

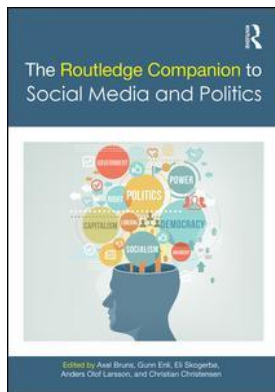
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## 31

# COMPARING FACEBOOK AND TWITTER DURING THE 2013 GENERAL ELECTION IN ITALY

*Luca Rossi and Mario Orefice*

## Introduction

The 2013 Italian general election has been labelled by many media and communication scholars as the “the first Twitter Italian general election” (Vaccari & Valeriani 2013: 1026). In this chapter we describe the 2013 electoral campaign from a social media perspective, comparing the use of Facebook and Twitter during months leading to the election. In so doing, we will show how different social media present different perspectives when it comes to political communication and how these perspectives can be fully understood only if social media are framed within a *continuum* together with traditional mass media.

When discussing the electoral use of social media, it is necessary to contextualise such use within the general adoption of digital media in the country of reference. Internet use in Italy is limited, even if it is possible to see a growing trend over the years. In 2012, 62.1 per cent of the population used the Internet at least once a week, with the same value reaching 63.5 per cent in 2013 (Censis 2013). It is interesting to note that data about the daily use of the Internet show a stronger trend increasing from 43.9 per cent of daily Internet users in 2012 to 51.6 per cent in 2013 (+7.7; Demos & PI 2013). The growth in Internet access seems to be coupled with an interesting change of user habits. In particular, while 86.4 per cent of Italians still indicate television as their preferential source of information (Censis 2013) a significant portion of online users say they combine television with Facebook or Twitter. Specifically, the 2013 survey indicated that Twitter was a “news and information channel” for 6.3 per cent of the users (+3.8 compared to 2012). Similar uses of Facebook increased from 26.8 per cent in 2012 to 37.6 per cent a year later (+10.8). These data suggest a scenario where large parts of the population currently remain outside of the digital debate. At the same time, data show a stable increasing trend over the years, and it is now safe to say that social media do play a relevant role in contemporary Italian political communication, both in qualitative and quantitative terms. From a quantitative perspective, the months leading up to the 2013 national election saw a high level of activity by new political actors

entering the arena and old parties redefining their traditional communication strategies. In the remainder of this chapter, we will first explore existing research regarding social media and electoral communication. Subsequently, we introduce and present the data collected during the election period. Finally, we discuss these data within the wider frame of contemporary political communication defined as *circular* and *hybrid* (Chadwick 2011; Bentivegna & Marchetti 2014).

### Social Media for Political Election Research

On a general level, one can identify two complementary approaches to the analysis of social media use during election periods. The first line of research, coherent with classical studies on political communication, focuses on the use of digital media by political parties or politicians. The second research area pays more attention to the study of grassroots communications arising before or between elections.

These different research areas, that obviously see many middle-ground approaches, are largely rooted in two substantially different research questions. On the one hand, scholars investigating how political parties and politicians use digital media typically describe the new forms of political communication and analyse whether or not social media innovate the interaction dynamics between politicians and citizens (Mori 2011; Pira 2012; Vergeer & Hermans 2013; Morcellini 2013). On the other hand, scholars interested in grassroots communication typically investigate if social media-based conversations can be used to study and describe the ongoing political debate produced online by ordinary citizens (Bentivegna 2014, Larsson 2014). In this latter area of research the approach is often non-deterministic, thus digital media are usually described as a new possibility to observe political discussions that would happen anyway just in different media. This second approach, usually based on large collection of social media data, has seen the participation of many disciplines trying to use Twitter, or data gathered from some other social media platform, in order to investigate people's political opinions and sentiments (Ceron et al. 2014). A side-track of these studies is represented by research that attempts to use social media data in order to predict election results (Tumasjan et al. 2010; Sang & Bos 2011; Caldarelli et al. 2014). While the goal is undoubtedly ambitious, the actual possibility of making such forecasts has been strongly criticised by many authors (Metaxas, 2011; Jungherr et al. 2012; Gayo-Avello et al. 2011). Beside the inconclusive academic debate about election results' predictability, there is no denying that this line of research has provided an opportunity for scholars to observe an emergent communicative structure of large-scale political communication, as well as the growth of new global protest movements that have emerged over the last years (Lotan et al. 2011; Valeriani 2011; Castells 2013).

Despite the fact that these two research lines have fundamental differences in terms of specific foci and theoretical backgrounds, they largely rely on the same type of data (mostly from Twitter)—even if these data are collected differently. Beside some exceptions where data collection is based on a pre-defined list of Twitter accounts (Vergeer & Hermans 2013), the vast majority of researchers collect what could be referred to as topical data (Bruns & Moe 2013) produced over a single or multiple hashtags (Tumasjan et al. 2010; Larsson 2014; Caldarelli et al. 2014). While a detailed analysis of the perils of Twitter data collection is not the goal of this chapter (see Bruns & Burgess 2012; Gaffney & Puschmann 2013; Morstatter et al. 2013 for further discussion on this topic), we still want to emphasise that when working with topical data we are

collecting messages that have been written explicitly to take part in a larger conversation potentially involving anyone interested in the same topic (Bruns & Moe 2013). Within the context of the present chapter, this means that a set of hashtags centred on the names of parties or political leaders (e.g. #M5S for the Italian Five Star Movement or #Berlusconi) will produce a candidate/party-centred data. On the opposite gathering data using hashtags referring to electoral process (such as #elezioni2013 for the Italian case) will produce a wider collection of topics potentially linked to the election. It could be easy to assume that data collected through a list of politicians' name hashtags would be a subset of the data collected through more general hashtags, but due to the unstructured nature of hashtags, we cannot take that for granted. As noted by Bruns & Burgess (2011), when single users add a specific hashtag to their messages they virtually engage with an audience, outside of their own network, that is potentially interested in the topic.

Compared to the large and growing corpus of Twitter-based research, literature investigating how Facebook is used during political campaigns is surprisingly limited. Beside a peak of scientific interest following 2008 U.S. presidential election that resulted in a significant amount of studies (Johnson & Perlmutter 2010; Vitak et al. 2011; Carlisle & Patton 2013), politological research based on what is currently the largest online social network is relatively rare. Since technical difficulties that researchers have to face when they try to collect Facebook data have surely had an impact in terms of quantity of studies available (for more detailed description of these issues, see Giglietto et al. 2012), Facebook-based research has always shown a different focus. This strand of research seems to have a broader social media perspective focusing on how political communication or user-generated contents are spread through multiple platforms—Blogs, Facebook, YouTube (Woolley et al. 2010). At the same time, much political communication research focusing on Facebook, as it happened also for Twitter later in time, has from the very beginning tried to understand whether social media could function as tools for increasing political participation and engagement (Vitak et al. 2011; Kushin & Yamamoto 2010).

In this chapter we use both Facebook and Twitter data to describe the 2013 Italian general election. By using a multiple data approach we try to produce a comparative analysis that has few precedents. At the same time, by adopting a multiple data approach, we claim that every single social media plays a specific role within the complex phenomenon of political elections. Every type of data, from Facebook to Twitter, constitutes, by definition, only a partial representation of the communication happening during an electoral campaign. Through the comparison of multiple data sources we can provide a better understanding of the whole campaign (from a communication perspective) as well as valuable information about the role played by different social media within it.

Both Facebook and Twitter data used in this chapter have been collected from January 2013 to February 2013 using Blogmeter (2013) acquisition tools. Technical details of these tools are discussed in a recent work by Boccia Artieri (2013). Facebook data are obtained through Facebook public API while Twitter data are obtained through a combination of Twitter REST and Streaming API. For both Facebook and Twitter data, we defined an initial set of keywords using names of all the principal politicians running for the election.

For Facebook, we collected 'Engagement' and PTA data (People Talking About) about the public pages of the selected politicians. Engagement value represents the

total number of *likes + comments + shares* obtained by a page and PTA is a broader metric that counts every kind of interaction a user can perform with a public page (e.g. like a page, post on the page wall, like a post, comment on a post, share a post). While Engagement is a cumulative metric, PTA counts single user's interactions thus it is not affected by high level of activity of some users (if a user comments many times in one day it will still counts as one).

For Twitter data, we collected every mention of a politician that was present in our list. Twitter mentions are all the tweets that explicitly mention, within the body text, an existing Twitter user by writing the @ symbol followed by the username.

### Multiple Platforms for Multiple Realities

Tables 31.1 and 31.2 give us a first glimpse of how different political leaders performed on different social media. Looking at the Facebook data (Table 31.1) the former comedian Beppe Grillo had the highest level of Engagement and PTA value during the campaign. It should be noted that Beppe Grillo's page counts a level of activity extremely higher than any other politician, posting, on average, 23 updates (videos, status, or pictures) every day reaching, by the end of the two months campaign, the number of 1,306 updates, more than six times the updates written by Nichi Vendola who ranked second.

Table 31.1 Top 5 Political Accounts on Facebook for Level of Engagement and People Talking About (PTA)

<b>Facebook</b> (1 January–24 February 2013)	Engagement	PTA	Status updates
Beppe Grillo	5,933,393	207,264	1,306
Silvio Berlusconi	1,141,932	55,241	122
M5S	1,044,878	49,278	81
Rivoluzione Civile (RC)	753,810	32,390	11
Nichi Vendola	667,008	41,163	221

Table 31.2 Top 5 Political Accounts on Twitter for Number of Direct Mentions (absolute values)

<b>Twitter</b> (1 January– 24 February 2013)	Mentions	Unique authors	Ment/Auth
Pierluigi Bersani	300,667	48,249	6.23
Mario Monti	276,127	65,514	4.21
Oscar Giannino	225,997	34,853	6.48
Beppe Grillo	212,371	58,296	3.64
Fare	129,312	21,198	6.10

While this is undoubtedly a relevant data to describe Beppe Grillo's Facebook strategy it is important to point out how there is no direct connection between the number of PTA and the number of updates published by a page, since PTA does not measure only interactions with the 'content' (likes, shared, comments) but also interactions with the page (check-in, mentions, etc.). Moreover, it is worth noticing that while most candidates had a Facebook page exclusively dedicated to their political activity, Beppe Grillo opened his page before he entered the political arena. Despite the change of 'public role', he kept the same Facebook page. Beppe Grillo's party, the Five Star Movement (M5S), also has another very popular page that ranked third just behind Silvio Berlusconi official page. Fourth is the left-wing party Rivoluzione Civile (Civil Revolution) which was created just before the election to gather votes of left-wing electors that had a very limited success. Fifth, we see the personal page of Nichi Vendola, leader of the left-wing party Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà (Left, Ecology, and Freedom). At the same time, it is interesting to notice the absence both of Partito Democratico (PD; Democratic Party, the centre-left party that actually won the election) and Scelta Civica (Civic Choice), a centre party led by former prime minister Mario Monti, who was expected, by many analysts, to obtain a better result.

While both PD's leader (Pierluigi Bersani) and Scelta Civica's leader (Mario Monti) had active pages at the time of study, they were absent from the Facebook rankings presented in Table 31.1. Table 31.2 shows how these two leaders were respectively the first and the second with the highest number of Twitter mentions. Due to the aforementioned differences in available data, Twitter scores are more affected by differences in content production rates; that means that a small number of hyperactive users might be able to produce a large amount of data. Thus, it is important to observe the number of mentions paired with the number of unique users. In fact, while Pierluigi Bersani engaged lower numbers than Mario Monti, the ones engaged seem to be more active in this sense with an average value of 6,23 mentions per user. Among the top five most mentioned Twitter accounts, we can observe both the account of the centre-right coalition 'Fare per fermare il declino' (Act to stop the decline) and the account of its leader, the journalist Oscar Giannino, are present among the top five accounts.

These kinds of data that connect either to parties or to individual politicians suggest the complexity of contemporary political communication, where individual leaders might attract audiences larger than their respective parties. These developments represent a substantial problem for data aggregation and interpretation. If, on the one side, we frame this as a specific characteristic of contemporary political debate, where citizens and individual politicians are able to connect and discuss without the symbolic mediation of traditional parties (Anduiza et al. 2009), on the data-collection side we should keep in mind how this might relate to different pre-existing backgrounds of every candidate. In this case, both Oscar Giannino and Beppe Grillo had established popular Twitter and Facebook accounts before they entered the political arena, so their followers can only be partially understood as uniquely political.

Besides showing the difference between political performances on Facebook and Twitter, the two tables show, when compared with Table 31.3, how neither Facebook nor Twitter data can be compared with the actual election results.

While this is not surprising, as a low correspondence between election success and social media success has been observed before, the observed differences between Facebook and Twitter should be explored further. We will investigate these differences

Table 31.3 Official Results of 2013 Italian General Election—Votes for the Candidate

<i>Politician (Supporting Party)</i>	<i>Camera</i>	<i>Senato</i>
Pierluigi Bersani (PD + SEL)	29.54 per cent	31.60 per cent
Silvio Berlusconi (PDL)	21.56 per cent	22.30 per cent
Beppe Grillo (M5S)	25.55 per cent	23.79 per cent
Mario Monti (SC)	8.30 per cent	9.13 per cent
Antonio Ingroia (RC)	2.25 per cent	1.79 per cent
Oscar Giannino (FARE)	1.12 per cent	0.90 per cent

Source: Ministry of the Interior (2015).

through two hypotheses used to consider the nature of social media data and social media use during political elections.

### Facebook and Twitter during Political Elections

Our first hypothesis is that different performances are direct results of different communication strategies as performed by political parties or leaders on the various social media platforms. While parties undoubtedly communicate differently on different social media, it also seems that social media use exhibits specific 'local culture' (Marwick 2011) that might favour certain parties. This could be due to specific demographics (such as age, gender, race, or socioeconomic state) associated with certain social media and it could be described as a platform-size form of the so-called echo-chamber effect. The idea that social media might act as political echo chambers by reinforcing already existing opinions and offer few opportunities for actual debate has been previously discussed extensively (Gilbert et al. 2009; Yardi & boyd 2010). While this is a well-known risk, the phenomenon has only been analysed in detail within single social media (Twitter, Blogs, etc.) and little is known of echo-chamber effect on a larger level. The different level of success that parties obtain moving through different social media may suggest that not only an echo-chamber effect can take place within a specific platform but that specific social media can be used more within a specific part of the population generating platform-size echo-chamber effects. Within this perspective, the observed difference between Partito Democratico (successful on Twitter and not on Facebook) and the Movimento 5 Stelle (successful on Facebook and not on Twitter) could be explained by the different political preferences of the average user of each platform. While this is an intriguing hypothesis that challenges the assumption of even adoption of social media we currently do not have a proper understanding of social media demographics (Sloan et al. 2015) to confirm it.

A second hypothesis that could explain the data we collected assumes that different social media are used by citizens for different purposes and goals and that this produces a specific (biased) representation of the political arena. While such a multi-goals approach is visible in some research (Metaxas & Mustafaraj 2012), difficulties in collecting comparable data have reduced the diffusion of this idea in favour of a more simple assumption that the large number of participants on a single social media platform

(usually Twitter) might be a reliable representation of a digital public sphere (Caldarelli et al. 2014).

In order to explore these potential different functions, we visualised the evolution of collected data over the time that collection took place (see Figures 31.1 and 31.2).

Twitter data (see Figure 31.1 and Figure 31.3) show a peak of communication at the very beginning of the campaign with tweets about Scelta Civica (Label 1 on

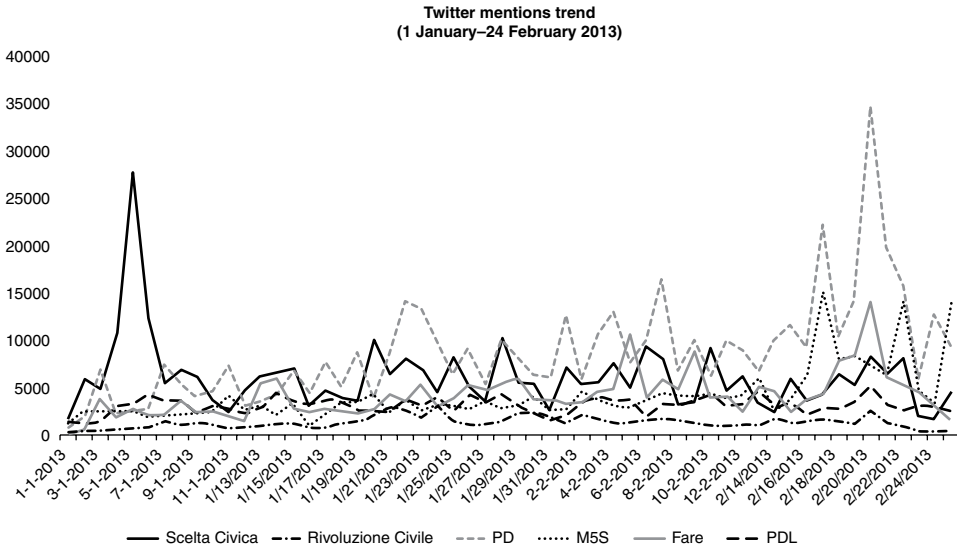


Figure 31.1 Daily Volume of Twitter Mentions

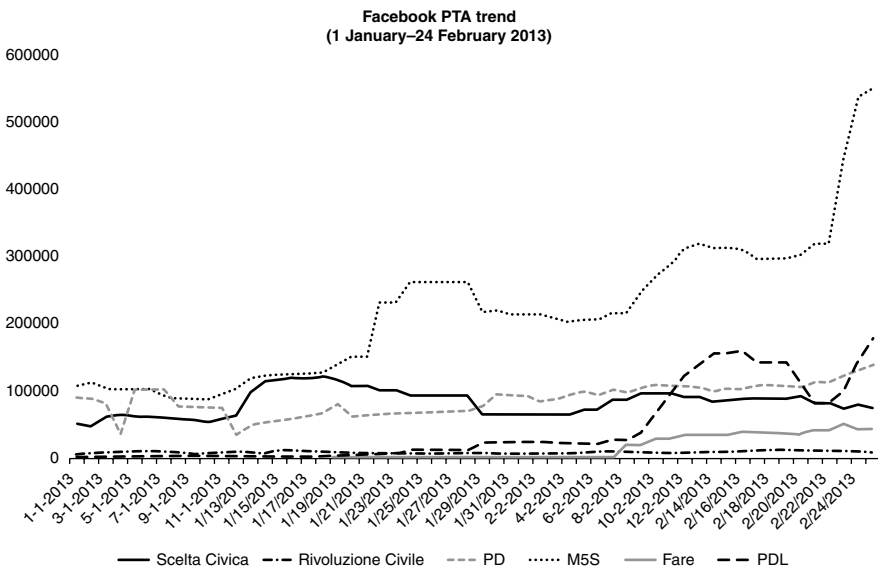


Figure 31.2 Daily Volume of People Talking About



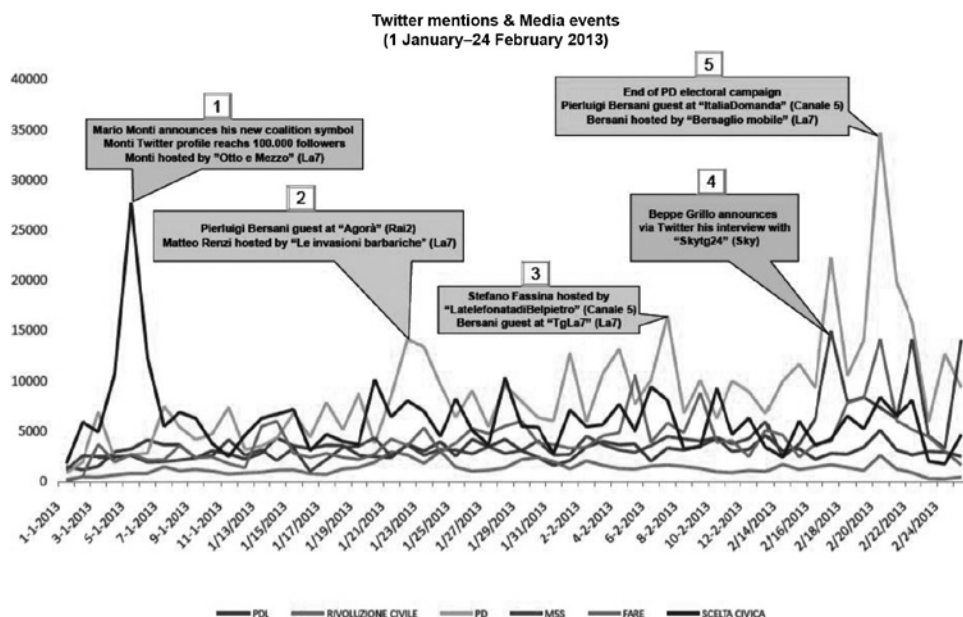


Figure 31.3 Media Presence of Political Leaders Superimposed to the Volume of Twitter Mentions

Figure 31.3). This is mainly due to the statement made by the then Prime Minister Mario Monti announcing his candidacy for the 2013 elections. The campaign went on with few notable events mostly related to the largest centre-left party Partito Democratico (Labels 2–3–5 on Figure 31.3). While we will discuss most of these data in the following paragraphs, it is interesting to point out the peak of Twitter data about 'Fare per fermare il decline', a minor centre-right party that are visible few days before the elections. These peaks are due to a huge scandal that involved Fare's candidate—the economic journalist Oscar Giannino—being found guilty of having falsified his résumé by adding fake academic titles.

Facebook data (see Figure 31.2) show a very different scenario. Throughout the studied period, the data suggest clear trends of growth and decline. The Five Star Movement (M5S) shows a continuous dominance in terms of People Talking About that became extreme after January 23, exactly one month before election day. In comparison to Twitter, Facebook trends do not seem related to any specific event that takes place during the campaign. It is worth noticing that while most parties had an electoral campaign organised through a plurality of communication channels (TV presence, public debates, blogs, and social media) the M5S decided to not appear on TV. This sort of mass media-absence of the M5S was accompanied by an extremely active campaign on the ground with meetings and rallies in a number of Italian cities. This media strategy proved to be effective since mass media had to report about these offline political activities anyway, and since these offline meetings and rallies were the source of a large number of videos diffused online through Facebook and YouTube. As of this writing, it is possible to find about 351,000 videos on YouTube regarding the 2013 Beppe Grillo election tour.

Comparing Twitter and Facebook trends and assuming a media-specificity perspective—as stated before—one can observe that if Facebook shows how parties might be able to engage in public debates—with different rates of success—with clearly identifiable growth towards the end of the campaign, Twitter seems to produce bursts of communication exhausted in one or few days. A possible interpretation of this behaviour is that, in our data, Twitter political communication is mainly driven by political debate taking place on Television or by other media-based events (Larsson & Moe 2012; 2013; Lietz et al. 2014).

More precisely, Twitter activity seems to be clearly dependent on what is broadcast through mainstream media. Indeed, during political campaigns such channels offer a large amount of opportunities for engaging as an active audience with electoral content (Highfield et al. 2013). This claim can be easily supported by observing how Figure 31.3 maps every single major peak of Twitter activity with highly recurrent presence of politicians on TV talk shows. With this in mind, large and strategic media presence seems to be behind the comparably large Twitter success of Pierluigi Bersani (leader of Partito Democratico) as well as that of the former Prime Minister Mario Monti. Every peak registered in Twitter data corresponds to a concurrent mass media presence of one of the two leaders. At the same time, it is interesting to notice how the Five Star Movement yielded no significant peaks during the whole campaign—except for two moments close to the election days. As previously suggested, while the official media strategy of M5S was to avoid any kind of mass media presence (no talk shows, no interviews, etc.) towards the end of the campaign Beppe Grillo announced an interview with SkyTG24-news channel of Sky Corp.— but he then decided to cancel the interview after a few days (Label 4 on Figure 31.3). Thus, even if M5S never participated on any TV political debate or talk show, the observable Twitter peaks can still be connected to announced and later cancelled mass media appearances.

While TV doesn't tweet or define how much users should tweet, it seems evident that the broadcasted content provides opportunities and topical resources for Twitter conversation. Some researchers have claimed that Twitter could be understood as an additional communication environment to traditional media in which politicians strengthen their already existing relations with the voters (Bentivegna & Marchetti 2014). Nevertheless the synchronous dynamics that have been pointed out between TV presence and Twitter conversation suggest not only that Twitter agenda is somehow influenced by TV programming but also that politicians have very limited control over digital conversation regarding it. Such a strict dependence of Twitter conversations on TV contents seems to offer an additional perspective to the general assumption that social media challenge traditional intermediation between voters and politicians. While, nowadays, there is undoubtedly space for direct communication between candidates and potential voters and for spontaneous debate emerging with no involvement of traditional mass media, there are also opportunities for autonomous political debates arising from more traditional media products.

## Conclusions and Discussion

This chapter has analysed the 2013 Italian election from a social media viewpoint, trying to relate the uses of such services to a more general perspective. First, when social media communications are observed as part of a larger social dynamic, they should be framed within a specific sociocultural context defined by the diffusion of social media

and by the actual (observable) social practices. Thus, while social media undoubtedly played a central role in 2013 Italian election, this should be framed within a countrywide context where weekly Internet use is just at 62,1 per cent of population and where social media use is still limited. At the same time, social media should not be perceived as a unique undistinguished environment but rather as a set of platforms and specific techno-social contexts that can be more or less favourable to specific parties, coalitions or other kind of political groups. Finally, we have shown how different social media—Facebook and Twitter in our case—have been used in a different ways, as Twitter showed a more firm relation with television (being used largely as a second-screen tool) while Facebook didn't show this kind of coupling.

At the same time the use of social media to explore political dynamics requires framing of empirical analysis within a larger context of contemporary political systems as has been described by political science. It is therefore necessary to study how social media enable and support deeper changes in the political system and, vice-versa, how social media are affected by these. On a political level the contemporary crisis of political legitimisation, as well as the lack of representativity of traditional parties, led to the emergence of new types of political actors (Parkinson 2003; Duso 2003; Barbera 2008) characterised by three major elements: *individualisation*, *mediatisation* and *spectacularisation*.

**Individualisation:** We observe a shift from traditional parties toward 'personal parties' heavily focused on single leaders. In 2013 Italian election we saw three main examples of this, from Silvio Berlusconi's Popolo della Libertà (PDL), to the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) centred on the former comedian Beppe Grillo, and Scelta Civica (SC) led by Mario Monti.

**Mediatisation:** Political communication is more and more defined by specific media strategies. According to Castells (2000), networked media politics needs to convey simple messages designed according to the preferred social media platform. Within this perspective the large adoption of political-Twitter hashtag made by the Partito Democratico (PD)—#pb2013 (which stands for PierluigiBersani2013), #ItaliaGiusta (Fair Italy), or #propostashock (shocking proposal)—represent an effective ways to engage within a specific social media platform. In a similar way the large amount of video material and clips produced during M5S's offline campaign proved to fit perfectly into the sharing practices of Facebook and YouTube.

**Spectacularisation:** Parties' communication strategies will be more and more 'candidate-centred' (Wattenberg 1991) in order to catch media and public attention—as well as votes. These strategies are especially based on the power of an individual politician to set the political and media agenda through the public exposure of specific aspects coming from his or her private (or intimate) life (Helms 2005; Mazzoleni & Sfardini 2009). The greatest example of this in Italian politics has been traditionally Silvio Berlusconi but during the election described in this paper we note that a large part of Beppe Grillo's campaign was based on his personal experiences and on being an outsider in the political arena and therefore different from the rest of the politicians.

While political scientists have largely analysed these characteristics, individualisation, mediatisation and spectacularisation have rarely been taken into consideration when it comes to research from the perspective of media and communication. In contrast, these should be included as necessary background for social media analyses around civic or political phenomena. By doing so we would be forced to frame political usage of social media within a larger perspective that makes no clear separation between social and mass media. It seems difficult to argue for such a separation when, as we

have observed in our data, social media appear to be coupled on so many levels with traditional mass media.

A more fruitful approach would be to consider political elections—and political communication in general—existing within what Andrew Chadwick calls a ‘hybrid media system’. In particular, he defines the relationship between politics, media and connected audiences as

the system built upon interactions among older and newer media logics—where logics are defined as technologies, genres, norms, behaviors and organizational forms—in the reflexively interconnected fields of media and politics. Actors in this system are articulated by complex and ever-evolving relationships based upon adaptation and interdependence and simultaneous concentrations and diffusions of power. (Chadwick 2013: 4)

While data show clear evidences of such hybrid system, whether this can be studied from a methodological point of view is still an open question. Nevertheless, we claim that in order to be fruitful, any future analysis of political use of social media should be rooted within a similar theoretical perspective and we are suggesting that the simultaneous analysis of multiple media data (both social media and mass media) could provide the proper methodological approach.

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