The Theory of Social Representations (Moscovici 1961) has been used extensively as a tool to understand better social groups’ appropriation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), and their empowerment through ICTs. However, few studies have explored the intersection of the three domains together – Social Representations, ICTs, and Community Empowerment. Nevertheless, the intersection is promising and fruitful: the theory of Social Representations allows for inclusion and comparison of different points of view, from underserved communities and local stakeholders, up to funding agents and decision makers. The theory enables one to uncover communities’ drivers for actions, to foster reflection, and to account for dissonant voices, which are of the utmost importance in understanding the role of ICTs especially in silenced and underrepresented communities. This theoretical framework is suitable for case studies as well as to provide longitudinal perspectives, which are needed in the studies of ICTs, a field so often limited by its novelty. Social representations are suitable in accounting for unforeseen aspects, which are most likely to be present in multidisciplinary and multicultural studies. Finally, the theory fits participatory and design-oriented research processes.

The four contributions in this special issue explore a range of information and communication tools used to foster community empowerment (from social media systems, such as Twitter and Facebook, to computers and digital radios) in a variety of geographical contexts (from Latin America, to Europe and Africa). The concept of community empowerment is tackled from different perspectives, the overarching theme being the role of ICTs in giving voice to local communities. The studies by Sarrica, Farinosi, Comunello, Brondi, Parisi and Fortunati (previously published in Semiotica 222), and by Bacallao Pino investigate the potential of online communication and of so-called web 2.0 to give a voice to

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communities. The first study analyzes the use of Twitter and Facebook in two recent dramatic earthquakes in Italy, while the second explores the issues of use and appropriation of digital technologies by students’ social movements in Chile and Mexico. Both contributions show how a community, being geographically defined or not, is shaped and re-modelled by the use of digital tools. The articles by Rega and Vannini, and by Pucciarelli and Vannini investigate, instead, the role of technologies in amplifying the voice of a community: the first article explores how Mozambican communities perceive Community Multimedia Centres in terms of local empowerment and socio-economic development; while the second investigates misalignments in the representations of the virtual and the physical city of Douala, in Cameroon.

Let us now have a closer look at the content of the four contributions of this special issue.

The article by Sarrica, Farinosi, Comunello, Brondi, Parisi and Fortunati (published in Semiotica 222) examines the use of Twitter and Facebook in two dramatic earthquakes that hit Italy: L’Aquila (2009) and Emilia (2012). It argues that the use of social media may contribute to social representations processes and functions: cognitive coping, social sharing of emotions, preserving self-efficacy, boosting identity and community empowerment. Results thus suggest that the use of social media favoured different representational functions, which progressively contributed to community empowerment.

Bacallao analyzes the social representations of ICTs’ appropriation for community empowerment by social movements, by exploring two Latin American recent student social movements: the Mexican #YoSoy132 and the Chilean student movement. The findings indicate that the online/offline and the visibility/articulation tensions are relevant dimensions of the social representation of ICTs’ appropriation for collective empowerment, and that the socio-political goals of such movements are a central mediation for the process of configuration of the social representation.

The article by Rega and Vannini uses the theoretical construct of Social Representations to investigate how Community Multimedia Centres (CMCs) are perceived by communities in Mozambique. Findings show that CMCs are seen as learning spaces almost exclusively dedicated to children and young people. One of the components of CMCs, the telecenter, is seen as focused on delivering ICT training, while the other component, the radio, is seen as engaging with educational activities and services in a broader sense.

Finally, Pucciarelli and Vannini investigate the complex relationship between the physical and digital spaces of the city of Douala, Cameroon, by comparing its online image against the oral representations by locals. Outcomes from the analysis show an unripe, intermediate stage of the “hybrid Douala,”
where the virtual space seems still not to be affecting the way in which the physical space is experienced, and where the gaps in the digital divide might be perpetuated. At the same time, a strong local ownership of certain digital activities suggests how the online image of the city is in the process of being constructed and developed locally.

While this special issue has contributed to the exploration of the links between ICTs and their appropriation by communities, it might also provide a valuable (even if small) contribution to the dialogue between the Theory of Social Representation and semiotics, as it has been recently suggested and demonstrated by Veltri (2015).

We really enjoyed gathering and reading these contributions, and believe that this special issue will also be a fruitful and enjoyable experience for all the readers.

References
