Digital Hyperleaders:
Communication Strategies on Social Networks at the 2019 European Elections

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Abstract

This article investigates the state of development of the electoral communication of Italian political leaders at the elections for the 2019 European Parliament. The aim was to verify which attitudes and forms of adaptation used in the communication strategies of so-called 'hyperleaders' have developed towards the network media logic. The research considers the following analytical dimensions: the extent of leaders' fan bases; the effect of publication frequency in terms of engagement; the effect of issue management in terms of engagement, and the effect of emotionalization of messages in terms of engagement. The results suggest the consolidation of a digital model of communication via social networks that connects, above all, Salvini, Di Maio and Meloni. They have in common specific attitudes and forms of adaptation to the network media logic, i.e. eminently a much greater capacity to engage in relation to the largeness of the public, the strategic use of key issues and emotional frame management.

1. A hybrid and postmedial election campaign

The election campaign for the 2019 European elections, which took place just over a year after the general elections, confirmed the hypothesis of a new phase of campaigning (Cepernich 2017; Stromer-Galley 2014). In line with the transformations occurring in all democracies at an advanced stage of mediatization (Esser and Strömbäck 2014; Kriesi *et al.* 2013; Mazzoleni and Schultz 1999), even in Italy, the election campaign has become *hybrid* and *postmedial*. This is a kind of campaign that continues to take place without significant differences between first and second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980) because in the Italian context the European elections tend to maintain a strong national significance. In fact, although the information system in the last five years has steadily increased attention on European issues, the attention to Europe paid by TV news and talk shows remains low. Even lower is the attention of leaders and parties to supranational issues when participating in the television arena. They cover Europe in no more than 10% of their statements (AA.VV. 2019). Thus, the result is a European campaign that is played mainly on national issues.

First of all, the electoral campaign in the era of social networks is *hybrid* because the digitization and diffusion of the Internet on a large scale have contaminated the *legacy media logics* with the *digital media logic* (Chadwick 2013; Wells *et. al.* 2016) and with the

network media logic (Baldwin-Philippi 2015; Klinger and Svensson 2014). 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). As Chadwick has shown, the hybrid campaign takes shape at the intersection of three dimensions within which the political actor acts:

a) in real space, where the leader brings into play his/her performative dimension with rallies, his/her presence among people and public events on the territory. The crowd is now the engine of every election strategy, with which the leader can influence media coverage and produce first-hand material to fuel online communication;

b) on television, the legacy media still at the centre of the information system that gives the leader visibility on a large scale and awareness to his/her personal branding;

c) on the Internet, that is social media, which are the main hub of propaganda and self-promotion, but also the infrastructure for the mobilization of the fan base online and offline (Bimber 2019).

Due to the combined action of the logics mentioned above, the hybrid structure of the media system modifies the social media habits of the political actors who, with their strategic practices, implement hybrid campaigning (Bracciale and Cepernich 2018).

Secondly, the electoral campaign is postmedial as a consequence of the centrality assigned by the digital paradigm to the user of the Web, an active node of social networks, no longer bound to the role of 'cold spectator' required by the broadcast nature of television and legacy media in general. Klinger and Svensson introduce the concept *of network media logic*, as opposed to that of mass media logic. 'Social media platforms are characterized by a different, though overlapping, logic form that of traditional mass media, with regard to the inherent communication norms and practices related to media production, distribution and usage' (2015: 1,246).

By developing connectivity and interactivity, digital technologies make it possible to activate connective action according to a dual logic of aggregation: one that exploits the potential for self-organization of decentralized networks of supporters who extensively use digital platforms, the other that exploits the potential for individualizing communicative and political action typical of the digital environment. 'The important point for the purpose of analysing connective action is to understand the distinctive role that communication plays in these often densely interwoven networks of human actors, discourses and technologies. Beyond sharing information and sending messages, the organizing properties of communication become prominent in connective action networks' (Bennett and Segerberg 2013: 42).

The most significant case is the second edition of the 'Vinci Salvini' points competition, promoted by the League leader through his social channels.[1] This is the most advanced example of fan base infrastructure through the Web, whose aim is to promote

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[1] Matteo Salvini launched the competition explaining the rules of participation with this video https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/videos/385938898675241/ and referring to the website http://www.vincisalvini.it.

the highest level of engagement of supporters on social networks (Facebook, Twitter and for the first time also Instagram) and, at the same time, the activation of molecular leaders offline. The weekly and monthly prizes – respectively a phone call and a face-to-face meeting with the leader – are, in fact, particularly effective incentives for the dissemination of the leader's content via social networks, but also an opportunity for the winners to re-intermediate his campaign in primary social groups: family, friends and colleagues at work. The multiplier effect of the connective action is enhanced in Salvini's communication by the tactical use of selfies with onlookers at the rally. At the end of the performance on stage, Salvini spends a great deal of time satisfying every single request for a selfie, so that his image and message are re-intermediated on a large scale by his supporters. In this sense, personal media rediscover the importance of social interactions and interpersonal communication. As the data will show, the responsiveness of the leaders' campaigns to postmedial logic cannot be said to be similar. On the contrary, it has proved to be significantly variable in the national scenario. In general, however, the emergence of increasingly adaptive communication models to the hybrid and postmedial ecosystem is confirmed. From this perspective, the figure of the hyperleader is emerging as 'the new type of leader that stands at the forefront of digital parties [...] This digitized leadership reflects the new possibilities for mass outreach and online crowding offered by social media, the rise of a digital celebrity culture that has emerged on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Snapchat, and the continuing necessity of leadership in contemporary politics' (Gerbaudo 2019: 144).

Therefore, we can acknowledge that social networks have a definitive centrality within the communicative strategies in political communication, which become even more so during the electoral campaign (Ceccobelli 2018). This is confirmed by the amounts of investments in political ads on Facebook: during the last month of the campaign, Salvini spent €127,518 on 56 ads, followed by the Democratic Party which paid €93,264 for 197 ads. The data seem to indicate weaker leadership of the Zingaretti campaign, which invested only €1,417 for five ads on its personal page. Berlusconi is third in the ranking, with an expenditure of €64,018 (343 ads) followed by the 5 Star Movement with €48,293 (25 ads), Meloni with €35,624 (58 ads), Forza Italia with €30,517 (22).[2] Moreover, the centrality of social networks in the communication strategies of political actors is also confirmed by the presence of precise elements of style and content common to all leaders. For example, Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018) clarify the recursiveness of the so-called 'populist' communication style in terms of 'endemic populism'.

There are three main factors that explain this centrality of social networks. The first is the leaderization of communication strategies (Enli and Skogerbø 2013). The consolidated process of party leaderization has also had an impact on communication. In a scenario of the deep crisis of parties and political disaffection, the political personality has become the most effective cognitive shortcut to the communication of a political program. The personalization of the communication strategy is the most functional solution to build consensus in the face of the weakening of the ideological apparatus. Social networks, therefore, become the privileged place for the production and diffusion of

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[2] Source: https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/report. Here Facebook makes data available for advertisements on social issues, elections or politics in accordance with recent policies for transparency in electoral advertising.

surrogate narratives. In this way, the leader is today the raw material for every action of political branding. The second factor, which explains the centrality assumed by social networks in the communication of political leaders, is the fact that they have become a fundamental arena of electoral competition. On the occasion of the March 2018 general election, the Web and the main social networks were a source of information for almost 60% of Italians.[3] In particular, social networks were the first source for 12.4% of Italians and the second for 6.7%. Only television maintains a greater centrality (Legnante and Vaccari 2018). This is the pluralization of the information arenas, re-intermediated by the algorithms of social media and search engines, as well as by the new forms of journalism's adaptation to digital environments (Diakopoulos 2019; Linden 2017). Finally, their centrality derives from being the hub of the self-promotion strategies of the political actors and the space of disintermediate communication between political actors and voters, which mainly insists on the fan base of reference and on the indefinitely wider perimeter of fans and supporters. Disintermediating communication means strategically exploiting self-representation by speaking directly, bypassing the journalistic mediation of traditional media (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018; Coleman 2005).

This translates concretely into the search for the following elements:

a) the direct relationship of political actors with citizens: here, then, is the re-intensification of the public agenda of the leader, with public events, rallies and other forms typical of pre-medial election campaigns;
b) the potential for spreadability, or virality, of contents, an indispensable attribute for increasing the volume of circulation of online messages and increasing their visibility;
c) the upstream conditioning of the media agenda, which puts information and journalism in a position to follow political actors, rather than vice versa.

In continuity with some previous research (Bracciale and Cepernich 2018; Cepernich 2019), this article aims to analyse the hybrid and postmedial evolution of the election campaign on the occasion of the European 2019 elections. In particular, the article aims to highlight attitudes and forms of adaptation in leaders' communication strategies to digital environments. On the basis of specific indicators, there may emerge different degrees and ways of adaptation – and therefore of strategic exploitation – to the postmedial and network logics as illustrated above. This research examines the following analytical dimensions: (a) the extent of the leader's fan base; (b) the effects in terms of engagement of publication frequency; (c) the effects in terms of engagement of issue management strategies; (d) the effects in terms of engagement of frame management strategies and of the emotionalization of the messages.

As for the extent of the leader's fan base, let's observe that a primary strategic objective of communication on social networks is to involve and mobilize the widest support base to reach the maximum potential in terms of engagement.[4] The leader works in digital format to:

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[3] Information websites, online newspapers or social networks as first or second source.
[4] Engagement is the ability to achieve reactions, comments and sharing by the public. The mobilization of users, but especially supporters, has significantly increased over time thanks to the availability of social networks (Norris and Curtice 2008; Vaccari 2013).

(1) receive the active involvement of his/her community of supporters to increase the visibility of its content on the platforms (primary audience); to keep active this base of online and offline supporters, to mobilize and support participation in the campaign with material and symbolic resources, and

(2) to activate secondary audiences when this communication is re-circulated by followers and friends (secondary audience) (Vaccari and Valeriani 2015).

This is the necessary precondition to facilitate the spread of online content on the basis of logical algorithms that regulate social media. The most recent evidence on mobilization shows that access to platforms and, in general, to digital technologies, can favour fairly articulated forms of political participation (Kahne and Bower 2018; Koc-Michalska and Lilleker 2019; Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2013).

As far as the structure of the flow and the frequency of publication of the contents are concerned, the strategies of the political actors are split between the addition of information (therefore to the saturation of the channel through a high frequency of publication) and the subtraction of information (that is to the decompression of the channel through a moderate frequency of publication). Clearly, no automated relationship can be established between party size, flow capacity (i.e. the number of posts produced daily) and productivity in terms of engagement (Larsson, 2016, 2017, 2019). Precisely for this reason, the publication strategy is examined here in relation to the rate of engagement achieved on the main social networks. As for, thirdly, the effects in terms of engagement of issue ownership strategies, the potential for involvement of networked publics and the fan base will be considered here in relation to the agenda of the leaders' issues campaign and, in particular, in relation to the key issues of their election campaign. In fact, the construction of digital storytelling implies the positioning of the leader and his/her party on the thematic priorities of the electoral program. The leader is induced by the affordances of social networks to build self-representation based on a few salient issues that characterize his/her political proposal. Combined with a high publication frequency, emphasis framing can reduce information redundancy within the echo chambers (Cacciatore, Scheufele and Iyengar, 2016).

Finally, as regards the effects in terms of engagement as a consequence of the framing and emotionalization of the narratives, the involvement of audiences and supporters will be analysed in terms of positivity, negativity or neutrality. Based on the theory of affective intelligence (Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen 2000), the most likely hypothesis is that negative emotional frames have a higher activation potential than positive ones.

This research is conducted from a descriptive sociology perspective and considers the seven leaders of the main parties running for elections to the European Parliament on 26 May 2019: Silvio Berlusconi (Forza Italia), Emma Bonino (+Europa - +Europe), Luigi Di Maio (Movimento 5 Stelle - Five Star Movement), Nicola Fratoianni (La Sinistra - The Left), Giorgia Meloni (Fratelli d'Italia - Brothers of Italy), Matteo Salvini (Lega Salvini Premier - League Salvini Premier), Nicola Zingaretti (Partito Democratico - Democratic Party). The monitoring was conducted between 15 April and 26 May, 2019, that is four weeks of the election campaign and two weeks of the pre-election campaign, including election day. This is a multimodal analysis of the leaders' flow capacity on social networks, which has considered the three main platforms currently present in the social

media communication device of political actors,[5] i.e. those that together most fully define the extent of the audience of each leader: Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The analysis took into account the whole flow of communication produced by the leaders in the indicated period: 2,449 posts on Facebook, 1,530 on Instagram, 4,799 tweets on Twitter (details in Table 1). The analysis[6] of issues and emotional frames, on the other hand, is limited to all the 2,449 Facebook posts, the generalist social network with the widest audience.[7]

2. Leaders' networked publics and the flow density on social networks

Matteo Salvini is the leader with the widest audience on all the platforms considered (Fig. 1). As well as more than 3.6 million fans on Facebook, he is the only one to exceed the threshold of one million fans on Instagram. The leader of the League also holds the record on Twitter, exceeding one million and sixty thousand followers. Luigi Di Maio follows in terms of audience, with over 2.2 million followers on Facebook and an audience of over 800,000 Instagrammers. With this first general data, a communication and digital leadership model emerges that is more adaptive than others to the logic of networked politics, a communicative model that also characterizes the leadership of Giorgia Meloni, who exceeds one million fans on Facebook and reaches with Twitter a threshold of 800,000 followers, having the second largest audience on this platform.

If, as we have seen, the fan base on social networks is a primary resource for campaigning, the leaders of the right and the Five Star Movement have a significant advantage over those of the centre-left. Silvio Berlusconi, the old tele-populist leader, is the fourth of the leaders to exceed the threshold of a million followers on Facebook, while significantly neglected is the self-referential environment of relations between media and politics on Twitter. Based on the centrality of images, he has only 190 followers on the platform.

Nicola Zingaretti, the first of the three on the left, is weak on Facebook, with about 260,000 fans on the most important platform in terms of penetrating a generalist audience. The largest circle of supporters of the Democratic Party leader is on Twitter, which is the social network with the lowest circulation among Web users, but which has primary importance for the political and cultural élites. Finally, the presence of Emma Bonino and Nicola Fratoianni on social networks is probably limited to the smallest community of militants and sympathizers of their respective parties. Bonino has a more active presence and a wider audience on Twitter (about 190,000 followers). Her total renunciation of Instagram and occasional use of Facebook (about 92,000 followers) assigned to the pages of the party, +Europe, the role of strategic channel for the campaign. Finally, Fratoianni,

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[5] The data was collected through Fanpage Karma (http://fanpagekarma.com).

[6] The monitoring was conducted as part of the activities of the Observatory on Political and Public Communication of the University of Turin through the manual content analysis of the posts published by the leader in the period considered. The coefficients of Krippendorff's α for the groups were highly satisfying in terms of almost all variables (Krippendorff's $\alpha > 0.88$ and percentage agreement = 98%) by conventions established in the field (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007).

[7] In 2018, 72.5% of the population were using social networks in Italy. More than half of them used the two most popular social networks: Facebook (56%) and YouTube (51.8%). Instagram users made up 26.7% of Italians (55.2% among young people). Twitter, on the other hand, fell again to 12.3% (Censis 2018).

who collects just 58,000 followers on Facebook and almost 27,000 on Twitter, also has a very weak presence on Instagram (just under 7,500 followers). The number of the leaders' followers can be considered an 'important measuring stick of online reach' (Bode and Epstein 2015: 136) and defines the perimeter of the network of potential connections. However, it does not give any indication of the quantity or type of interaction.

Figure 1. The fan bases of the leaders on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter (26 May 2019)
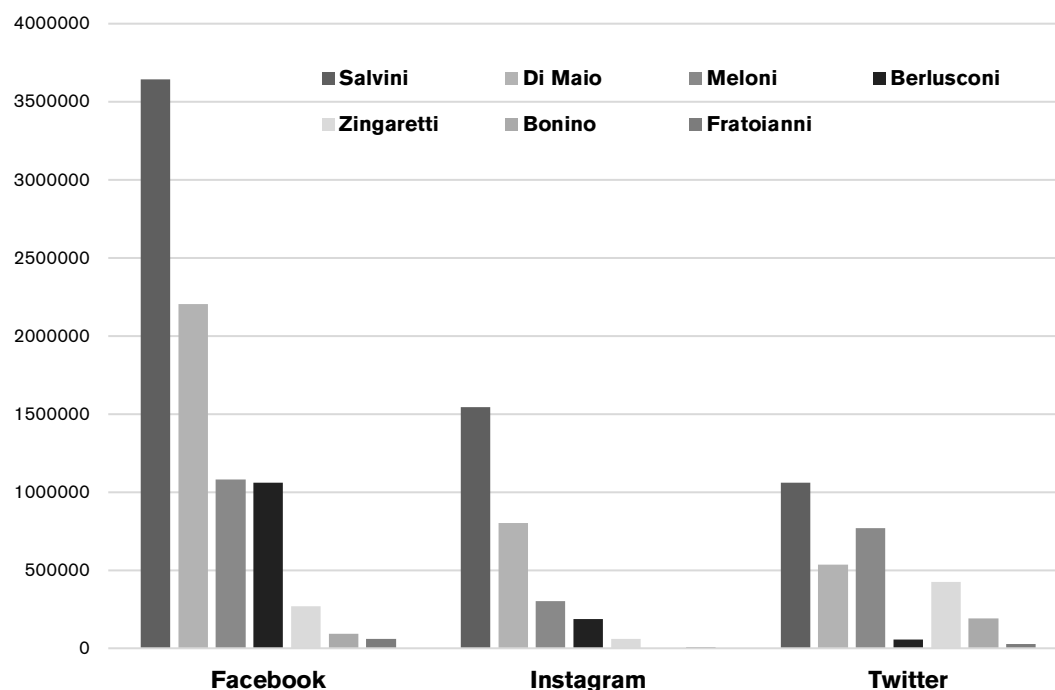
The frequency of posting is a second key indicator as to the digital attitude of the leader, although the pursuit of a channel saturation strategy does not mean, in itself, that the strategy is more or less effective in producing effects on engagement. Salvini opts for a high frequency of publication of contents on all social networks monitored (Tab. 1). His average of 22 posts per day on Facebook and 17 on Instagram rank him at the top in terms of quantity of content produced. He is outperformed on Twitter only by Fratoianni, who produces an average of almost 45 tweets per day, compared to 41 by the League leader.

Meloni publishes 10.6 posts per day on Facebook and 6.5 on Instagram, a frequency that sets her within a saturation pattern, except on Twitter, where she stops at an average of 7.9 messages per day. Di Maio concentrates his flow capacity on Facebook, keeping the other platforms to a minimum. The leaders of the League, Brothers of Italy and the Five Star Movement are permanently above the average publication on Facebook in the period covered. On Instagram, only Salvini and Meloni publish above the average. The intensive use of Twitter by Salvini and Fratoianni seems to be congruent with the real-time informative nature of the medium (Bossetta 2018), which is different from occasional use (Di Maio) or sporadic posting (Bonino, Zingaretti). With an average of about 14 tweets per day, Berlusconi still recognizes microblogging as a relevant function of the real-time narrative of the campaign to reinterpret his message through media and influencers.

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	Facebook		Instagram		Twitter	
	Posts per day	Number of posts	Posts per day	Number of posts	Posts per day	Number of tweets
Salvini	22.4	939	17	721	41.4	1,737
Di Maio	8	336	1.07	72	0.4	18
Meloni	10.6	445	6.5	271	7.9	333
Berlusconi	6.2	260	4	167	14.02	589
Zingaretti	4.8	201	3.2	125	3.9	162
Bonino	1.4	61	0	0	2.04	86
Fratoianni	4.9	207	4.1	174	44.6	1,874
Tot.	-	2,449	-	1530	-	4,799

Finally, Fig. 2, 3 and 4 relate the frequency of flow of leaders on social networks monitored with the effects obtained in terms of engagement. In general, the first evidence to be confirmed is the maximum efficiency of Salvini in all the production phases of the flow (construction of the fan base, frequency of publication and engagement).

Di Maio's strategy on Facebook is, in other ways, highly indicative because it shows a very high activity base, despite a very low frequency of publication compared to that of Salvini and Meloni. As Gerodimos and Justinussen (2015) have shown, also the regular and low frequency of publication – analogous to Obama during his campaign for re-election in 2012 (4 posts per day) – can produce a high and dynamic ability to engage online. On Facebook, for example, Di Maio gets about 1,500 reactions on average per post, a performance indicator not much lower than Salvini's (just above 1,600), despite the opposite choice to stress the flow. But what is really interesting is that Di Maio receives just under 4,000 shares in his posts, almost double those of the League leader. And he surpasses Salvini also for his comments, demonstrating that the Five Star Movement – the first digital native party in national political history – can count on very active and organized support for the digital strategy. This element clearly shows that the rate of engagement does not depend directly on the frequency of flow and therefore, the strategy of saturation of the flow is functional above all to emphasise framing rather than audience responsiveness (Bracciale, Martella and Visentin 2018).

Similar results emerge with regard to the number of shares per post obtained by Meloni (almost 200) and that of comments received by Berlusconi. It should also be underlined that for an evaluation of the real effectiveness of the engagement strategy it is necessary to give different weight to likes (more easily obtainable because they respond to a lower cost for the user), reactions, comments and shares.

Figure 2. The communicative flow (no. of posts) of leaders on Facebook and media reaction, comments and shares received to the number of posts (15 April - 26 May 2019)
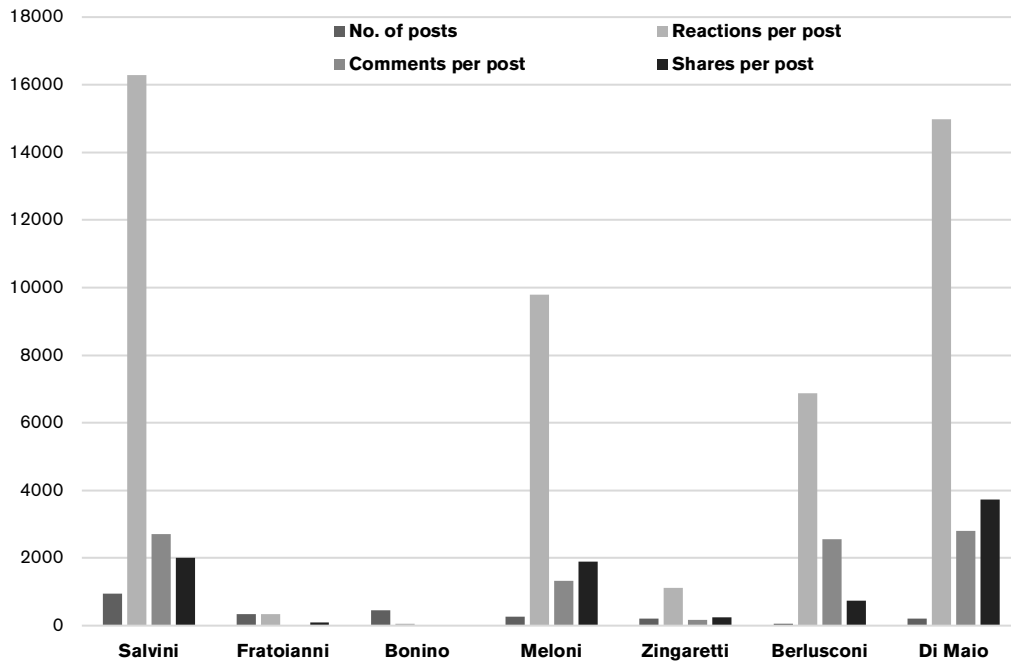

Instagram (Fig. 3) is still a new tool in the digital communication strategies of Italian political actors. In all the cases observed, the platform, which is based on the use of images, has not been recognized as a specific function in communication strategies, and is therefore different from Facebook and Twitter. This is different from the United States, where cross-platform integration strategies are more consolidated as a result of both a higher level of professionalization of political communication and the availability of budgets that are not comparable in terms of amount. For example, in the primary elections of the 2016 presidential elections, Rubio (Republican) and Sanders (Democrat) published on their Instagram pages original content not relaunched by Facebook in 96% and 89% of the posts respectively. The other candidates, however, reused content which was never in smaller quantities than 40% (Bossetta 2018. See also Stier *et al*. 2018). We can hypothesize that this is reflected in a substantial generalized ineffectiveness in the production of engagement for all the leaders considered. Fig. 3 shows, on the one hand, how the weak 'like' is the largely prevailing form of engagement, albeit with a clear difference in attractiveness. Salvini clearly seems to operate on a different scale from his competitors. On the other hand, the figure shows the substantial generalized inconsistency of the interaction with users through comments. An increasing corpus of research on the use of Instagram in electoral communication shows that the relatively low volume of interactions is still common to other European political actors in periods of campaign (Filimonov, Russmann and Svensson 2016; Larsson 2017; Russmann and Svensson 2017).[8]

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[8] In general, however, it is indicative that most of the studies on Instagram in the election campaign do not have as their focus engagement, obviously not yet at a significant level, but the use of images and the

The generalized low frequency of comments, in fact, allows us to assume that the platform has not yet reached a sufficient centrality to impose itself as a competitive arena to Facebook and Twitter.

Figure 3. The flow of communication (no. of posts) of leaders on Instagram and like media, comments received compared to the number of posts (15 April to 26 May, 2019)
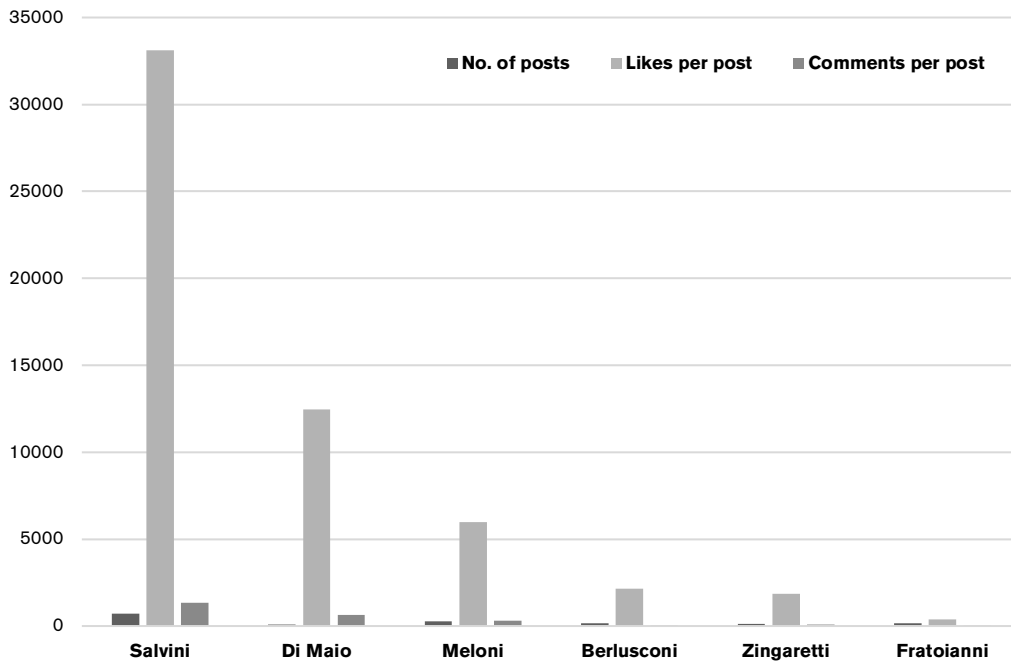

The strategy of saturation on Twitter (meaning a high frequency of tweeting) by Salvini and Fratoianni (Fig. 4) produces contrasting results in terms of public engagement. First of all, in terms of spreading the message, Salvini, with a base of more than 1 million followers, produced a massive number of tweets (1,737) and was quite successful in terms of 'like' per post (1,362). The massive flow, however, did not reward him in terms of retweets obtained (310). Fratoianni, who tweeted 1,874 content items to a very narrow base of 27,000 followers, did not activate Twitter audiences, collecting on average just over 16 likes and four retweets per post. Once again, a strong presence on the platform clashes, on the one hand, with the different widths of the fan base, and on the other, with its lesser activism.

Di Maio confirms on Twitter the collaborative nature of his fan base, as in the nature of a party and digital leadership. The Five Star Movement leader published only 18 tweets during the analysis period. However, he achieves better results than Salvini in terms of both retweets and likes: about 2,170 likes per post and 467 retweets. This demonstrates, on the one hand, that the fan base is more active; and, on the other, that it is effectively organized and has adequate infrastructure for digitally evolved campaigning. It is noteworthy that even the most recent empirical research seems to confirm that Twitter

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construction of the visual storytelling of the candidate, according to the logic of personalization (Lalancette and Raynauld 2019).

remains – albeit to different extents in different social and political contexts – an élite channel compared to Facebook and Instagram (Jensen 2017; Larsson and Moe 2014).

Figure 4. The communicative flow (no. of posts) of leaders on Twitter retweeted and liked compared to the number of posts (15 April – 26 May, 2019)
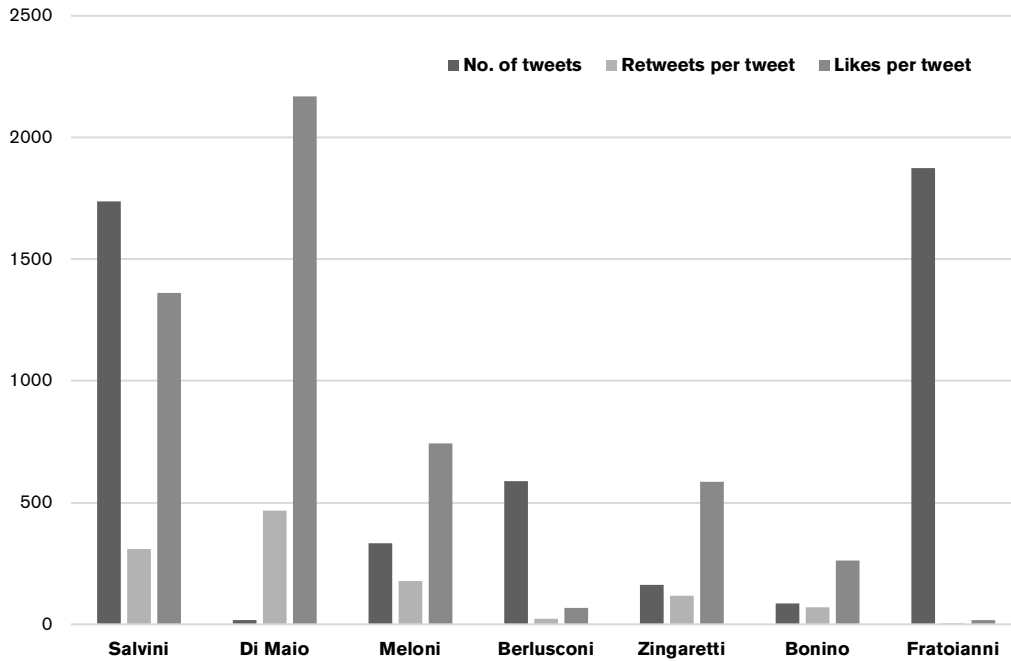
The strategy of Meloni and Zingaretti is similar, and produces comparable effects, although Meloni confirms the attitude to another frequency of flow on this channel. So, the Brothers of Italy leader gets an average of 744 likes and 179 retweets, compared to a production limited to 333 tweets. Zingaretti gets on average 584 likes and 118 retweets for each of his 162 posts. Finally, Berlusconi gets a low rate of engagement from the Twitter audience, despite a significant frequency of publication with an average of 67 likes and 22 retweets per post. The same happens to Bonino who, having a richer fan base of about 190,000 followers, receives for each of her 86 tweets an average of 236 likes and 71 retweets.

3. The effects of issues management on Facebook

The monitoring of issue management activity enables significant results to be drawn on functionality from policy priorities in leaders' communication strategies on social networks. The promotional affordances of social media push leaders predominantly towards self-promotional and propagandistic communication. Almost half of the leaders' posts (48%) are classified as electoral propaganda.[9] The leaders' strategic communication,

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[9] The issues were classified according to manual content analysis of posts, considering all published posts during the observed timeframe, as follows: electoral propaganda (posts containing texts and links that explicitly promote and invite the recipient to vote for the leader, his/her party and his/her candidates); national political debate post with texts and links with which the leader directly intervenes in the political debate in progress (i.e. parliamentary dynamics, public debate on government issues and the reporting

therefore, differs on the selection of the second and third most salient issues: Salvini and Di Maio use the power of issue ownership as a reflection of their government action. In fact, 12.4% of the posts of the League leader, then Minister of the Interior, are focused on security, and 8.5% on immigration, typical issues of the right. Di Maio's issue ownership is even clearer: then Minister of Labour and Economic Development, 21.9% of his posts deal with the issue of labour and 16.1% with intervention in the national political debate. Similar to Salvini, Meloni emphasizes the issue of security (12.5%), but at the same time differs in her marked attention to the dimension of values and rights (11.2%). The main focus is on patriotism and Italianism, which are spread over a wide range of topics: priority for Italians in accessing social services, and protection of 'Made in Italy' production to enhance the sovereign right-wing identity traits of the party. Zingaretti places the Democratic Party on the same issues as the 5 Star Movement, on the ground of which he plays his political strategy: work and social policies (13.7%) and national political debate (8.8%). In the same political space traditionally of reference for the left there is also Fratoianni: job and social policies (17.9%), news facts (11.7%) are often the subject of reframing for posts in negative campaigns against the policies of Salvini and Di Maio on the hottest issues such as immigration, labour rights and employment, and security.

Let's explore, now, the liberal side of the political scenario: Berlusconi focuses mainly on the internal debate (13.5%) and on economic issues (9.6%). Finally, Bonino, in predictable coherence with the leadership of a single issue party called '+Europe' — which places at the centre of its programme the strengthening of European integration policies up to the constitution of the United States of Europe — focuses on foreign policy and the Union (18.6%) and on the news as an expedient for political positioning on the issues at the centre of the media agenda. The marginality reserved by political actors for European and foreign policy issues is significant (2.4%), as already shown by other research (AA.VV. 2019; Cepernich *et. al.* 2019), for an election for the supranational parliament.

The narrative 'private life and leisure' is, first of all, a fundamental indicator of personalization (Enli and Moe, 2017) and, secondly, a sign of deep popularization of self-promotion strategies, in terms of mixing the codes of politics and those of pop culture (Mazzoleni and Sfardini 2009; Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2019; Street 1997; Van Zoonen 2005). Finally, the narrative indicates the intimization of self-representation in public (Stanyer 2013). This category is meaningfully present in the contents of Salvini (39 posts, 4.3%) and Meloni (22 posts, 5.6%), residual in those of Berlusconi (8 posts, 3.2%) and Fratoianni (2 posts, 1.2%), and completely absent in Bonino and Zingaretti.

Despite the salience of issues recognized as central to the public agenda such as security (8.8%), employment and welfare policies (8.6%), domestic political life (7.8%), civil and social rights (6.1%) and immigration (5.6%), posts on the private life and free time of leaders are those that get the maximum public activation on Facebook in terms of engagement.[10] As Fig. 5 shows, it is the issue 'private life and leisure' that achieves the best performance, with indicators of involvement for all leaders who have made use of this narrative, with the

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on facts and events with a political valence); values and human rights, foreign policy, public security, economy, employment and social policies, private life and leisure, immigration, current affairs (post containing texts and links with which the leader comments and reframes news reported by newspapers, TV news and so on).

[10] The engagement rate is calculated by dividing the daily number of likes, comments and shares by the number of fans.

only exception being Fratoianni, for whom the issue of immigration is more engaging for his audience.

Figure 5. The leaders' issue rate of engagement per issue. The rate is the relationship between the daily sum of 'likes', comments and shares and the number of fans. (continues on next page)
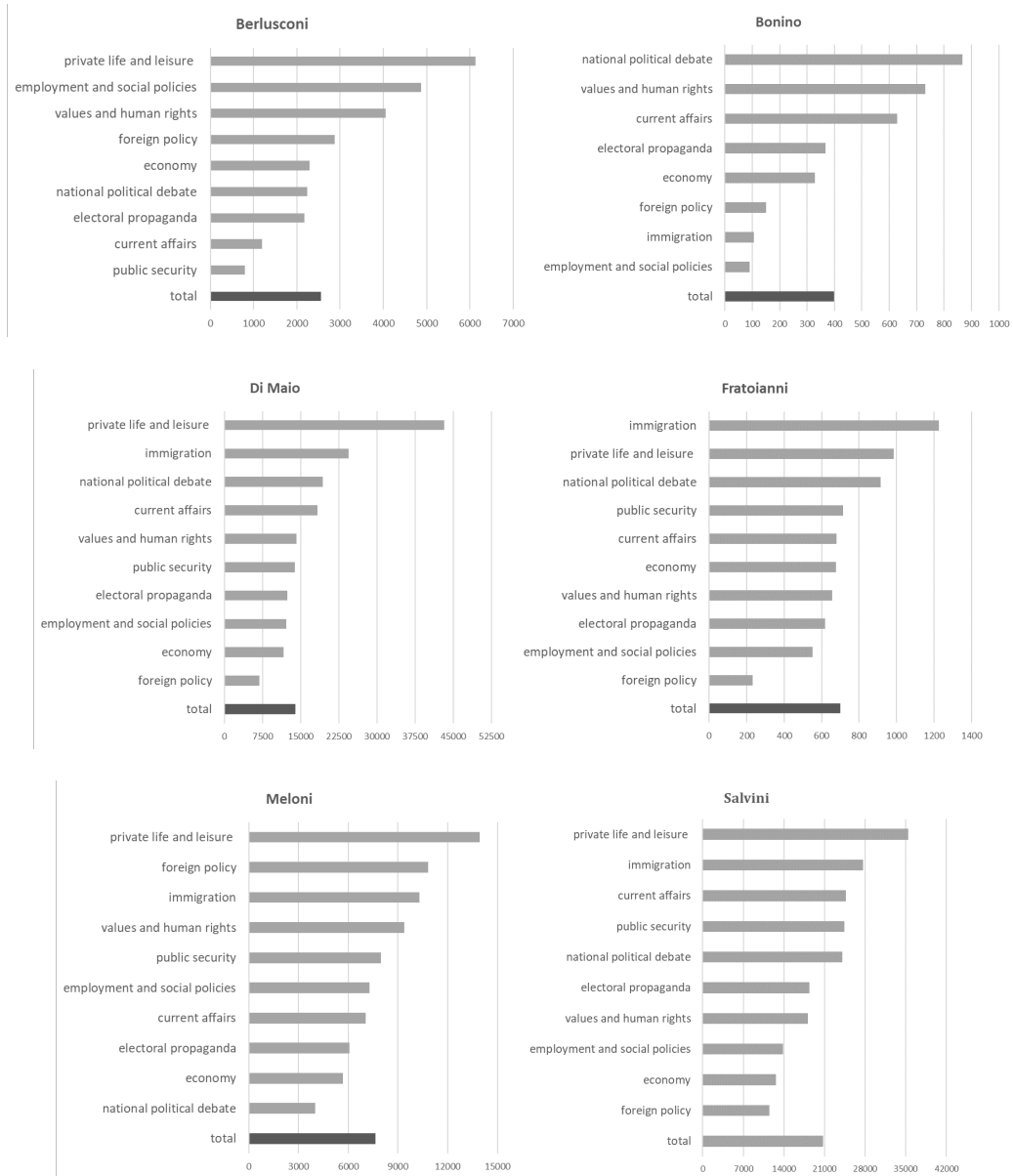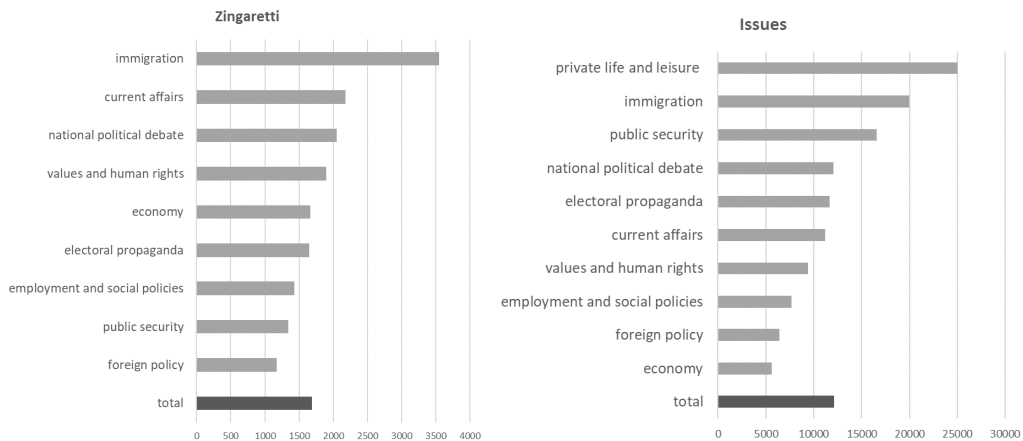
Note: total posts 2,449.

So, what are the issues that most activate the audiences of monitored leaders? Berlusconi, Di Maio, Meloni and Salvini maximize their respective engagement rates when they personalize their narration of politics with posts on their private lives and leisure time. More generally, the popularization of the communication flow is a positive lever for increasing the involvement of the online public. These are posts in which the humanization and intimization of celebrity politicians becomes important (Wheeler 2013), while the political value of content is relegated to the background. Even though it is a counterintuitive hypothesis, it follows that electoral propaganda – which has been the main issue in the leaders' posts – tends instead to activate the user only to a limited extent.

The second most engaging issue is immigration. It is primary for Salvini, but also for Di Maio; these data highlight very significant dystonia between the latter's issue priorities and his fan base ones, which are more coherent with Salvini's. It is also true for Zingaretti and Fratoianni, who build on Facebook the counter-narrative to Salvini and to the government's anti-immigrant policies. The second most engaging issue for Meloni is foreign policy, where evidently the sovereign rhetoric against Europe has real power to involve the relevant public. Finally, Berlusconi engages more, in addition to his private life, in talking about economic development, employment and social policies.

The situation is different for Bonino and Zingaretti, who do not popularize digital narratives with the personalization of content. As we have seen, Zingaretti engages mainly by talking about immigration in antithesis to Salvini and government policies on the theme, but the second most engaging issue is the news. This is the effect of reframing facts from the political news used by the leader to position himself. The +Europe leader, on the other hand, engages her base, first of all, by intervening on the issues of the national political debate and then, in line with the Radical Party fan base, on the issue of liberal values and civil rights. Finally, Fratoianni is the only leader who, while exploiting the codes of intimidation (2 posts), is more successful with the fan base when intervening on the immigration issue.

3. The emotional narratives of leaders on Facebook

The emotionalization of digital messages and narratives[11] is now a pivotal element in the communication of political leaders in election campaigns. Overall, in fact, 55% of the posts analysed contain at least one of the emotions sought, 38% of which are positive, 16% negative.

Nevertheless, an increasing corpus of empirical studies highlights a process of 'negativization' of political communication, particularly on social media. This is because negative emotional frames tend to show a greater ability to engage network users (Brader 2006; Bracciale and Martella 2017; Cepernich and Novelli 2018; Neuman *et al.* 2007). The perverse effect of the negativization of social communication is represented by the risks of a structural polarization of the public sphere (Amnesty International, 2019). In any case, the communication of political actors to the European elections 2019 has not been characterized by markedly 'negative' tones, at least on Facebook. In fact, only 16.1% of posts are characterized by negative frames (attacks on the opponent, negative campaigning, etc.) (Tab. 2), while the positive frames of change and hope reach 38.8%.

Frame management in the leaders' communication shows significant differences. The leaders most oriented towards negative emotions are Meloni (27.2%), Fratoianni (27.2%) and Zingaretti (20.9%). Salvini, on the other hand, stopped at 12.4%; Berlusconi at 13.5%; Di Maio at 8.1% and Bonino at 4.7%. Particularly interesting is the negative rate in Salvini's posts, that mostly use the positive frame for alarmist issues, such as immigration and security, in order to reassure voters, triggering in opponents a negative counter-narrative as a criticism of positioning or blame. However, in consideration of the high frequency of publication, in absolute values, the quantity of negative posts produced by Salvini (112) is much higher than other leaders. Only Meloni, with 107 posts, is in step with him.

The effects of frame management on networked publics can be observed referring to the average engagement. Thus, the picture changes: in line with the main findings in the literature, all users respond more intensely to the negative messages of leaders (Weber 2013), with the sole exception of Fratoianni. The negative strategy produces evident effects on the average of Di Maio's engagement, who is also one of the leaders to use less negativity in posts. The same happens for Salvini and Meloni. When these leaders use negative frames, they engage their audiences more. Positive frames, on the other hand, are well below average capacity. Confirming the existence of a strong trend towards emotionalization, non-emotionalized posts involve fewer users for all leaders.

The analysis conducted in Table 3 by crossing the analytical dimensions of (a) emotional frames (b) issue of the post and (c) engagement product, shows interesting results. Considering the electoral propaganda posts, which are the most numerous, Bonino, Di Maio and Fratoianni achieve above-average activation when using positive communication registers. In contrast, Meloni, Salvini and Zingaretti activate the base more when the frame is negative. Only in Berlusconi's case is the lack of an emotional frame in propaganda posts a positive engagement factor.

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[11] The emotional frames are the result of the aggregation subsequent to the classification of the posts on the basis of the prevailing emotional frame denoted by the content (Cepernich et al. 2018): joy, trust, hope, surprise (Positive); sadness, fear, disgust, anger (Negative).

16

Table 3. The most engaging communication frames on Facebook to the issues (15 April to 26 May 2019).

	Berlusconi	Bonino	Di Maio	Fratoianni	Meloni	Salvini	Zingaretti
Electoral propaganda	neutral	positive	positive	positive	negative	negative	negative
National political debate	negative	negative	negative	positive	negative	positive	negative
Values and human rights	positive	positive	negative	negative	neutral	negative	neutral
Foreign policy and Europe	positive	positive	mt	positive	negative	negative	positive
Public security	positive	np	negative	positive	negative	negative	negative
Economy	negative	mt	positive	positive	positive	negative	neutral
Employment and social policies	negative	mt	negative	positive	negative	neutral	negative
Private life and leisure	positive	np	positive	positive	negative	positive	np
Immigration	np	mt	mt	neutral	negative	positive	positive
Current affairs	negative	negative	negative	positive	negative	negative	positive
Total	negative	negative	negative	positive	negative	negative	negative

Legend: np=does not address the issue; mt=monotone

In general, the neutrality of the message benefits leaders only occasionally: Meloni and Zingaretti when the issue is 'values and human rights', only Zingaretti when talking about economics, Salvini on the issue of 'employment and social policies' and finally, Fratoianni on the issue of immigration.

The Left leader is also the only case in which the public react with greater involvement when the post contains a positive frame. This, as we have seen, is in the face of a flow built with a high rate of negativity (27%). For all the others, engagement is higher than average in the presence of a negative emotionalization of the message.

When the positive emotional framing produces a high capacity of engagement, this indicates the equal capacity of the fan base to support leaders on certain issues identifying their campaign: for example, Salvini on the hottest issues of the internal political debate and, above all, on immigration. These, in fact, are issues that have radically polarized opinions on the Italian political landscape. In the same way, Meloni's posts on the economy reflect a space where evidently sovereigntist positions are pushed within the social environment by the widespread agreement of the fan base.

Finally, a separate consideration about the 'private life and leisure' issue is that it is a powerful driver of engagement with positive frames. Although the popularization of the communication flow is a smaller part of content production, it confirms its high potential in terms of engagement. This is true, except for Meloni, who often uses irony to place a negative frame on her personal and private life.

5. Conclusions

This article investigated the degree of development of the electoral communication of Italian leaders in a context of second-order elections – as are those for the European Parliament – but which have significant national importance. The aim was to verify which attitudes and forms of adaptation political leaders have developed towards the dominant logics in digital communication.

Overall, the emergence of 'hyperleaders' in online political communication is confirmed, i.e. leaders who are more adaptive than others to digital environments and the normativity of their grammar. In line with what emerged in the 2018 political elections (Cepernich 2019), Salvini, Di Maio and Meloni share specific attitudes and forms of adaptation to the network media logic. These attributes include, first of all, the breadth of the public, if we consider the three social networks monitored as a whole and second, the communicative strategy that favours interactions and, therefore, engagement, each with its own characteristics. Third is the strategic use of key issues of the campaign. Significant examples of efficient frame management are the popularization and focusing of key issues to contain channel redundancy within the communication flow, which is particularly stressed in the election campaign. Finally, there is the emotionality rate of the posts, which is above the system average in the communication of Meloni (61.6%), Salvini (60.6%) and Zingaretti (60.4%). The strategic use of the negative frame – that is, the one that is technically the most mobilizing – characterizes only two of the three most digital 'hyperleaders': Meloni and Salvini. This responds to specific choices of communicative style and political rhetoric.

Let's consider, first of all, the extent of each leader's audience. Salvini has the largest audience. More than 3.6 million followers on Facebook make his presence on the platform comparable in terms of visibility effects to those of a mass medium. In addition, Salvini is in a position of great advantage on all social networks observed. Apart from this striking case of 'digital hyperleader', the leaders of the emerging right (Salvini and Meloni) and Luigi Di Maio (leader of the Five Star Movement) demonstrate greater efficiency of audience building. This is compared to a major weakness of the leaders of the left, Zingaretti, Fratoianni and Bonino: in fact, they are permanently below the threshold of half a million followers on all strategic social networks.

Looking at the frequency of publication and the density of the flow, Salvini is the only one showing a saturation goal. Di Maio and Meloni also publish above-average posts on Facebook, confirming certain common attitudes towards digital strategies. On Instagram, instead, only Meloni follows Salvini, while on Twitter only Fratoianni competes with the leader of the League, but with much lower results for engagement. In fact, considering the ability to engage the public related to the frequency of flow, we find that on Facebook, and especially on Twitter, Di Maio exceeds Salvini for engagement, particularly with regard to comments and sharing. It is, therefore, necessary to underline, once again, both the strongly participative nature of the Five Star Movement, and the evidence that stressing the flow does not automatically mean making it more productive. A second relevant fact, instead, is the homogeneous low capacity of Instagram to generate engagement, if we exclude the likes of Salvini and – to a significantly lesser extent – of Di Maio and Meloni.

An analogously significant result emerges from the analysis of engagement capacity through issue management on Facebook. On the one hand, in fact, the monitoring confirms the dual strategic use of classic issues: self-promotion through direct propaganda and the insistence on key issues with which to place oneself and one's party in the political scenario. On the other hand, however, it is very interesting to note that in the majority of cases the most engaging posts are not on key issues, but on the leaders' private lives and leisure time. This means that the personalization and popularization of messages pay off in terms of activating online audiences more than anything else. The second most engaging issue for most of the leaders considered is immigration, with no significant differences between left and right.

Finally, as regards the strategies of frame management and emotionalization of the messages, a counterintuitive result is that only 16% of the electoral communication of leaders is framed negatively. The highest rate of content negativization is found in Meloni, Fratoianni and Zingaretti (over 20%), while Salvini is below with 12.4% of negative posts. The League leader, in fact, tends to attribute positive frames to alarmist themes, from his points of view, such as immigration and security. However, this research largely confirms the greater engagement potential of negativity compared to positivity. The average engagement, in fact, is greater if the frame used by the leader is negative in relation to almost all the issues, with the only exception being Fratoianni. The positive frame is most engaging, however, when the leader personalizes the flow with light news from his private life.

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