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Statement of purpose

Dear Madame, Sir,

My name is Dante Donati, I am currently enrolled in the third year of the PhD program in Economics at Pompeu Fabra University (UPF), in Barcelona. I am writing to apply to the NBER Digitization Tutorial.

During the Master of Science and the Master of Research I pursued at Bocconi University and UPF, respectively, I specialized in the study of empirical techniques applied to Political Economy and Development Economics. In particular, my studies focused on terrorism, health, inequality, economic geography, economics of information and public economics. During these years and still today, I have been working closely on these topics with Professors Ruben Durante, Ruben Enikolopov, Eliana La Ferrara, Nicola Gennaioli, Maria Petrova, Giacomo Ponzetto, Marta Reynal-Querol and Alessandro Tarozzi.

In the last year I focused my attention on the political and socio-economic consequences of the media and digital technologies. Indeed, during the course work of the MRes, I carried out personal researches to analyze the causal impact of 3G mobile internet availability on economic activity (market access and trade) and political outcomes in South Africa. The first work was supervised by Giacomo Ponzetto (see Abstract 1, on the next page). The second work became my MRes thesis, which I discussed with Professors Petrova and Enikolopov. I will present the updated version of this paper at the conference on Digital Economy next January in Toulouse. I attach a preliminary version of the abstract (see Abstract 2, on the next page).

I strongly believe that the spread of digital technologies, and specifically the arrival of mobile Internet, may give birth to a new frontier of research in economic and social sciences. Indeed, the phenomenon offers interesting opportunities to study the role of information in economics and its intersection with traditional fields, both in developed and developing countries. As a matter of fact, apart from the standard geographical and

temporal dimensions, the spread and use of these technologies interestingly vary across age, income, legislations, social status, etc. At the same time, their widespread use provides access to a large amount of new data that should be taken into account by researchers.

In developing countries, smartphones could represent an effective way to promote behavioral change and eventually lead to socio-economic development. Together with Victor Orozco (The World Bank), we will implement an online-based randomized control trial in India to study the effect of educational video clips, comics and video games on gender-based violence. The treatment will be implemented through smartphones. The investigation is part of a general area of research that focuses on the use of edutainment (educational entertainment) and trans-media to shift people's behavior.

In the developed world, the frequent use of online applications and social media by young generations is gathering the attention of the media. Here, health issues represent a primary negative consequence of smartphones availability among teenagers. Together with Ruben Durante we are planning to study the causal effects of the use of these technologies on the mental-health and related pathologies of young people.
Moreover, another interesting area of research I am exploring looks at the way perceptions of social-status and inequality (and hence preferences towards redistribution) are affected by the constant interaction with social media. As an example, consider the exposure of young people to the "rich kids" Instagram pages, and the related content.

Non-experimental empirical research in these fields is generally threatened by confounding factors which prevents estimating causal effects. However, at the same time data quality and availability seem to improve quickly. State-of-the-art research and techniques need to adapt in order to embrace these changes. I believe that the NBER digitizing tutorial would be an excellent opportunity to learn about frontier research from the most expert scholars in the field. My personal academic experience would certainly benefit as well.

I kindly ask you to consider my application. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Kind regards,

Dante Donati

Abstract 1

Mobile internet and economic development:
evidence from a spatially-disaggregated analysis

This essays seeks to investigate whether internet access can lead to economic development looking at the South African mobile internet expansion between 2009 and 2013. Among various potential channels that can drive the relationship between internet and economic activity, agglomeration economies are the preferred hypothesis. In the absence of a valid instrument for internet coverage, this paper attempts to tackle endogeneity issues adopting a semi-structural approach based on a two-step methodology which relies on propensity score and diff-in-diff estimation. The findings show that internet seems to play no significant role for economic development in mostly urban and more developed regions. By contrast, in rural and poorer places 3G internet coverage appears to matter. A one-standard deviation increase in coverage enhances economic activity by 0.20, which is almost one-third of the mean of the dependent variable at the baseline. Unfortunately, the empirical strategy developed here allows to estimate the ultimate aggregate effects of internet on development. More structural work is needed to understand which of the proposed channels plays the most fundamental role.

Abstract 2

Mobile Internet access and political outcomes:
Evidence from South Africa

Does 3G Internet coverage affect political participation and individuals' voting behavior in developing countries? In this paper I provide an empirical answer to this question looking at the South African municipal elections results between 2000 and 2016. I conduct two complementary analyses. In the first part, I exploit the temporal and geographical variation in 3G Internet coverage to estimate its causal impact on voter turnout and vote shares of the major South African parties, ANC, DA and EFF, respectively. In order to mitigate concerns on potential endogeneity, I use a high-resolution newly constructed dataset along with a Diff-in-Diff estimation, and perform a series of robustness checks. In the second part, I develop a comprehensive analysis of the potential mechanisms that may drive the observed relationships. A triple difference estimator is used to assess the role of the Internet in providing information on the financial administration of the municipal money. Finally, I carry out a heterogeneity analysis across sub-samples of the original dataset to examine which segments of the population are more likely to be affected by Internet coverage. The main findings show that Internet access did not significantly affect voter turnout, yet it caused a reduction in the vote share of the ruling ANC party by almost 6.4 pp. The second major party, the DA, has gained from the Internet arrival. Its share rose by approximately 2.2 pp. Moreover, among localities with high level of corruption-related expenditure, a unitary increase in coverage causes a reduction in the votes for the ANC party of almost 1.2 pp. Finally, evidence from the heterogeneity analysis points out the information role the Internet plays in more isolated localities