the Spanish term *medios populares*, and citizens' media. (p. 151)

It is starting from this intertwining of mediatized communities, translocality, and citizen media that we propose a reflection based on some experiences in progress of social community development to elaborate possible roles of communication processes in a potentially profound cultural and social change.

What Is Community Development: The Density of Relationships Becomes a Resource for Citizens

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

If the description is relatively theoretically simple, operationally, the activation of a development process is very difficult and tiring.

There are at least three media roles involved to take into account (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 175):

(1) Media content become important resources for defining collectivities.

(2) Media are means for constructing collectivities.

(3) Media trigger dynamics in collectivities.

According to Couldry and Hepp (2017), all three elements are relevant to understanding the central role of the media in building communities together with a:

> … shift from "collectivities of pure co-presence" to "collectivities of multi-modal communication".… Based on and shaped by a diverse media ensemble, less rooted in direct experience but in shared processes of mediated communication, these "collectivities of multi-modal communication" become communities when they build up a "common we" as well as long-term structures. An important characteristic of deep mediatization is the variable intensity of such collectivities and the role that choices between media modalities play in the formation of distinctive collectivities. Far from general switch-over to purely "personal" networks, in an age of deep mediatization we see a more differentiated range of collectivities, in part because even older collectivities of co-presence have now become mediatized. (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, pp. 175-176)

Let us try to imagine what happens when we activate a process of social community development that starts from participant observation in the territory and ends with the protagonism of citizens, both through a different culture of citizenship and communicative citizenship action, and through communicative acts of citizenship, as we shall later see.

Interpersonal Proximity Communication: Listening Without the Pretension of Change

When activating anthropological field work the first step in social community development (interviews with privileged witnesses, participant observation, neighborhood walks, physical presence in public spaces and public places in the neighborhood, contacts with people to collect needs aspirations, lifestyles, and ways of living in the community) is the interpersonal communication of proximity that takes on centrality.

It is a communication that must build empathy and reciprocity at the same time, a readiness to listen without this being intended as a resolution of problems. It is also an approach that anthropologists who have worked in the field in contexts of extraneous completions have assimilated into their training processes (Russell Bernard, 2017). Here, in fact, not only the competences related to interpersonal communication are generally understood to be at stake, but, rather, those that are contextualized, on the one hand, in the territorial community in its articulations (neighborhoods, squares, streets, and buildings), and, on the other hand, within the mediatized community (local media, social media, and local participatory platforms). These skills are the heart of proximity interpersonal communication and are often undervalued because they presuppose an egalitarian and fair dynamic among the participants and, above all, contain a simple and popular natural language as well as being metaphorically explanatory to most of the inhabitants of the community itself (Ervas, Gola, & Rossi, 2017).

It is more difficult to confront it for those (public social workers or NGO organizations) who have in their toolbox the aid relationship as the main instrument of intervention. A first cultural change is not indifferent and could have positive consequences not only on community development but also on social work as well.

Communicative Trust and Participation

The same wavelength is the question of participation that is essential for communication processes (Volterrani, 2018). Participation in community development has three major issues to be addressed: How to make citizens protagonists, how to promote and take care of the places of participation, and how to promote participation.

How to Make the Citizens Protagonists

For the first question, trust and reliability are two fundamental elements to increase social capital and social cohesion (Burt, Cook, & Lin, 2001). In contexts where there is a widespread and consolidated

social capital, both aspects are part of the cultural heritage and need only be re-activated. In poor contexts of social capital, the construction of an active protagonism of citizens passes first from the diffusion of the idea that it is possible to do something starting from the bottom and from simple activities. This can be activated both through a path composed of basic communication acts that favor the participation of the inhabitants as protagonists of the change of their community and through a different way of understanding citizen media.

In the first case, the main obstacle is distrust and possible accusations of naivety or of not having a sense of reality: plots, corruption, clientele of various kinds and genres, and/or hidden interests that move people to do certain things. All of which are situations that most people have known in their daily lives, undergoing the consequences, as real or presumed as they are. An unfavorable cultural climate changes only if communication and participatory processes of opposite signs are activated, which make people trust again in the communities, and in the institutions. Probably those who have read these words up to this point will say that they are just, in fact, words. But the possibility of rebuilding trust and social capital is not impossible.

An example of the construction of trust and participatory communication. The goal must be limited, as in the case of the project Com.in.3.0 where groups were built as small embryos of micro-social capital in many territories of the regions of Southern Italy among people who dealt (and continue to deal) with migrants[2].

The maintenance of these embryos of social capital, if there are no imminent project objectives, is very difficult. We are not used to forming relationships without necessarily having specific interests and objectives. Therefore, activating a communicative trust also means letting the people involved be patient; it means the ability to recognize that a relationship is often worth more than a project because it has no end and is not a means to achieving something else.

Communication in this case has been and is central to the slow development of the territorial communities. The support provided by the ad hoc online participatory platform has also made it possible to socialize those of advanced age or poor digital skills in the online world with practices different from those of social media, thanks to the intervention of the other members of the micro-group.

The "way" of citizen media. An alternative way to construct trust and participatory communication is constituted by citizen media and in particular by media practices that have as their objective the construction of a way of being public and citizen which is different from the traditional one.

Stephansen (2016, p. 24) described the path a community can follow using citizen media, citing Rodríguez (2001, p. 20),

> Referring to "citizens' media" implies first that a collectivity is enacting its citizenship by actively intervening in and transforming the established mediascape; second, that these media are contesting social codes, legitimized identities, and institutionalized social relations; and third, that these communication practices are empowering the community involved, to the point where these transformations and changes are possible.

All this is possible through concrete practices that are capable of involving the people of the community. For example, as pointed out by Stephansen (2016) in reference to the World Social Forum,

> Shared communication involves mobilization, movement-building and the proliferation of alternative communication

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[2] The project Com.in.3.0 (FAMI promoted by five regions of Southern Italy with an enacting subject the Nova Consortium) had as its objective the establishment, strengthening of skills, and the social capacity of heterogeneous groups (coming from public, private, and third sector organizations) of 18 cities in five southern regions on the topic of migrants.

practices, as well as the circulation of media content. It involves a laborious process of constructing social relationships, involving new actors in the production of media content and setting in motion dynamics in the places where the WSF is held. (p. 32)

But it is in the description of the practice of shared communication that we understand what the useful elements applicable to community development are:

> Shared communication activists engage in a distinct set of organizational practices oriented towards the creation of collaborative production processes that stimulate exchange of ideas, skills and experiences. As part of their commitment to strengthening movement-based communication processes, activists also engage in capacity-building practices aimed at equipping grassroots activists with the skills they need to produce their own media. Both of these sets of practices underpin broader practices of network formation: by creating spaces of sociality and involving new actors in collaborative processes of media production, activists aim to strengthen links among communicators and build networks of solidarity. Such practices, in turn, have been consolidated through a range of movement-building practices aimed at strengthening struggles for media democratization and developing a sense of collective identity among communication activists. (Stephansen, 2016, p. 33)

The set composed of the sharing of practices, collaborative training, and network construction is one of the ways in which it is possible to imagine the strengthening of fiduciary and participatory communication also going in the direction of the construction of an audience (of the community and of the media) that have a different critical perspective (Stephansen, 2016, pp. 38-39).

The Places of Participation

The care of the places of participation is all-round communication. Not only making known where you can participate, but how you can participate and, above all, how you can feel good in a context where there are people who are participating both physically and aesthetically. The aesthetic part of the places of participation in a context of community development is not secondary. If the aesthetic part is not taken care of, as we well know, then the social and aesthetic degradation grow and, unfortunately, legitimize each other. But the care of the places of participation also passes from the care of the online spaces that involve the participatory platforms where the main problem is certainly that of understanding the mechanisms with which the platforms managed directly and indirectly by the Big Five[3] work (Van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018, pp. 31-48), but also and above all identify what can be done to counter the sharing economy through, for example, the platform cooperativism (Scholz, 2016). However, we must take into account that platform cooperativism may work well for small-scale communities, but it will not spread automatically to other cities and countries, so it remains dubious whether they can present a countervailing power to the Big Five's dominant position (Van Doorn, 2017; Van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 152). In community development, it is essential to combine three different needs: the ability to take care of the physical spaces of participation at the same time as those online, which are often built ad hoc; the ability to build a connection between local and global through participatory platforms that is attractive and easily accessible for the people who take part; and the ability to build participatory spaces close to the realities of local communities. It is at the crossroads between these different needs, which are also contradictory to each other, where it is possible to imagine communicative processes adequate to a completely transformed and made complex participation also thanks to media coverage (Carpentier, 2016; Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

An example of communicative care of a physical space of participation. In the old town of Lamezia, Italy, Literary Coffee, run by a heterogeneous grouping of associations, cooperatives, and foundations, is first

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[3] The Big Five companies are: Alphabet-Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon, and Microsoft (Van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 12).

and foremost a beautiful space to see as well as a good place to have a cup of coffee, eat something, and meet someone. It is a place of participation certainly shared by the promoters, but a place where anyone can find a space to express themselves.

An example of communicative care of an online participation space. FQTS is a set of training practices for managers of third sector organizations in Southern Italy[4]. The place of connection of the training practices is an e-learning platform based on Moodle that has evolved in a participatory sense, both internally and alongside a Loomio platform. The online space has been taken care of from an aesthetic point of view as well as from a strictly communicative point of view. In the second direction, the participants were "forced" to interact with each other and with the teachers through the platform which, slowly, became appropriate and was elected as a place for conversation and even free discussion. Certainly, it does not yet have the appeal of global social media platforms, but the presence of a large number of participants along with active and participatory teaching methods has had a strong transformative and communicative impact on the territorial communities to which the participants belong.

Promote Participation

Finally, the third issue, the promotion of participation, is closely related to the construction of communicative trust. If we have established good fiduciary relationships, we will have to confront the (not easy to resolve) issue of the continuity of communication. It is easy, on the emotional wave of a positive moment and an unexpected success, to affirm that people participate even without telling them anything. After a short time, though they need to be recovered through methods and communication tools that were incorporated and shared previously, even a bulletin board in the middle of a square, if well managed, can represent a place of promotion if it has been shared as well as an A4-sized informational flyer distributed on a neighborhood street. The problem in this case is not the use of sophisticated and mediatized tools, but rather that of having shared socialized and simple tools in their use (Baker & Blaagaard, 2016). Often, however, we prefer to go in the other direction because we think that is the road to involvement, for example, using only social media. If in a community development process, we have shared social media as a tool to involve and promote participation, then that will be the instrument, but not because "it is not possible not to use social media today", but because the choice of that tool has come through a participatory path. People enjoy information and communication processes, often mixing many different tools for different goals and contexts that live and act. If, in that specific community, social media are the main tool that is used for involvement and participation, then it is appropriate to share and use it. Otherwise, it is the collective creativity that has to experiment with the most appropriate communication tools for that territorial community as well as building the most appropriate formative moments.

Connecting Communication

In community development, an important phase is that of the reconstruction of simple and complex bonds. The breakdown or, more frequently, the loosening of social ties is one of the aspects on which it is essential to concentrate once trust and reciprocity are rebuilt.

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[4] FQTS (Training of Manager of the Southern Italy Third Sector) is a 10-year training program promoted by the Forum of the Third National Sector (an association of Italian non-profit organizations) and by CsvNet (Italian national association of service centers for volunteering) and funded by the Con il Sud Foundation.

The simple bonds are those of neighborhood, those that help to solve needs and problems of daily life without resorting to intervention or structured service. Also, in this case, it is not a return to a romantic idea of community, but rather, to be able to identify in a specific context (neighborhood and street) what could be the individual and collective resources that can be shared by the community. This sharing is in extreme need of a connecting communication capable of bringing together problems and resources with fluidity and simplicity day after day. It is a communication that, at least at the beginning, should not be formalized because it would lose the freshness necessary to be able to quickly enter the relevant public spaces of the community. It is only later that, by increasing complexity, more sophisticated means of interaction may be necessary, but never forgetting their origins of neighborhood and proximity.

Complex bonds, on the other hand, need a more structured communication even if at the beginning the communication has the same characteristics described previously. The more structured communication concerns the collective structures (committees and associations) that can arise from the action of community development, while the more fluid communication can concern the informal groups. In both cases, a qualitative leap is emphasized in the self-perception of the community which begins a work that is more organized and continuous. This is also the moment in which a comparison can be made with local public institutions.

Communication With the Territory: The Mood Boards of the Community

The involvement of the relevant community actors is another decisive moment for community development to take a more solid form. Public actors are of primary importance as a guarantee of universality. This is not always possible due to the specific conditions of the local context (for example, commissariats or infiltrations, if not real occupations, of organized crime), but it is, however, a dialogue that must be opened and built upon.

Dialogue with institutions for those who build community involvement from below is always difficult because the communication codes are completely different and sometimes even contradictory (Van Dijck et al., 2018, pp. 155-162). The first is rational, patient, and balanced; the second is pragmatic, informal, and fast. It is not a value judgment that we want to make, but rather a difference to be emphasized in order to find a way that can be shared. First of all, the timing. Communicating with institutions means taking the view of having to wait for political representation. Whoever legitimately directs the local institutions must respond to all citizens and, unless the community development concerns the entire citizenship (e.g., small countries), must build balanced interventions on the territory. This does not mean, however, that it is not possible to build up an integration of public policies launched as a result of the actions of community development. Knowing how to describe well the actions accomplished, giving life and meaning to what has been possible due to the protagonism of people, is one of the objectives to be achieved at this stage. Knowing how to recount these actions requires the ability to acquire the basics of storytelling as well as the ability to collect the daily stories that "make" a community. You should also learn how to do what American screenwriters do in order to convince producers of the greatness of their work: Build so-called mood boards which are video remixes that show what the script would be like once made using images and videos taken from other media products. The mood boards of the community are those that tell what has been done, and what could be done for sharing with institutions as well as with the third sector organizations and the companies of the territory. The production capacity of these products does not require a high level of professionalism and all the tools (assembly software, images, and videos) are available on the network without access restrictions and easily usable. In this context, we can

realize the ability to be producers and consumers of multimedia products as theorized by Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, and Robison (2006) who in this case, unlike fandoms, sees groups of citizens of communities with scarce digital skills as protagonists.

A mode which can be even more interesting when viewed from the perspective of the social responsibility of local businesses, which can become more aware if they are able to perceive those aspects that often risk being hidden from a path of community development.

In short, communication with the territory is a communication that must aim for involvement to increase perception and knowledge in public and private actors and to change opinions, attitudes, and behaviors with respect to the community of reference. Furthermore, it must be able, as far as possible, to widen the boundaries of community development to disseminate and share with other parts of the territory possible methods, tools, and results.

If viewed from the point of view of institutions, communication with citizens cannot detach from the method that produces bottom-up involvement. Basically, it is essential that those with public responsibilities know how to observe and read what the communication flows relevant to the community are, trying to support and channel them with attention and respect. Continuing with the example of mood boards, these can also be built for what concerns services and exquisitely public actions in order to get "in tune" with the citizens of the community that is using them to narrate from below. But it is also possible to think that the "traditional" tools of institutional communication, such as newsletters, can be transformed into moments of community participation if the editors that create them are open to the contributions of its citizens.

What is envisaged is a system of communication flows that does not originate from below or from above, but is rather a "middle ground" of community communication.

Back to the Past, Mutualistic Communication

A final reference to community development is with respect to territorial mutuality. This represents an idea of advanced community development where people of the community even build financial devices capable of intervening—like the workers' societies of mutual aid of the late 19th century—in difficult situations while preserving the dignity of the people and families involved.

In this case, the cultural aspect of mutuality is perhaps the one that most needs to be communicated. The idea that we can provide resources for a community and that perhaps we will not receive an immediate personal advantage from this act is difficult to understand and accept in many contexts where a very accentuated individualism is widespread. But this is precisely the role of mutualistic communication, cultural change: changing individual and collective culture by leveraging the possible results that can be achieved both in the informal mutuality of the street, neighborhood, and community as mentioned at the beginning, and in the territorial one that may also imply a commitment to grant financial support. By building territorial mutuality one can imagine developing a shared idea of the community on small services related to educational policies, such as support for academic performance or parental support outside of nursery or kindergarten services. These ideas are not born if there has not been a process of mutual participation of a strong and lasting informal type that has highlighted what the real problems were. Subsequently, the participant decides that an individual financial contribution is necessary in order to imagine supporting those activities, assuming that only part of the community will benefit from them. This repeated aspect on other issues builds that incentive to the construction of differentiated mutual funds that can be the basis for building a more rooted territorial mutuality.

Conclusions: A Guide for the Future

A community that is culturally changing is one that can build social cohesion, social development, and economic development. In a territorial community, cultural change is deeply intertwined with social change: Without seeing and touching the effects of social change, it is not easy for people to change their minds about what their new role might be in the community. Communication in the nuances that we have tried to tell so far assumes a strategic value often underestimated because we tend to privilege the concrete and pragmatic aspects of the interventions without taking into account that if you do not build sharing, relationships, mutual recognition, and opportunities for knowledge, it is almost impossible to give continuity to what has been undertaken within the community.

In the era of deep mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2017), the development of community, on the one hand, is built through the communication processes and, on the other hand, can be interrupted by the communication processes themselves if they are substantially driven exclusively by the global market. The challenge in the coming years will be precisely to tackle these problems with a bottom-up approach capable of grasping the challenges of contemporary capitalism.

Acknowledgements

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