Hybrid 2018 campaigning: the social media habits of Italian political leaders and parties

Roberta Bracciale

UNIVERSITY OF PISA

Cristopher Cepernich

UNIVERSITY OF TURIN

Abstract

The electoral communication flows produced by leaders, parties, and the main candidates are the result of hybrid media logics and this is due to the environment in which they develop, and to the communicative strategies used. These strategies are generated by the intersection of traditional media logics (TV, radio, press) with digital media logics (Internet). This article investigates the social media communication habits of the main Italian leaders and political parties on Twitter and Facebook. To understand how the hybrid campaign developed in the Italian context, specific indicators were identified to operationalize social media habits related to: (a) communicative strategy, based on the productivity of the account (broadcast) and on its degree of interactivity (conversational), (b) skillfulness, regarding the capability to use different features of the social media platform; and (c) engagement, related to the capacity of the account to involve the audience. Results show that a more skillful use of the platforms, combined with a conversational communication strategy, produce more engaging messages regardless the specific political actor (leader or party). Finally, the outcomes show a significant strengthening of hybrid media campaigning during the last Italian general elections on 4 March 2018.

1. Hybrid Campaigning

The political campaign during the last Italian general elections on 4 March 2018 shows a significant consolidation of hybrid media campaigning. The electoral communication flows produced by leaders, parties and the main candidates are the result of hybrid media logics, because such is the environment in which they are structured. In fact, according to Chadwick's definition, a hybrid communicative strategy is generated in the integration – but we could better say in the intersection – of traditional media logics (TV, radio, press) with digital media logics (Internet). A hybrid communication system, therefore, 'is built upon interactions among older and newer media logic – where logics are defined as technologies, genres, norms, behaviours, and organizational forms – in the reflexively connected fields of media and politics' (Chadwick 2013: 4). In this perspective, the old/new media dichotomy is nowadays impractical both in the professional practices of communication and in those of research. The elements at the root of contemporary electoral campaigns are found by focusing attention on 'the flux, in-betweenness, the interstitial, and the liminal' (*ibidem*).

Recently, Wells *et al.* have demonstrated that 'Trump's efforts to court media attention, through staged events, unscheduled interactions, and social media activity, were largely successful' (2016: 675). There are different relevant cases of communicative

hybridization also during the latest electoral campaigns such as the 'live' Facebook streaming of public events. In this regard, the electoral rally has become a fundamental element of the electoral narrative. Sociological studies on the performance of politics have shown that the performative action of leader becomes a generative factor of media narratives. It functions both as an internal bond within the communities of supporters and militants, and as a unifying collective representation of a wider segment of voters: '[...] the struggle for power becomes theatrical. Candidates work to present compelling performances of civil competence to citizen audiences at a remove not only geographically but also emotionally and morally. It is the success of these performances that determinate how whites, blacks, Jews, Catholics, and women distribute their precious votes, and the opinions of these supposedly demographic groups shift significantly in response to coding, narrative, tone, metaphor, setting, and performance in the course of campaign time' (Alexander 2010: 9).

As a second significant case of communicative hybridization in the electoral context, live tweeting during TV talk shows is a feature that enhances the direct interaction between politicians and the public through second screen vision. In fact, a growing number of citizens comment on live TV programmes as they are being transmitted, simultaneously using more than one screen, such as a smartphone or a tablet. This produces a collective re-framing of the mainstream information flow, especially when live tweeting performances are used. It is the viewertariat public 'which we define as viewers who use online publishing platforms and social tools to interpret, publicly comment on, and debate a television broadcast while they are watching it' (Anstead and O'Loughlin 2011: 441).

The hybrid campaign is *correlated* to the penetration of digital technologies in the field of politics, as social networks are the hub of any hybrid campaign (Wells *et al.* 2016). They work as the primary connection factor between media and real space (Stromer-Galley 2014). Different strategic set-ups of the hybrid campaign give shape to equally different social media habits: that is, different functional uses of social networks in the economy of the hybrid campaign. For this reason, the digital set-up of the hybrid campaign is the subject of this research.

The literature, albeit in a fragmented way, shows a qualitative leap in different levels of the electoral campaign model, especially if contrasted to the 'postmodern' model (Andretta and Bracciale 2017).

On a first level, the digital communication system has definitively reinforced the primacy of the network logic in electoral campaigns, defined on the criteria of the spreadability of the content and the connectivity between people. This network logic operates in everyday life through personal media, social network sites (Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest), microblogging platforms (Twitter, Tumblr), and messaging apps (WhatsApp, Telegram, Snapchat).

On a second level, the communicative style of political actors is increasingly personalized (Bentivegna 2015). Symmetrically, this determines the personalization of messages with an increasing use of targeting and microtargeting techniques. We have seen them work with instruments such as Google AdWords and Facebook adv, which efficiently profile people's interests. On a third level, the media that form the basis of the hybrid campaign are now those typical of the disintermediation process, taking place through the efficient integration of channels. Among the dynamics at the base of

this we can find: (a) the spreadability of contents, or virality, an essential feature to increase the volume of circulation of online messages, their visibility and, when possible, to inform the media agenda; (b) direct and immediate contact with citizens and voters, and (c) the re-acquisition of interpersonal communication into the campaign structure, focusing on the reactivation of 'molecular leaders' as a hub of informal communication in the most personal daily environment of each citizen-elector (Cepernich 2017). Thus, politicians return to participate in public events and to talk in the squares in the form of rallies. These are typical forms of pre-media election campaigns which feed the voracious social network circuits with ever-fresh content and support for the construction of the media agenda.

On a fourth level, the network-logic infrastructure is active in all phases of the campaign. In this scenario, the main factor of the digital campaign is the mobilization capacity of all relational networks available to the individual and to the collective political actors. The networked campaign is developed by giving the offline mobilization an online organization. In fact, individual willingness to mobilize is positively influenced by the quality of the structural connections, determined especially by the use of technological platforms. Networking is a powerful factor in the activation of behaviour. The influencer, especially when his or her actions are linked to the real social sphere, and not only to the technologically mediated one, becomes the most effective testimonial, bringing into the interactive situation a capital of trust often unavailable to the political figure.

Finally, on a fifth level, the political campaigns during the digital age face the great challenge of engaging and participating in an increasingly apathetic and fickle electorate that tends towards emotional and sometimes reactive voting behaviour. The post-medial logic of the network, which states as fact the direct involvement of individuals and the revitalization of individual microcosms, and online and offline communities, involves the empowerment of individuals. In this sense, the hybrid campaign is post-medial and implies the recovery of the 'human factor' of communication as a relational factor.

The hybrid campaign structure takes places at the intersection of three main dimensions of the campaign process: real space, Internet and television. All these were clearly present in Barack Obama's campaign for the 2008 US Primary (Chadwick 2013: 139). To illustrate the hybridization of electoral communication in Italy, we can consider the metamorphosis affecting some traditional propaganda material such as commercials, leaflets and posters. This is a consequence of an irreversible digital switch. Seizing the opportunities arising for disintermediation, propaganda communication has found in the information bubbles of social networks a very fertile ground for the mobilization of voters (Cepernich 2017; Novelli 2018). A first example of this is the TV adv historically strangled in Italy by the *par condicio* law on equal conditions for political communication, which actually inhibits its circulation on national TV circuits. This has found new life in non-places (Augé 1995), such as large railway stations in major urban areas, and in digital ecosystems with a high rate of partisanship and emotionalization (Brader 2006; Cepernich and Novelli 2018). A second example is the old flyer, now reproduced on timelines in the form of promotional postcards and infographics with an extensive use of numbers that certify an inevitably partial representation of the reality.

A third and final example is the electoral manifesto which has disappeared from city walls, a sort of substitution effect of the physical territory with the digital one.

Unexpectedly, the use of manifestos – above all the invasive 6x3 format – is no longer customary, with the exception of leaders or parties with significant starting deficits in brand awareness. This is the case, for example, of Pietro Grasso (Liberi e Uguali), the new face of the leadership of a debuting party, and Giorgia Meloni (Fratelli d'Italia), a well-known leader but at the head of a small political force in a coalition overwhelmed by exuberant political and media personalities such as Silvio Berlusconi (Forza Italia) and Matteo Salvini (Lega). Berlusconi also rediscovered the 6x3[1] manifestos, although on a drastically minor scale compared to the past, in the urgency of rebranding himself as a public figure, no less important than his party. They have found on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram a more effective communication channel. The acquired centrality of social networks is explained by the availability in those arenas of increasingly large and, at the same time, active publics who support the political leaders' communication, but also because of the possibility of new strategies of message profiling at very low costs compared to traditional advertising forms.

Two important scenario conditions supported the digitalization upgrade of campaigning during the Italian election. Firstly, this was the first low-budget campaign in Italian politics, due to the abolition of electoral refunds to parties[2]. Secondly, the reduced time available for campaigning, which was concentrated within a period of just two months, forced the protagonists to make huge efforts in order to optimize the scarce available resources. In fact, efforts were focused almost exclusively in February. For these reasons, social media became the key production and dissemination channels for disintermediate propaganda and the main nodes of hybrid campaigning: Twitter with more intra-elite dynamics, Facebook more extra-elite.

Following these preliminary assumptions, this research investigates the social media communication habits of the main Italian leaders and political parties on Twitter and Facebook. The leaders' communication habits cannot be explained independently from those of their parties, and vice versa. In a strategic perspective, the leaders' communication is strictly interdependent with that of their parties. Based on their respective structural features, staff often assign different and integrated functions to each social media. For example, Twitter is more inclined towards media-oriented communication, and Facebook to a public-oriented one. The increasing personalization of the communicative style produces differentiation in the strategic use of the channels, not the replacement of one with the other.

In the first part of this work, specific indicators are identified to operationalize social media habits on Twitter and Facebook (Bracciale and Martella 2016). Later, the first outcomes of the monitoring activities conducted by Policom.online[3] on the strategic use of social networks in electoral communication by political actors are presented in a descriptive form. Finally, we try to underline similarities and differences in the approaches to the 2018 election campaign strategies on social network sites.

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[1] The extensive use of the 6x3 format electoral manifesto was introduced by Berlusconi in the 2001 general election campaign in response to the *par condicio* law (n. 28 of 2000), known as the law on equal conditions of political communication in an election context, which limited the broadcasting of television commercials to very limited spaces, in fact, by blocking it.

[2] Electoral refunds were abolished by Decree-Law No 149 of 28 December 2013, signed by the former Prime Minister, Enrico Letta.

[3] See link: http://www.policom.online.

2. Measuring social media habits

In order to translate this conceptual background into an empirical analysis and to understand how the hybrid campaign was developed in the Italian context, we have used as proxy the social media habits of both leaders and their parties. Specifically, we have identified three dimensions of the social media use habits that fit with the logic of the digital environment outlined above: the communicative strategies adopted by both leaders and political parties; the skills that they need to best seize the specific social media affordances, and their capacity to engage their audiences.

The outlined hybrid campaign attributes are not mutually exclusive in relation to a specific dimension of social media habits as there could be different motivations behind each communicative action. For instance, the spreadability of a content can be related to the communicative strategies adopted by the accounts and at the same time can depend on its capacity to engage citizens. Personalization, due to the disintermediated context in which political actors can interact directly with followers, can be disclosed by the possibility of both being able to communicate directly to the public and the capacity to address someone by the use of mentions or tagging a specific user.

To summarize, the social media habit dimensions are related to (a) communicative strategies: (i) broadcast, based on the productivity of the account, and (ii) conversational, based on the degree of interactivity in the platform; (b) skilfulness: regarding the ability to use different features of the social media platform, and (c) engagement: regarding the capacity of the account to involve the audience. The social media habits have been operationalized based on these dimensions, identifying specific indicators for both Facebook and Twitter.

Although the specific affordances of both platforms may differ, in the case of public Facebook pages we can find many similarities to Twitter profiles if we consider the structure of the social networks they configure. In fact, relationships on both Twitter and Facebook pages are asymmetric – unlike private Facebook profiles where friendship is mutual. Indeed, a user can follow a Twitter account or a Facebook page without being followed, i.e. without the relationship becoming bidirectional. In this scenario, the two social network sites and their habits become more correctly comparable.

This analysis considers the Facebook pages and Twitter accounts of the main Italian political leaders and their parties: Silvio Berlusconi and Forza Italia; Emma Bonino and +Europa (+Europe); Luigi Di Maio and Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Stars Movement); Pietro Grasso and Liberi e Uguali (Free and Equal); Giorgia Meloni and Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy); Matteo Renzi and Partito Democratico (Democratic Party); Matteo Salvini and Lega – Salvini Premier (League - Salvini Premier).

The timelines of the leaders and parties were downloaded[4] through Twitter Rest API and Facebook Graph API, from 2 January 2018 to 3 March 2018. In total we collected 7,673 tweets and 8,940 posts. The indicators were operationalized both with metadata gathering by Twitter and Facebook APIs and with some text parsing tools using the R software.

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[4] See link: http://www.policom.online.

2.1. Social Media Habits Dimensions

2.1.a. Communicative Strategies

Political actors still use social network sites mainly for broadcasting messages, following a top-down communication model. The pursued strategy of maximizing the visibility of both the leader and the party in the public debate has three main goals:

1. To promote the leader's or party's image through (re)branding activities and self-promotion actions;
2. To influence media coverage through the over-production of self-generated content then made available to journalists and taking advantage of the rapidity and voracity of the digital information system, due to media hybridization;
3. To foster direct communication with the audience and voters.

In the light of the foregoing, the first communication strategy that should be considered is productivity, namely each account flow and coverage capacity. Indeed, according to the broadcast communication rule, the greater the communication flow, the greater will be the available potential of visibility. Table 1 shows the specific indicator used for the analysis.

Table 1. Communicative Strategies: broadcast (productivity indicators)

Twitter Indicators	Facebook Indicators
1. frequency: daily average of produced tweets during the analysed time period.	**1. frequency:** daily average of produced posts during the analysed time period.

Table 2. Communicative Strategies: conversational (interactivity indicators)

Twitter Indicators	Facebook Indicators
1. mentions done: percentage of tweets with a mention out of the total number of produced tweets during the time period considered **2. replies done:** percentage of replies out of the total number of produced tweets during the time period considered **3. retweets done:** percentage of retweets out of the total number of produced tweets during the time period considered	**1. tags done:** percentage of posts with a tag out of the total number of produced posts during the time period considered **2. comments done:** percentage of replies to comments out of the total number of produced posts during the time period considered [percentage of comments made by the account to its posts]

The analysis considers another important strategy, the conversational one. This is pursued through the interaction practices supported by the leaders' and parties' Twitter accounts and Facebook pages. As shown in Table 2, the degree of interaction is measured by the propensity to mention, reply, and especially on Twitter, to retweet. While retweets could be seen as a simple act of resharing content generated by others, they offer the opportunity to engage new users in a discussion thread, contributing to creating 'a

conversational ecology in which conversations are composed of a public interplay of voices that give rise to an emotional sense of shared conversational context' (boyd, Golder and Lotan 2010: 1). This indicates a greater inclination towards dialogue and including other users in the communication flow.

Therefore, if at a first level a tag mostly measures the propensity of the political actor to directly interact with another political actor or an influencer in any respect, the number of comments made is an indicator, instead, of the tendency to interact with users. This allows the candidate's style to be positioned according to the broadcast vs conversational polarization.

It should be pointed out, however, that often the interactivity strategies are functional to, and not an alternative for, the predominantly broadcast use of the social network during electoral campaigns. Indeed, historically speaking, the politicians' recourse to web-based interactions has mainly aimed to build a shareholders' interaction rather than a real one with users. In other words, the goal has been to create 'an illusion of face-to face relationship' (Stromer-Galley 2014: 91), because of both a widespread distrust towards the process outcome, and the objective difficulty of operatively managing a large-scale real interaction with users in an efficient and effective way.

2.1.b. Skilfulness

Skilfulness reflects the degree of the politicians' communication expertise in managing the structure flow on Twitter and Facebook. Certainly, the communication format is an element of major importance for effective communication. It is the outcome of the organization of contents, the style through which they are expressed, the emphasis and relevance given to certain elements, and the communicative grammar of the medium (Altheide and Snow 1979). In other words, skilfulness measures the complexity degree of the communicative syntax. The following table (Table 3) specifies the indicators which measure the skilfulness strategy, such as the resort to hashtags and hyperlinks, explaining the characteristics of each platform.

Table 3. Skilfulness indicators

Twitter Indicators	Facebook Indicators
1. hashtags: Percentage of tweets with a hashtag out of the total of tweets produced during the time period considered **2. links:** percentage of tweets with a link out of the total of tweets produced during the time period considered (over 280K) **3. photos:** percentage of tweets with an image out of the total of tweets produced during the time period considered.	**1. hashtags:** Percentage of posts with a hashtag out of the total number produced during the time period considered (ad hoc publics) **2. links:** percentage of posts with a link out of the total number produced during the time period considered **3. photos:** percentage of posts with an image out of the total number produced during the time period considered **4. videos:** percentage of posts with a video out of the total number produced during the time period considered

Hashtags on Twitter, as a matter of fact, offer different functions. They emphasize a particular content, making it searchable on the information flow of the platform (Bruns and Burgess 2012). They can also set the agenda on specific arguments (Small 2011), allowing political actors to monitor and manage the communication flow indexed by a '#', an efficient tool for audience enlargement (Segerberg and Bennett 2011). Lastly, hashtags enable the creation of ad hoc communities (Bruns and Burgess 2012), overcoming the limit of one's own network of followers.

On Facebook, instead, hashtags play a marginal role, even if they technically offer, especially on public pages, almost the same functions as those on Twitter, such as thematization, post searchability in the information flow, and cross-networking, among other functions. Verifying their use is one of the aims of the monitoring activities, as it would represent a significant case of hybridization between the two most important social platforms.

The use of hyperlinks, on the other hand, makes the flow structure even more complex. They allow users to exceed the 180-characters limit (240 nowadays) (Boyd, Golder and Lotan 2010), to share existing content (Zhao and Rosson 2009), and to complete the message with additional text. Furthermore, photo and video contribute to increasing audience engagement and interactions, thus giving the content more visibility due to the algorithm that hierarchizes the timeline news (Wang 2016).

2.1.c. Engagement

Engagement is undoubtedly the most interesting analytical dimension in the digital campaigning context. This is determined according to its potential for activating online supporters, as necessary as they are difficult to obtain, in fact, especially for parties (Greffet and Wojcik 2017; Lilleker 2016). The strategic use of online engagement represents the first step towards hybrid campaigning as the activation of online supporters is a key condition for offline activation. This network building is fundamental for hybrid electoral campaigns, which are based on the 'creation, cultivation, and maintenance of ties with supporters that staffers could mobilize for collective social and symbolic action' (Kreiss 2012:10).

For example, retweets (on Twitter) and shares (on Facebook) enhance the political actors' capacity to reach a secondary audience. Indeed, this process allows a specific account or page to communicate with a public beyond its number of followers (primary audience). This is crucial for the diffusion of the political message, and consistent with studies which have analysed the relationship between the number of followers and influence on political attitudes and behaviour (Bond *et al.* 2012; Cha *et al.* 2010; Zhang *et al.* 2009). Hence, the retweet and share rates are necessary for measuring the overall efficacy of the communication strategies (tab. 4).

Moreover, the ability of a Facebook page to prompt comments and interactions in general is a key element in increasing content visibility, apart from the number of fans. In fact, the Facebook news feed gives visibility to those posts that have comments from a user on a friend's[5] timeline.

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[5] See link: https://www.facebook.com/help/327131014036297/.

Table 4. Engagement indicators

Twitter Indicators	Facebook Indicators
1. retweets received: average of received retweets out of the total number of produced posts during the time period considered. **2. likes received:** average of received favourites out of the total number of produced posts during the time period considered.	**1. comments received:** average of comments received out of the total number of produced posts during the time period considered **2. likes received:** average of likes received out of the total number of produced posts during the time period considered **3. shares received:** average of shares received out of the total number of produced posts during the time period considered

3. Twitter Habits during 2018 campaign

All the main Italian political leaders and their parties had active accounts on Twitter, which were opened before the 2018 general elections. The two new political formations – Liberi e Uguali and +Europa – are obvious exceptions, as both opened their profiles at the end of 2017. These 2018 general elections also marked the debut of Silvio Berlusconi's official Twitter account. The late landing could be the reason for the low number of followers of the latest arrivals. This was probably remedied by the enhancing of productivity (using a broadcast strategy) during the campaign.

The *broadcast strategy* managed by political actors on Twitter was verified through two indicators: the average of the original tweets produced, and the average of the total activity given by the sum of tweets, retweets and replies. The first is a measure of the strategic investment in communication built *ad hoc* for its followers; the second is an indicator of the 'coverage' of the online presence.

Except for Matteo Salvini and Silvio Berlusconi, higher frequencies and higher activities seem to be part of the strategic communicative style of parties, while the leaders show lower levels of productivity.

Regarding the interactivity dimension (*conversational strategy*), fringe parties and their leaders seem to be more inclined to involve other users in the discussion. This is the case of Pietro Grasso, Liberi e Uguali, Emma Bonino, and Più Europa, as well as Forza Italia.

With respect to Replies, these are generally very few in number, with the exception of two of the centre-right parties: Lega - Salvini Premier (32.3%) and Forza Italia (65.8%). The FI data appears particularly interesting, because it prefigures the use of tactics that are significantly different from the others. This aspect needs further investigation. Finally, the Movimento 5 Stelle and the Partito Democratico are the parties most inclined to act on their strategy on Twitter through the practice of retweeting content produced by other accounts.

In relation to *skilfulness,* defined as a dimension of reinforcement in the construction of the message through a more informed use of platform features, the data shows that about three fourths of the posts by Giorgia Meloni, Silvio Berlusconi, Matteo Salvini, Matteo Renzi and +Europa contain at least one hashtag. More than 50% of tweets by the

Movimento 5 Stelle, Luigi Di Maio, Fratelli d'Italia and Lega - Salvini Premier contain a hyperlink. This practice of adding a link to an external web page is usually employed to exceed the textual limits imposed by the platform[6]. Furthermore, it represents an opportunity for self-promotion, driving traffic into other platforms (for example from Twitter to Facebook and vice versa) or advertising participation in TV programmes, radio, newspaper interviews, etc.

Giorgia Meloni, Movimento 5 Stelle, Partito Democratico and Fratelli d'Italia included a photo in more than half of their posts, usually portraying the leader participating in a television broadcast or speaking with ordinary people during a rally.

The last analytical dimension considered in this research is the *engagement* capability of Twitter users. This competence is mainly expressed through retweet (RT) and likes (favourites) that each tweet on the profile obtained through its strategic game. The political actors who most effectively created engagement were Luigi Di Maio, with over 500 RT for each tweet; followed by Matteo Renzi, with over 370 RT and the Movimento 5 Stelle with over 230 RT. Compared to the number of likes, the positions in the table of Renzi and Di Maio are reversed: over 1,300 favourites for the former and 1,150 for the latter.

Table 5. Twitter habits of Italian political leaders and parties from 02.01.2018 to 03.03.2018.

Account	Productivity (Broadcast)	Interactivity (Conversational)			Skilfulness			Engagement	
	Frequency	v.% mentions	v.% reply	v.% rt	v.% #	v.% URL	v.% Photo	Mean RT	Mean Likes
Silvio Berlusconi	19.0	21.5	1.1	1.6	81.5	4.5	45.5	33.5	88.4
Emma Bonino	2.9	85.8	1.3	53.1	68.9	29.0	5.5	80.5	255.8
Luigi Di Maio	1.6	24.5	0.0	52.2	27.6	77.6	33.7	543.4	1152.3
Pietro Grasso	1.4	53.3	2.3	47.4	39.1	47.8	47.8	175.8	498.4
Giorgia Meloni	3.0	30.0	5.6	13.4	75.5	19.0	61.5	179.6	596.4
Matteo Renzi	2.7	7.8	0.9	22.1	91.6	44.0	28.3	374.2	1302.9
Matteo Salvini	18.8	24.4	1.1	3.2	81.8	24.3	46.2	128.2	435.2
Forza Italia	0.8	98.9	65.8	33.5	54.3	11.3	13.1	16.3	1.1
Più Europa	6.7	71.5	1.1	2.3	97.2	20.1	47.4	38.3	104.4
M5S	2.2	38.3	0.2	72.4	51.8	59.6	67.4	236.5	424.5
Liberi e Uguali	9.1	58.3	1.6	58.2	44.7	34.0	44.9	36.0	75.3
Fratelli d'Italia	13.0	5.8	0.1	5.0	7.1	92.9	94.8	7.9	18.6
PD	4.6	48.5	0.3	82.0	38.4	46.5	75.4	113.6	230.6
Lega	36.4	32.3	32.3	0.0	9.3	98.8	0.0	7.0	14.0
Total	**21.7**	**42.9**	**8.1**	**31.9**	**54.9**	**43.5**	**43.7**	**140.8**	**371.3**

4. Facebook Habits during 2018 Election

The Facebook pages of Italian parties and leaders have a rather heterogeneous number of fans. In general, the leaders' pages have larger audiences than those of the parties, with the exception of Forza Italia which has close to two million likes preceded only by Matteo Salvini who has exceeded the threshold of two million fans.

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[6] At the beginning the textual limitation imposed by the platform was 140 characters, today 280.

The analytical dimension of *productivity (broadcast strategy)* is characterized by the high frequency of the Lega - Salvini Premier party with around 60 posts per day. The other parties published fewer than 16 posts per day. Among the leaders, however, the most active in terms of frequency were Salvini, Di Maio and Meloni with an activity rate of over 10 posts per day.

Interactivity (conversational strategy) is a characteristic feature of Pietro Grasso's communication strategy. In almost 60% of his posts there was at least one mention and his response rate to comments was 72%.

With regard to platform use skills *(skilfulness)*, the syntax of posts is a good indicator of the heterogeneity of formats that is presented to the public. Matteo Salvini and +Europa use hashtags in about half of their posts. Hashtags are a typical Twitter format which, due to the effects of hybridization between platforms, has been imported into Facebook, albeit with little success.

Fratelli d'Italia uses at least one hyperlink in over 80% of their posts. This is a much more intensive use of this syntax than its competitors. In fact, the League, which uses the second largest number of hyperlinks, includes links in just 30% of its posts. The use of images is quite widespread among the political actors' Facebook pages. More than half of the posts of +Europa, Silvio Berlusconi, Forza Italia, Partito Democratico, Lega - Salvini Premier and Liberi e Uguali contain at least one. The recourse to use images (photos, but also infographics and postcards) is a significant indicator of technical expertise, because images offer a better chance of engaging the audience than just using written text. The use of videos is also quite widespread: Matteo Salvini, Movimento 5 Stelle and Forza Italia publish them in over 40% of their posts.

Table 6. Facebook habits of Italian political leaders and parties from 02.01.2018 to 03.03.2018

Page Name	Productivity (Broadcast)	Interactivity (Conversational)		Skilfulness				Engagement		
	frequency	v.% mention	v.% reply	v.% #	v.% URL	v.% photo	v.% video	Mean comments	Mean likes	Mean share
Silvio Berlusconi	3.3	55.6	0.0	12.7	3.1	62.2	34.7	1213.8	3738.6	648.3
Emma Bonino	2.0	34.4	0.0	7.2	25.4	47.5	21.3	25.9	267.2	32.0
Luigi Di Maio	11.2	23.9	4.9	5.4	28.8	31.1	36.9	1545.2	7513.2	4062.8
Pietro Grasso	1.4	59.3	72.0	1.1	17.3	39.5	22.2	30.4	3493.8	772.5
Giorgia Meloni	8.7	7.1	19.6	35.2	14.5	39.2	32.1	117.3	3901.5	954.0
Matteo Renzi	2.5	7.9	20.0	28.4	7.2	28.3	38.8	639.3	8470.7	1530.4
Matteo Salvini	11.8	1.1	1.2	55.5	16.9	31.2	46.6	527.5	8571.2	2208.9
Forza Italia	6.4	2.6	33.3	2.5	2.3	55.8	41.4	22.7	633.6	206.1
Più Europa	3.8	42.4	11.6	45.2	7.4	63.8	24.0	70.3	1700.3	308.3
M 5 Stelle	15.6	20.7	0.1	4.4	32.5	23.9	43.2	199.4	2354.1	1697.9
Liberi e Uguali	3.8	23.0	24.2	2.6	20.7	49.6	25.7	236.8	435.5	216.6
Fratelli d'Italia	12.0	1.0	0.0	4.6	82.9	7.8	9.2	151.8	374.5	68.9
PD	6.7	47.1	61.0	11.3	16.1	54.6	25.4	2596.8	1380.5	587.5
Lega	58.8	0.4	0.1	37.8	37.6	49.7	12.5	1812.1	240.2	68.4
Total	**10.6**	**23.3**	**17.7**	**18.1**	**22.3**	**41.7**	**29.6**	**656.4**	**3078.8**	**954. 5**

Finally, we also consider the last analytical dimension of *engagement* for Facebook. The element of personalization seems to play a key role in the number of likes collected: Matteo Salvini, Matteo Renzi and Luigi Di Maio get an average of around 8,000 Likes for each post. Other leaders also show a favourable engagement performance. Overall, Giorgia Meloni, Silvio Berlusconi and Pietro Grasso have discreet success with over 3,500 likes per post. The only real exception is Emma Bonino, whose Facebook management reaches just 250 likes for each post. As to the average of shares, the situation changes substantially. In addition to Di Maio and Salvini, the Movimento 5 Stelle appears able to generate an important sharing activity from fans in the community.

5. Conclusion

What communicative habits can we then highlight for the political leaders and their parties on Facebook and Twitter?

First of all, we must remark on the prevalence of the broadcast strategy, especially used by centre-right political actors, in line with previous research on the relationship between politics and innovation technologies. Lega is the political actor with the strongest focus on broadcast strategy, both on Twitter and Facebook.

Of particular interest is how the parties' daily mean of production is significantly higher than that of the political leaders. The only exception is Silvio Berlusconi's Twitter account which is more active than that of his party Forza Italia, whose index of productivity is quite low. This suggests a precise functional differentiation between the use of the channels by parties and leaders.

The adoption of a broadcast communicative model by political actors highlights the adhesion of a specific cultural form which is characterized by a one-way, centralized communication flow. The adoption of this model implies the reluctance of the political actor, more or less consciously, to establish a direct relationship with citizens and voters in sharp contrast to the social and conversational nature that distinguishes social media.

In any case, there is no direct correlation between flow capacity and public engagement. For example, on Twitter, Luigi Di Maio is the least productive leader (daily mean 1.6), but he obtains better results with the number of retweets and likes he receives (tweets mean 543.4 RT and 1,152.3 likes). In this regard, numerous studies have shown the importance of the number of retweets collected by the account, as this directly influences the political actor's ability to reach a secondary audience to which he/she would otherwise not have any access (Vaccari and Valeriani 2015).

As for the parties, data on engagement capability seems to show a scenario in which the smaller parties try to manage the account to reduce the communication gap with the larger parties (Gibson and McAllister 2015). However, this strategy seems to generate negative effects. The data shows a normalization of the online presence that reproduces the existing offline gaps in terms of popularity (Margolis and Resnick 2000).

Indeed, a communicative model which is mainly broadcast is characterized by a low response rate to users' comments. In this respect, this electoral campaign on Facebook confirms what has already been observed by different studies regarding the use of social media by political actors: it is a sort of bullhorn simply aimed at self-promotion (Graham *et al.* 2013).

On the contrary, the adoption of a conversation communicative model, besides using the potentialities of the medium, conveys a greater predisposition towards dialogue and an effort to regain a direct relationship with voting citizens (Bentivegna 2015). This last is directly related to the nature of the platforms. Conversational strategies are pursued less on Facebook than on Twitter. A confirmation of this seems to be a shared abandonment of the interactive use of Facebook (the platform of extra-élite relationships), as opposed to Twitter (the platform of intra-élite relationships).

The analysis shows a disposition, by the centre-right and the Movimento 5 Stelle political actors, to adopt a more conversational and interactive strategy, which is a historically rooted characteristic of these actors. Furthermore, a tendency emerges towards a more coherent use of the platforms by some of the parties, namely PD and Liberi e Uguali, and their leaders. For example, Pietro Grasso and Liberi e Uguali show a significant capacity for interaction on Facebook

The Movimento 5 Stelle practices an interactive strategy more on Twitter than on Facebook. This results in increased interactivity in the elitarian communicative Twitter flow, a platform mostly oriented to the diffusion of political opinions (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2013) and characterized by a strong tendency towards polarization (Enli and Skogerbø 2013). As a matter of fact, Facebook is a more generalist social network. The radically interactive Twitter strategy of Forza Italia should be highlighted. Regarding Facebook, the strategies seem to be more balanced between broadcast and interactive. Nonetheless, the functional diversification between leaders' and parties' channels does not seem to be significant.

On average, skilfulness is higher in the channels of the parties rather than in those of the leaders, especially on Twitter. In general, Fratelli d'Italia is the party that presents more articulated grammar, principally on Twitter because of the use of photos (present in 95% of tweets) and links (present in 93% of tweets). Following this party, Movimento 5 Stelle and +Europa, Renzi and PD, are the ones that more systematically use the complex potentials of the platform. For example, +Europa and PD resort more to hashtags and Lega more to links.

Skilfulness on Facebook in mainly linked to the use of photos and links. In the posts by Lega, which present the highest levels of skilfulness among the political actors considered for this study, pictures are present in 42% of its posts. In the posts by +Europa, these elements are present in 64% of the total number of posts. However, consideration should be given to the use of hashtags on Facebook, usually intense but reductive. These are present in almost half of Salvini's posts, in 45% of the ones by +Europa, 35% of the posts produced by Meloni, and 28% by Renzi. This means that the use of hashtags on Facebook is spreading, probably because they are useful to define the priority of a particular issue. This represents, evidently, a substantial trace of hybridization between the main social platforms for electoral communication.

Finally, we monitored the political actors' engagement capacity, which directly affects the opportunities to spread the content of the message beyond their circle of followers on Facebook and Twitter. In general, we have observed that a more skilful use of the platforms, combined with a conversational communication strategy, seems to produce more engaging outcomes for the message of both the political leaders and parties. This last is notably true for the leaders' profiles and pages which tend to be more

engaging than those of the parties. Our monitoring corroborates a leader-centrism effect of communication on social media, specifically as it regards this fundamental dimension of electoral communication.

Thus, Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Renzi are the most engaging political leaders on Twitter, followed by Meloni, Grasso, and Salvini. Below the average we then find Bonino and Berlusconi. On Facebook, Di Maio confirms his primacy over Salvini, who prefers generating engagement on the more generalist extra-élite relationship platform. Lastly, Renzi presents an above-average engagement capacity on Facebook, while Bonino's engagement is much more about content. Around the average we find the rest of the political leaders: Meloni, Berlusconi, and Grasso. Regarding the political parties, the only one with an engagement capacity above the average is the Movimento 5 Stelle, both on Twitter and Facebook.

In conclusion, this monitoring aimed to provide a picture, as complete as possible, of the social media habits of political leaders and their parties during the 2018 Italian general elections. This is only the first interpretative step of a wider research programme on the hubs of the hybrid campaign, which aims to explain the most recent developments in the Italian political context.

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