



# **#TwitterPA T3/2011**

Mapping the Presence and Activities of  
the Italian Public Bodies on Twitter  
[TrimIII/2011]

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**Full Report available online at:**

<http://www.scribd.com/gioanniarata>

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## Executive Summary

The present report examines the use of Twitter by local public bodies [municipalities, provinces, regions] and by Italian ministries.

With more than 165 registered users, 100 million active users [cfr. <http://goo.gl/QG8qB> ], and an average of 460000 new accounts opened in the world each day, the platform under examination represents one of the most dynamic realities in the entire social media landscape. By now, its numbers are also significant in Italy: at the end of 2010 there were 1.3 million registered profiles- 350000 of which were active- an average of 100000 new subscriptions a month and 350000 tweets sent out on a daily basis.

**The accounts which are ascribed to local public bodies and ministers are 160 in all, representing an extremely small portion [ $>0.01\%$ ] of the Italian total.**

\* In absolute terms, the lion's share is 132 accounts belonging to municipal administrations [82.5% of the total], followed by provinces [11.25%] and regions [5%]. Ministries make up 1.25% of the Italian total.

\* It is, however, at the regional level that one may register the highest intensity of presence: 7 out of 20 [35% of the total] Regions are furnished with an account, where the percentage decreases to 16.3% for provinces, 8.6% for ministries and 1.6% for municipalities.

**The number of public accounts continues to increase, but the growth trajectory remains constant over time; one may not register the positive peaks that instead occur with individuals and businesses**

\* The first quantitative leap arrived in 2009, when 51 new organizations subscribed to the service [there were 6 on 31 December 2008]. In 2010 the growth continues, with the opening of 63 antennas, while in 2011 the number of profiles created to date is 40 [25% of the total].

\* Rimini was the first entity to open a Twitter account. It was November of 2007.

**The use of Twitter is more widespread in Northern Italy...**

\* Northern Italy boasts a total of 89 antennas [55.6% of the total].

\* The four regions that host the largest number of Twitter bases are all in Northern Italy: Piedmont, Veneto, Emilia- Romagna and Lombardy.

**...But Central Italy, Southern Italy, and the Italian islands also show good signs of vitality**

\* More than a third of the accounts detected [38] are ascribed to local organizations in the *Mezzogiorno*, while there are 33 accounts present in the 5 regions of Central Italy.

\* Regions such as Puglia [12 antennas], Sardinia [11] e Tuscany [12] reveal a dense presence, far superior to the National average.

\* Sardinia, in particular, is the region with the most elevated ratio of antennas in relation to the population [about one account for every 151000 residents].

**Twieeting Districts are a reality**

\* There is a tendency to form "Twieeting Districts" around the most dynamic city centers. This is occurring in Piedmont, where attraction of the Region and the capital Municipality of Piedmont has brought about a concentration of 19 antennas, in Veneto [19 antennas], Emilia-Romagna [16], Sardinia [11].

**The majority of antennas belong to territorial public bodies of limited dimensions, while many large cities are still missing from the list**

\* 100 out of the 160 registered accounts [62.5%] belong to small municipalities which are not even capital of their province.

\* Conversely, only 11 of the 20 capital cities of the regions have opened their own base on Twitter. Missing from the list are metropolises such as Rome, Bari, Palermo, and, *de facto*, Florence [which only has an unofficial account].

**The public accounts demonstrate, on the whole, a limited understanding of the uses and the potentials of the tool**

\* 124 of the accounts under observation [80% of the total] utilize Twitter exclusively as a *broadcast* channel, without taking advantage of some of the dialogue and sharing features the system has to offer. As another confirmation of the scarce tendency to use dialogue, 20% of the antennas do not "follow" any external account.

\* Two of the registered profiles actually keep their own tweets private, only consenting the fruition of public information upon authorization by the local institution.

**There are numerous accounts which are opened and then quickly abandoned by administrations. And even in those cases in which updates continue, their frequency is low, on average**

\* More than half of the antennas under observation [91 out of 160, 56.9% of the sample] are updated with a nonchalant frequency or not at all. The reality of sleeping accounts is particularly marked- those in which no update has been registered in the 30 days prior to the survey. There are 58 antennas attributed to this category, equal to 36.3% of the total.

\* The sleeping accounts are particularly concentrated in the municipal areas [50 occurrences] and the regions [3 occurrences]. There was no antenna of this kind in the provinces.

\* At the other extreme of the *continuum* are the 24 profiles [15% of the total] updated with a daily frequency. These are found at all of the administrative levels and dimensions, from ministries to small towns.

**Twitter is prevalently used as a “continuation” of the physical office**

\* Prevalent uses regard the announcement of events [registered in 111 antennas] and the advancement of information of public interest [59% of the cases, equal to 94 occurrences]. This evidence proves valid for all of the administrative levels examined.

\* Among the most innovative modes of use, we can note the increase of multimedia materials [practiced in 45 places] and the use of *crowdsourcing* [6 occurrences]. These experimental activities are mostly concentrated in the municipal antennas.

\* In 7.5% [12 out of 160] of the cases, the public spaces on Twitter have been opened but have not yet been “populated” with any content.

**The first “ghost accounts” make their appearance**

\* 9 of the antennas under analysis make use of names and symbols which are apparently ascribable to administrations, but their authorship remains uncertain. Some of the occurrences are real instances of *cybersquatting*, while in other cases, the occupying of accounts is done by citizens in good faith with a preventative aim, who block the spaces in order to make them available for the administration in case of a Twitter “landing”.

## 1. Numbers and distribution of public accounts

In September 2011, Italian local public bodies and ministries can count 160 Twitter profiles in all- a number significant in and of itself, even if it is decidedly narrow in relation to the total number of active accounts in the country [350000 at the end of 2010, according to the unofficial data which are available]. From the perspective of the distribution among the different administrative levels, the municipalities take the lion's share, as documented by Fig1:

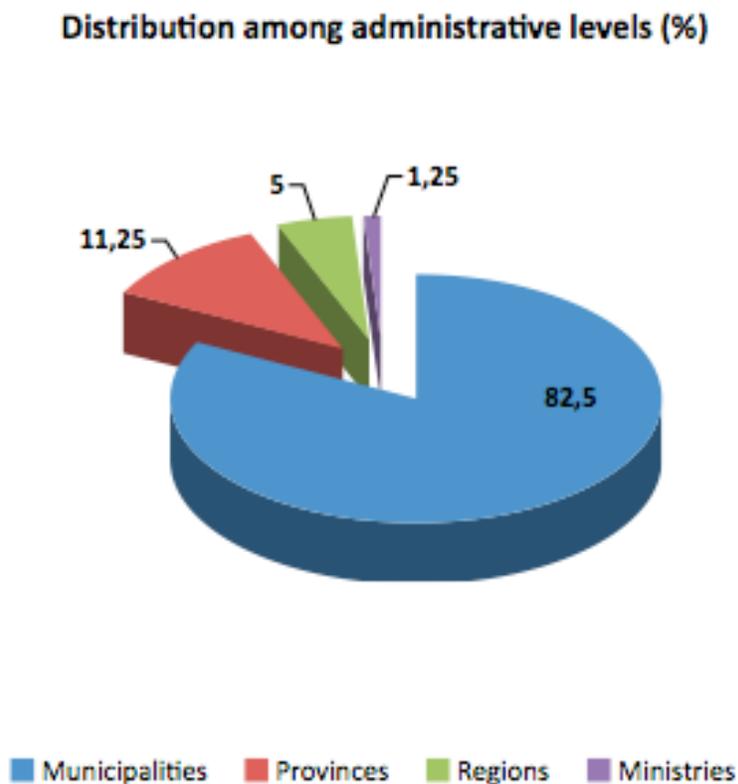


Fig. 1 Distribution among administrative levels [%]

There are 132 antennas in the municipalities[Fig.2], compared to 18 connected to the provinces, 8 to the regions, and only two to the ministries.

	Absolute Terms	%
Municipalities	132	82,5
Provinces	18	11,25
Regions	8	5
Ministries	2	1,25
<b>Totale</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>100</b>

Fig. 2: Distribution among administrative levels

The prevalence of municipalities in absolute terms should not, however, be deceiving. If they are considered in relation to their overall number [8092], in fact, the “Twittering” municipal administrations represent only 1.6% of the total- a percentage that rises to 8.6% for the ministries, to 16.3% for the provinces and to a noteworthy 35% for the regions.

## 2. The trajectory over time

The introduction of Twitter at the level of local public bodies is owed to the municipality of Rimini, whose account has been open since November 2007. But that year- and for all of 2008- the platform of microblogging was substantially unknown to administrations. It was only in 2009 that administrations began to approach these platforms in a more decided manner [51 new accounts], and then in 2010 and 2011.

	Absolute Terms	Growth (%)
2007	1	-
2008	5	400,0
2009	51	92,0
2010	63	23,5
2011 [partial]	40	-17,0

Fig.3: the trajectory of the Italian Public Twittersphere across time

The evidence presented in Fig. 3 documents a constant increase in accounts at the local administrative level. Nevertheless, the same data assumes a completely different value when compared with the overall expansion which the platform experiences in our country: the little data available demonstrate, in fact, a considerable leap in the Twitter phenomenon, with monthly growth rates that measure around 30% and new subscriptions for 100000 units every 30 days. In this sense, while the number of platforms at the level of system-country [individuals, companies, public bodies] is exploding, those numbers related to local bodies are growing more slowly- and they instead lead one to hypothesize a contraction of the year-to-year rapport for 2011.

### 3. The distribution across national territory

The territorial distribution of the accounts reveals many elements of interest, which are already highlighted in the earlier surveys and confirmed by the survey of September 2011.

The first information has to do with the pervasiveness of the means of communication, one which is indeed present in every part of the country. [Fig.4] With the sole exception of Molise, all of the Italian regions register the presence of at least two Twitter antennas, with larger “peaks” of 19 in Piedmont and Veneto.

Regions	Accounts
Val D'Aosta	2
Piemonte	19
Lombardia	15
Trentino Alto-Adige	8
Veneto	19
Friuli Venezia- Giulia	3
Liguria	7
Emilia- Romagna	16
Toscana	12
Umbria	4
Marche	6
Lazio	7
Abruzzo	4
Puglia	12
Basilicata	3
Campania	7
Molise	0
Calabria	3
Sicilia	2
Sardegna	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>160</b>

Fig.4: Distribution of the account among Regions

The Northern area of the country proves undoubtedly to be the most populated, hosting a total of 89 bases [72 at the Municipal level, 11 at the Provincial level, and 6 at the Regional level] as well as the 4 most dynamic regions [Piedmont and Veneto, followed by Emilia- Romagna and Lombardo]. At the same time, the Mezzogiorno and Central Italy hold a significant number of accounts [38 and 33, respectively], with regions such as Puglia, Tuscany and Sardinia attesting to numbers that are well above average.

But the most significant evidence regards the so-called “Tweeting districts” . They are a phenomenon of geographic density which is easily observable on the same map of the accounts [Fig. 5]: in many areas across the country, from the Turin district, to those of Cagliari

and Sassari; from the Apulian coast, to Lombardy, and along the Emilian Way; in Veneto and in the province of Trento, there are indeed visible Twitter “clouds” which are more or less dense from one case to another. The analysis conducted here does not allow for the certain specification of the factors which led to the emergence of these districts. Nonetheless, it is possible to hypothesize that the presence of particularly active or rising antennas- like those in the Municipalities of Turin, Bologna, Cagliari, Venice, those in the Province of Trento, or those in the Region of Apulia – that might have played a role by acting as hubs and models for the spreading of the means of communication in the surrounding area.



Fig. 5: Google Fusion map available at: <http://goo.gl/5ckzX>

At the same time, in a manner which apparently contradicts what has been argued earlier, the analysis also evinces the vitality of small centers. The bases made up of municipalities other than that of the regional or provincial capital. In fact, 62.5% of the total number [100 antennas] of bases are made up of municipalities which are not the regional or provincial capital, and they are found to be extremely vital, even in areas that are not strictly central to the country. As a counterpoint to this data, there is the absence of many of the important metropolitan areas such as Rome, Palermo, Bari and Florence that haven't yet taken steps towards providing a recognizable Twitter presence. The evidence just offered, together with that related to the Twitter districts, suggests that the social innovation develops [although non prevalently] in the suburbs, but finds the occasion to consolidate above all in contexts characterized by the presence of metropolitan antennas [or regional, or provincial] and is able to pull along the growth of the surrounding districts.

#### 4. Literacy, competence, and frequency of use of the medium

Local bodies and ministries subscribe to Twitter, but they often do not seem to be capable of utilizing it with competency. This information strongly emerges from the examination of different dimensions, such as the meaningful use of the dialogue features, the degree of interconnection and collaboration with third-party accounts, and the frequency of updates to the channel. Let's look at them in detail.

The first vidente in this regard draws upon to the data related to the employment of the advanced functions of the system: *retweet*, *hashtag*, and dialogue messages addressed to specific users [Fig.6].

	Retweet		Hashtag		@	
	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N
Municipalities	17	115	20	112	11	121
Provinces	5	13	5	13	1	17
Regions	2	6	0	8	0	8
Ministries	0	2	0	2	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>136</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>148</b>

Fig.6: Use of the advanced functions

In particular, just 15% of the antennas [20 municipalities, 5 provinces, and no ministries or regional administrations] are served by so-called hashtags, the symbols conventionally used to facilitate the research and indexing of Twitter pitches, and a number nearly analogous to this [17 at the municipal level, 5 at the provincial level, and 2 at the regional level] “re-pitch” content coming from third party accounts through the *retweet* function. What's even less widespread, then, is the activity linked to the use of the symbol “@”, that allows one to contact other users through personalized messages. There are 12 antennas that use this feature [11 municipal, one provincial], comprising 7.5% of the total.

The scarce propensity towards dialogue- and more generally, to the use of the *social characteristics* of the social media- are confirmed in the data related to the number of accounts followed by the administrations [so-called *following*] documented in Figs. 7 and 8.

Following	Absolute Terms	%
0	32	20,0
1-25	36	22,5
6-25	37	23,1
26-50	13	8,1
51+	42	26,3
<b>Total</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>100</b>

Fig.7: Number of external accounts followed by Public Twitter accounts [Absolute Terms and %]

20% of the antennas [32 in total, of which 28 are municipal, 2 are provincial, 1 is regional, and 1 is ministerial] simply do not follow anyone else's Twitter profile. And almost a quarter of the total [22.5%] do little more, having chosen to subscribe to a number between one and five profiles. Taken together, these data tell us that almost half of the accounts under examination [42.5%] show little or no interest in the possibility of hearing or speaking [which are intrinsic to this channel], and they limit themselves to using their own space as a "megaphone" for their own information.

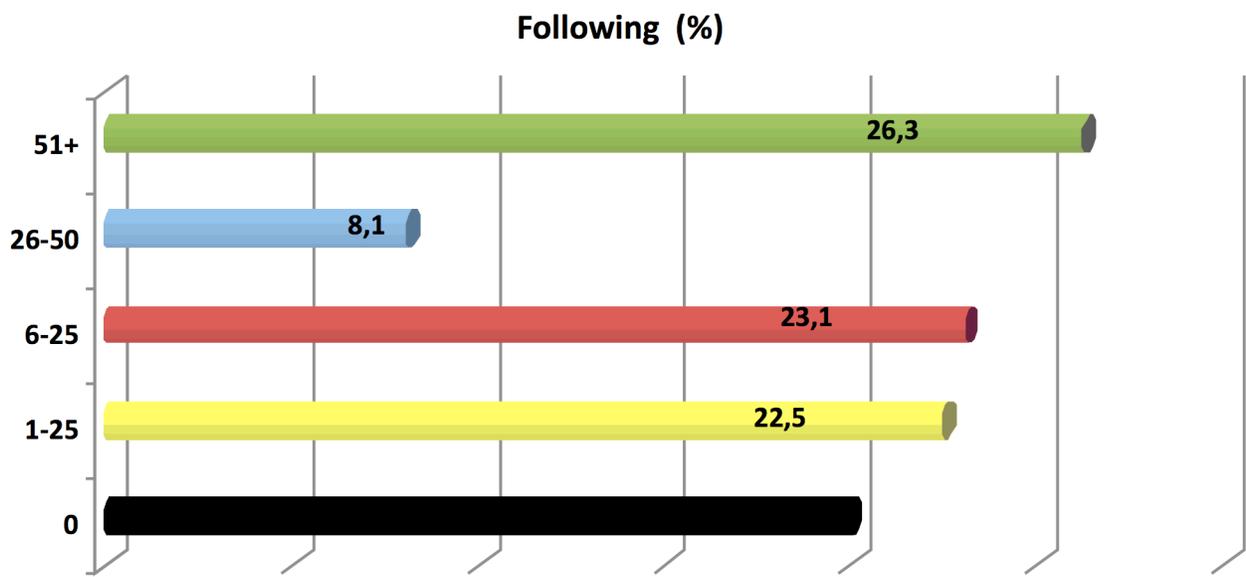


Fig. 8: external accounts followed by the Public Twitter Profiles [%]

The other profiles under examination exhibit a more dialogue-oriented potentiality related to this means of communication: almost one in four accounts [23.1%] follow between six and twenty-three external entities, and the remaining 55 register an even higher number for the category of *following*.

Other valuable indications regarding the degree of competence- or at least of attention- in the use of Twitter can be treated under the examination of evidence on the frequency of updates to the account [Fig. 9, Fig. 10].

Frequency of use (%)	Absolute Terms	%
Daily	24	15,0
1+ times/week	35	21,9
1/week~	10	6,3
Occasional	33	20,6
Sleeping	58	36,3
Total	160	100

Fig.9: Updating Frequency [Absolute Terms and %]

In 24 of 160 cases which were analyzed [15%], the insertion of new content occurred either daily or more than once a day, while 21.9% of the antennas were enriched with new updates several times over the course of a week, even if they were not updated every day. Taken together, the accounts of these two subgroups total 59- 40 of which refer to the municipalities, 13 to the provinces, 2 to the regional administrations, and 1 to the ministries.

At the other end of the continuum are the “sleeping” accounts, that is, those for which no update has been registered in the 30 days prior to the survey. This is an extremely wide audience- equivalent in numbers to the “virtuous” one, since it counts 58 units- that indicate, at the very least, negligence, if not real ignorance about the nature of Twitter and its various functions. From this perspective, it is worth also observing how a large number of the sleepers [50] are concentrated among antennas at the municipal level. These are especially prevalent among the smallest public bodies- while the phenomenon proves to be less pronounced in the areas of larger dimensions. The continuity of the bases, then, is more easily guaranteed where the dimensions- and the human and structural supply- of the bodies are more robust.

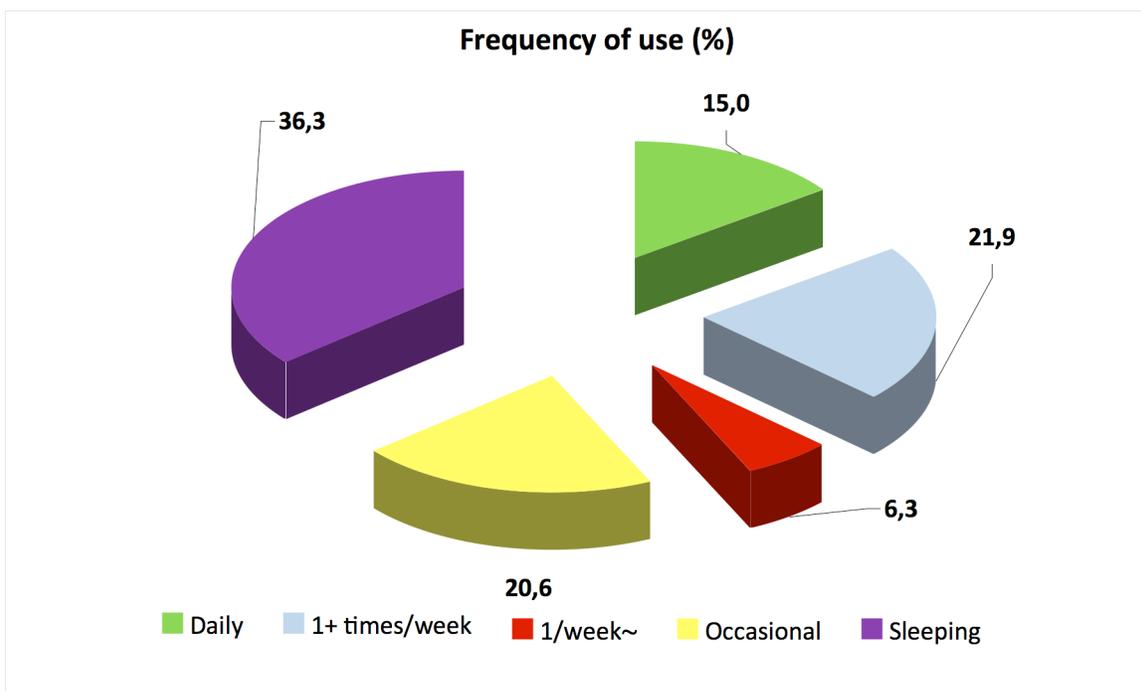


Fig.10: Updating Frequency [%]

In conclusion, the examination of the indexes related to the frequency of updates, to the use of the advanced features, and to that of listening to external accounts presents us with an image of a Twitter administration with many shadows. The degree of familiarity with this means of communication- at the level of features and directions for use- appears in most cases to be limited. There is a prevalent tendency on Twitter to replicate communication models like broadcasts, with an administration that limits itself to a unidirectional conveyance of their information to the outside while expressing no concern for listening or dialogue with the interlocutors.

## 5. Usage and spreading of content

Through their own spaces, the administrations exchange information in many different ways. And the spectrum of this usage is progressively growing as the numbers increase and the knowledge about the potentialities of its use increases. This considered, the analysis of data [Fig. 11] brings to light the existence of some prevalent modes of usage, and in a cross-sectional and independent manner, with respect to the type and dimension of the bodies.

Usage and spreading of contents	Absolute Term
Public interest Info	94
Public notifications	38
Announcement of events	111
Multimedia sharing	45
Communications by administrators and	37
Crowdsourcing actions	6
No tweet published yet	12
Other	10
Not retrieved	3
<b>Totale</b>	<b>356</b>

Fig.11: Modes of usage of Twitter by Public Accounts

The antennas are employed first and foremost for the announcement of events [111 occurrences, 69.3% of the total] and for information sharing on subjects of general interest like traffic, weather, changes in openings and closings of public buildings, strikes [94 occurrences, 58.7% of the total]. Instead, there are 38 antennas that use Twitter to announce - or, through links dedicated to the purpose, directly post - public notifications and other related documentation. In 37 cases the data that passes on the account is strictly related to administration and to the administrators, such as summonses to meetings, reports on the same, and even communications made by elected officials.

Besides these facts that characterize Twitter as a digital extension of the physical help desk, other modes of usage are gradually being asserted. This is the case, for example, with the sharing of multimedia materials- images, films, podcast- an activity practiced by more than one in four antennas [28.1%] or by initiatives that involve the collection of content generated by citizens [known as *crowdsourcing*], practiced in 6 areas.

The remaining cases also offer interesting catalysts for research. In 12 of the cases under examination, the account, even if open, was not yet populated by one pitch, while in other 10 cases only messages of contact were published [ex: "Welcome to the Twitter account of the Municipality of xyz"]. Finally, there were three accounts for which it was not possible to reveal the mode of use: in two cases, this is because the profiles- previously opened- were officially closed by the administrations [and therefore were no longer visible]; in the third case, this is because the public body opted for a private account, the access to which was limited to visitors who were authorized by the same public body.

## **6. The “ghost” accounts**

Knowingly included in the research were nine antennas whose relation to public bodies is not completely clear. These are accounts that carry- in terms of their names, logos and the content diffused- explicit reference to specific administrations, but for whom it was impossible to completely assert its real authorship.

It was decided to count these accounts, defined as “ghost accounts”, not only for the objective difficulty in ascertaining their affiliation, but also because they are representative of a phenomenon- that of more or less clear digital fraud - regarding online identity, that is beginning to gain strength even in the world of Twitter. This is territory that practically unexplored by the administrations, but one which will be practically impossible not to take into consideration in the future.

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### **About this research**

This research was conducted through the empirical observation of profiles [number of tweets, following, follower] and of content published by the accounts under analysis. The census of accounts was completed through a combination of: research on Twitter and Google search engines, research on the list of contacts of profiles that were already selected, a collection of announcements through Twitter and FriendFeed, use of Twitter’s system of suggestions [“Who to follow”]. A cross-check was done, wherever possible, on the official website of the public body of the record selected. The list, obtained in this way, is by no means exhaustive. The data were updated at about 7:00 am on 27 September 2011.

### **About the Author**

Giovanni Arata is a researcher and freelance journalist.

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