Facebook, digital campaign and Italian general election 2018. A focus on the disintermediation process activated by the web

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Abstract

The digital media convergence has innovated all the information and communication channels. ICTs have adapted to the reticular structure, which can be interpreted as a paradigm of today's Network Society, invoking a reorganization of man-machine relationship, interpersonal interactions and the ways of collecting, processing and storing data. Political communication and its processes of participation are not exempt from this evident change. The aim of this paper is to investigate the transformation dynamics that have taken place through the Internet and social networks, as effectively more democratic tools that are able to stimulate a bottom-up and grassroots participation, in some respects a disintermediate participation compared to the typical unidirectionality of analogue media. In identifying the specific characteristics of the interaction spaces offered by the web, we have examined the digital campaign strategy devised by the political parties during the Italian general election (4th March 2018). The results have returned an unprecedented scenario, in which the social media strategy plays a leading role in the different dimensions of political marketing. The web is proposed to become the ideal social arena for the meeting between political offer and demand.

Keywords: Internet Data; Networked Politics; Digital Campaign; Political Marketing; Social Media Strategy; Italian General Election.

1. Introduction

Last 4th March 2018 general election was held in Italy. Political candidates have planned complex political marketing strategies and voters have been exposed to a communication river, resulting from an intense campaign. The Internet has hosted most of the communication flows: the structure made of "nodes" and "bridges" of the *Network Society* (Castells, 1996) has poured online, fueling a universe of exceptional relationships. The possibility of Internet users to share interaction spaces, beyond physical proximity, is a peculiar characteristic and the main advantage of this digital *medium*. The web, during its evolutionary path, has abandoned the rigidity of a *top-down* communication to enable new *bottom-up* communication flows of *peer-to-peer* interaction, also in the political sphere and in civic engagement.

The objective of this paper is to study the peculiarities of this electoral campaign, observing the role of the Internet and, more specifically, of Facebook, the social network that most of all has been the preferred platform for the dissemination of targeted messages (top-down), for their circulation and for the active user response (bottom-up), as "consumers of the political offer". Moreover, in considering the overall media scenario, we asked ourselves whether there has been a permanent disintermediation between political offer and demand, where political actors have proposed to bypass traditional mediation to enable a direct channel with the individual citizen through the web. Lastly, it is appropriate to investigate the political marketing and web marketing activities, with specific reference to social media marketing, carried out during the election campaign to reach a discouraged "voter-consumer", tired of the promises not kept[1] and eager to participate actively in the dialogue with the "seller", the same necessary dialogue that occurs today between firms and consumers in the field of products and services businesses.

2. Electoral campaign, Internet and the networked politics

2.1. Towards a new structural change

The crisis of political participation in the most advanced democracies (also visible from the phenomenon of abstentionism) has been observed by a wide range of theoretical and empirical research (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; Kriesi et al., 2013; Dalton, 2014). The results of these studies have highlighted the problems related to the mediatization of

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[1] According to Eurobarometer, in fact, Italian parties collect the trust of just 9% of citizens. The government and parliament achieve a 15% confidence rate on the national population (Standard Eurobarometer 86, November 2016).

politics. Press and television have helped to create distances[2], increasing the level of distrust of the political class. The *media-system* has not fulfilled the functions of *watchdog*, instead it contributed to a phenomenon known as the spectacularization of politics, in which the media are co-authors of the definition of the *agenda-setting* (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In an attempt to recover at least part of the lost ground, it was necessary to restore those relational spaces typical of direct contact. With the advent of the Internet, political actors have stimulated new forms of communication, based on the principles of political marketing, relational marketing and social media marketing; while voters have experienced a new process of post-media individualization, with partial replacement of the old and obsolete mediation mechanism (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001). The gradual evolutionary process of digital modernization has invested at the same time the political organizations, the information system and the electorate (Norris, 2000).

At the origins of this innovative model is the absolute success of «Obama for America», the first and biggest digital campaign organization ever (Johnson, 2009). It has proved its effectiveness through the wider mobilization network in history: on the election day, on 4th November 2008, about 25% of Obama's voters were connected to him through his online networks (Masket, 2009; Plouffe, 2010). In the wake of this success, Trump and Clinton moved towards it in 2016, while, in Europe, we witnessed the accomplishments of the Spanish movements *Ciudadanos* and *Podemos*, in 2015 and 2016, of the French movement *En Marche!*, for Macron 2017, and the English one, for Corbyn 2017. In Italy, in 2013, the *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S), started by Beppe Grillo, was the forerunner of this new way of meaning the political organization. An inclusive political organization, that nurtures itself from below, promoting unprecedented forms of disintermediation and participation. But in 2013, only the M5S had a complete and effective digital strategy. This strategy was, in some respects, necessary, because, unlike the other parties, they had very limited visibility within the mainstream analogue media contexts (TV and press). Their success in 2013, thanks to the web, has shown, even in Italy, that it was necessary to reevaluate the old mechanisms of *broadcasting* communication, in favor of a participatory model guided by digital technologies. The infrastructure and organizational architecture of politics should have moved online, in the networked politics, where *individualized*, post-bureaucratic and participatory activism (Cepernich, 2017) resides. Moreover, the peculiarity of the Italian general election 2018 is identifiable in the legislative intervention that has abolished public funding for parties. This has encouraged the transition to an online digital campaign, taking advantage of the (relative) gratuitousness of the web spaces and of the new engagement and

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[2] According to an Eurobarometer survey on trust in the media-system, 52% of Italians have confidence in media information. This is in line with the European average (53%) but well below the Scandinavian countries (Finland 88%, Denmark 77% , Sweden 77%), the Netherlands and Portugal (73%) or Austria (72%). (Special Eurobarometer 452, Media pluralism and democracy, November 2016).

fundraising initiatives. In this way the primacy of public opinion has been established, especially that which is formed online, where the *hubs* (super-nodes) of the network, in the role of *influencers* (Weimann, 1991), move the consensus as new *opinion leaders* in a two-step flow of communication (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944) on the web. Political marketing, therefore, has equipped itself with data scientists, demoscopic surveys, data-driven strategies, news management, etc. The Internet increasingly becomes the favorite place for political communication, a place inhabited by a voter who is no longer a passive spectator, but an active-citizen and a *digital-militant* (Novelli, 2018).

2.2. Applied social tools

The Facebook profile is an extremely widespread digital tool, which refers to a strong interpersonal and disintermediate component. The existence of *avatars* within a peer user network is the most obvious expression of a process of personalization of the media space. The "logged in" voter enters the world of *mass self-communication* (Castells, 2009), where the contents are increasingly seen in a subjective and self-selective key. This is what determines the *filter bubbles* of the self-referential information (Pariser, 2011), as the effects of a semi-automatic selection of contents, individually or collectively, as a consequence of the hyper-selective exposure of subjects and of the functioning of the algorithmic logic in the search results. The individual becomes at the same time a producer, a distributor and a selective consumer of contents, in his personal space that he takes care of at will. From a marketing point of view, social networks are a precious reservoir of *big data*, from which to draw to set up the digital campaign. Profiling tools and techniques prove extremely useful not only in commercial campaigns but also in electoral campaigns. The feedback provided by Facebook, as well as by other social networks, allows to quantify a significant part of the response of the communication's receiver, returning some measures on the effectiveness of the strategies. Moreover, in confirming the importance of online communication, we refer to the Audiweb data on internet diffusion in Italy: from the June 2017 survey it emerged that Italians who claim to have at least one device with the possibility to access the Internet are 43 million, about 90% of the population between 11 and 74 years.

3. Research methodology

The effectiveness of digital communication tools is also found in the field of empirical social research. The huge amount of aggregated data offered by the web reduces the problems inherent to the detection and sampling techniques, as well as favoring dialogue and compatibility between different softwares, by virtue of the common use of computer language. In observing the new forms of online political interaction and communication, we gathered all the textual, graphic and audiovisual material (it was almost always a mixed

material) produced by the official Facebook pages of the main parties that make up the current tripolar political scenario: *Movimento 5 Stelle*, *PD* (Democratic Party) and *Lega*. The time frames in which the data have been collected concern the first and fourth (last) week of the electoral campaign (exactly from 5th to 11th February and from 26th February to 3rd March). A total of 1,397 Facebook posts were studied. Lastly, we have constructed and analyzed through a matrix a large series of variables, which have been useful to return important information for the observation of the phenomenon, after considering the actual electoral results and what we set out to investigate.

4. Findings

In light of the results of the general election, we focused on the three main political parties: indeed, the M5S obtained 32.9% of the votes, followed by the PD (18.8%) and the Lega (17.4%)[3]. Data about the subscriptions to the Facebook spaces (both parties and candidates profiles) and the traffic of messages directed through these channels (table 1.), have confirmed the importance of a campaign strategy specifically devised for the world wide web. The parties that have concentrated massive resources on the Internet have increased their visibility, beyond a mere "showcase website". The participation modalities of Facebook users differ in intensity. In fact, among these differences it creeps the phenomenon named by Morozov (2011) "*couch activism*", which is a level of "gaunt" involvement, that does not necessarily translate into concrete activism.

Table 1. Number of Facebook subscribers/number of posts produced by the parties (weeks 1-4)

Facebook pages/profiles	Subscribers	Total posts
Lega – Salvini Premier	395,541	1,022
Partito Democratico	259,069	98
Movimento 5 Stelle	1,284,671	277
Matteo Salvini[a]	2,162,960	
Matteo Renzi[a]	1,125,786	
Luigi Di Maio[a]	1,560,451	

a: Facebook personal profiles. Source: Facebook.com (5th March 2018), our elaboration.

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[3] It is worth pointing out, however, that in considering the agreements done by the center-left coalitions (PD, *Più Europa*, *Civica Popolare, Italia Europa Insieme*) and those done by the center-right (Lega, *Forza Italia*, *Fratelli d'Italia*, *Noi con l'Italia - UDC*), the scenario changes considerably: the center-left has reached a total of 23%, while the center-right has obtained 37%.

Regarding the process of political *leaderization*, the processed data (table 2.) show that in the Lega the leader's communication prevails over that one of the party. The messages of the Lega are oriented to the construction and narration of the public image of the leader, Salvini. They help reduce the distances between voters and candidate. The PD has used a balanced strategy between the leader and the party's image. The M5S, instead, has privileged the importance of the party in relation to the candidate, Di Maio, confirming to be a deliberately inclusive movement, with a process of disintermediation that, before the Facebook channel, passes from *Il Blog delle stelle* (ex Beppe Grillo's Blog) and from the *Rousseau* platform, as two virtual spaces of direct interaction..

Table 2. *Leaderization* **strategies per party**

Party/leader	*Continuum* party-leader (0-100)[a]
Lega/Matteo Salvini	86
Partito Democratico/Matteo Renzi	48
Movimento 5 Stelle/Luigi Di Maio	37

a: the constructed index summarizes 10 items regarding the communication of the leader and the party. The value 0 represents the complete centrality of the party, while the value 100 represents the maximum process of *leaderization*. Our results are in line with those presented by *Ipsos* and *TWIG* about Facebook and Twitter messages. Source: our elaboration plus *Ipsos* http://www.ipsos.com/it-it/elezioni-politiche-2018-analisi-del-voto.

In observing the data on the topics faced by the parties through Facebook, it is clear that the Lega (Figure 1) has characterized its communication on the security issue, with specific reference to the government of immigration. The main communication strategy of the Salvini's party has relied on *fear arousing appeals* (Fabris, 1997), namely those messages that aim to impress the public through the exposure to negative contents, in an implicit attempt to spread worry and subsequently propose a solution to the problem.
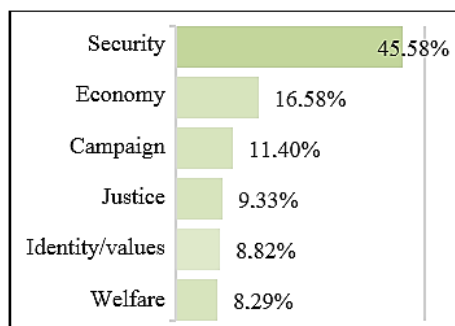

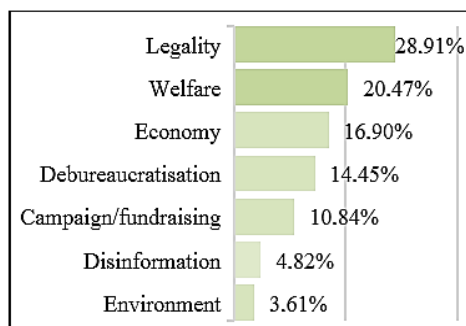*Figure 1. Main topics in the speeches of the Lega.*

Figure 2. Main topics in the speeches of the M5S.

The M5S (Figure 2), instead, proposes itself as a new reforming force, capable of combating corruption, lack of transparency and the high costs of politics. Their target constituency is largely made up of the weakest sections of the population, for whom massive welfare measures have been proposed (the "*citizenship income*" is the most relevant and well-known example among their proposals). Lastly, the PD (Figure 3) has tried to leverage the typical values of the Progressive Left, underlining past political achievements and the need to ensure continuity in the Country's path.
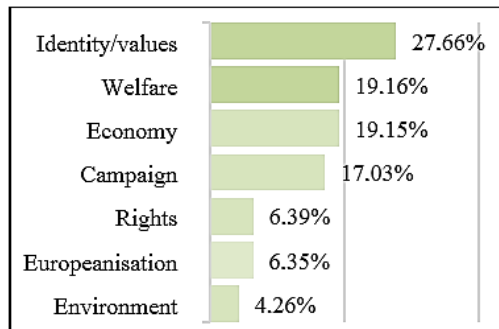

Figure 3. Main topics in the speeches of the PD.

5. Conclusions

The online digital campaign has proven to be of great strategic importance for the parties. The exponential spread of web messages has amplified the echo of communications. As visible from the data, M5S and Lega have used the internet to create an image coherent with the electorates' expectations, setting a digital campaign (thanks to the use of profiling techniques and algorithms) based on the urgencies perceived by voters. In some cases the annulment of the distances between the candidate and the voter has turned in an almost *one-to-one communication*. The PD, instead, despite having proclaimed the values of a "progressive" Left, has demonstrated to be maliciously bound with the "old" media-system, missing the appointment with a fruitful dialogue with his targets. Their conspicuous loss of consensus, as ruling party before elections, passes from this inadequate online digital strategy. In conclusion, the Internet has certainly renewed the ways through which political offer meets political demand, providing an interactive and partially disintermediate exposure space available to candidates and voters, in order to return useful two-way feedback for both actors involved. In fact, as Mazzoleni argued (1998), political marketing must "favor the adaptation of a candidate to his/her potential electorate, make him/her known to the largest number of voters, create differences compared to the opponents, optimize the number of votes that can be earned during the campaign".

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