Italian Politics in the Web 2.0

Participation Mistrust and Disintermediation Processes

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CMCS Working Papers
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ITALIAN POLITICS IN THE Web 2.0: participation, mistrust and disintermediation processes

Abstract

Many scholars think that behaviour in certain social networks (in particular Facebook) and in some metaverse experiences (like Second Life) might increase political participation and civic engagement, not only online but even in interpersonal “physical” relations. At the same time, it seems that the new forms of political communication through the tools of Web 2.0 represent a clear example of disintermediation between political actors and citizens.

Starting from these presuppositions, we carried out multidimensional research on the use of Facebook and Second Life in Italian political communication. We observed four main tendencies:

a) growth of networked individualism;
b) growth of involvement with an impact on civic attention and engagement;
c) growth of new subjects (traditionally distant from the political sphere) approaching politics and pre-political forms of engagement;
d) growth of networking as a tool to increase social participation, but mainly in subjects who already had political and social interests.

At the same time, it seems that although traditional forms of political intermediation have disappeared, it is not completely true that disintermediation processes are replacing them. In this paper we will present the theoretical background and findings of our research.

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1. Audience Studies between new consumption styles and methodological problems

As is well known, to belong to an audience is a criterion of cultural belonging and it cannot be limited to the simple action of “watching” television or consuming the products of any other medium. Consequently, “to study the audience means to take into consideration different contexts and multiple activities of cultural consumption” (Sorice 2007). In this situation it is not sufficient to study and “understand” the audience using old methodological tools and/or a simplified functionalist perspective.

Many scholars have written at length about the scientific relevance of tools of measurement. However, this, in our opinion, is a marginal problem. The question of reliability (which is certainly important from both a methodological and an ethical point of view) is less important than the more general question of the structure of audiences today. The audience has been profoundly transformed; its fragmentation but also its reconstitution into shapes that only few years ago were unthinkable obliges us to question the “status of the audience” itself.

The questions concerning the role and functions of the media public become even more delicate when we deal with the relationship between media and politics. In this case we have, at least, two directions from which the political public may be involved. As Michael Higgins (2008, 35) has stated: “One is for media to act on behalf of the public, and the other is for media to establish an arrangement in which the public have input”. This important statement by Higgins obliges us to consider also the types and qualities of public participation in the political sphere.

Brian McNair – in a fundamental book written with Matthew Hibberd and Philip Schlesinger – has analysed the main advantages for
broadening political engagement that derives from politically-based public participation programming (McNair, Hibberd, Schlesinger 2003). The first advantage of McNair’s analysis, for Higgins, is that: “such programmes present a means by which the public can have first-hand ‘representation’ in mass media in a tangible manifestation of a mediated public sphere (McNair, Hibberd, Schlesinger 2003, 31). Through television and radio – and latterly through the Internet – members of the public can enter the media apparatus to listen to their peers and offer political arguments on the basis of a shared concern in the democratic process. The second advantage stems from the opportunities of public access to those in political influence, where members of the public have the chance to submit policy makers and members of the political élite to scrutiny and questioning (Ibid., 57). A third advantage is that this form of programming might prompt what McNair et al. call the ‘mobilization’ of political publics – the possibility, that is to say, that viewers and participants will be impelled to ‘act on, or at least think about, the issue under discussion’ (Ibid., 64). Thus, “at the level at which media make a normative assessment of their own contribution to public service, giving the public a participatory role in political television both actualizes the mediated public sphere (...) and potentially contributes to solving the problem of public desengagement from formal politics” (Higgins 2008, 53-54).

If broadcast programming presents some advantages and, of course, critical points to discuss, social networks (and even many forms of media consumption such as, at least potentially, IpTv and YouTube) give the public new opportunities to become a collective subject, involved in political engagement. Some scholars think that the main logic of the social networking process is *disintermediation*, in which the public should have more opportunities to activate participatory styles of consumption. However, we would caution against an over-enthusiastic view of the possibilities offered by Web
In all our research we have clearly shown that we do not agree with the “apocalyptic” scholars (as Umberto Eco called those who see the tendencies of new media technologies and popular cultural forms in a negative light). At the same time, we want to consider a number of problems in the topic of “social participation”. Does social networking always represent a form of participatory action simply because it is based on disintermediated frames? Is political communication in Web 2.0 really based on disintermediation processes?

First of all, however, it is necessary to define what we mean when we speak about access and participation.

2. Access, Interaction, Participation

In our research we have adopted the conceptual distinction between access, interaction and participation, using a perspective close to that of Nico Carpentier (2007) and to our own earlier work (Sorice 2007) on this topic. So there are three steps: access, interaction, participation.

We can further subdivide “access” into three steps:

a) Access 1.0, in which the use of the media for public service represents a typical example. In the words of Servaes (1999: 85) “It may be defined in terms of the opportunities available to the public to choose varied and relevant programs and to have a means of feedback to transmit its reactions and demands to production organizations”. This the logic, for example, of the UK Government’s Green Paper on the BBC and public service, one of the most important examples globally of open access to TV and media.

b) Access 1.1. This can be defined from a community media perspective, as “the processes that permit users to provide...
relatively open and unedited input to the mass media” (Lewis 1993: 12). It is the logic of non-mainstream and alternative media, on which our centre (together with Osscom in Milan) has developed the first research project in Italy (Pasquali, Sorice 2005).

c) Access 2.0 means the opportunity to have the produced content published and/or broadcast and, in the same time, to have the skills to receive content and provide feedback (Carpentier 2007).

Access, of course, in all three of these definitions, is not yet “interaction”. A simple definition of interaction helps us point out the technical (but also political) topic of the “pull-technologies”. But do the “pull-technologies” really cancel out the power of the producers and distributors? Can we really control the symbolic goods – as John B. Thompson defined them – distributed by the media or do we have only an illusion of control? “Our control – as Rokeby has stated (1995: 154) – may appear absolute, but the domain of that control is externally defined. We are engaged, but exercise no power over the filtering language of interaction embedded in the interface”.

Some authors have made a semantic superimposition between interaction and involvement (Sorice 2007b; De Blasio, Sorice 2008). Involvement is one of the concepts commonly used in reception studies and in the analysis of the “consumption” process. It emphasizes particularly the relational and affective aspect implied in the reception process and it is connected to the question of balanced power. There is no co-decision making in interaction, whereas involvement is a gate towards the concept (and practice) of the relational community:

In this frame, the media consent to give a community different foundations: not only the space community but also the relational community. This means a possible shift from
ascribed belonging to affiliative belonging: In effect, relational communities are based upon involvement and performance (as in Goffman’s dramaturgical model, 1959) and the relational communities constitute the field in which we can conduct our analysis of modern communication ‘including interactions or quasi-interactions conducted via internet, broadcasting and mobile tools’ (see Moores 2005) (De Blasio and Sorice 2008).

3. From Creativity/Reproduction to Performativity/Involvement

Individual and social performances in a range of contexts are best made sense of in terms of what Anthony Giddens (1993) calls the structuration of social practices. Contemporary audiences are an example not only of the merger of creativity and reproduction but also of performativity and involvement as social practices. In all our work on media audiences we have noted that the traditional and rigid distinction between creativity and social reproduction seems to have definitively disappeared. Of course, this does not mean that there are no audiences; just that audiences are very different from some years ago. At the same time, this does not mean that the so-called active audiences are “always” composed of active participants. In the field of Web 2.0 studies, we have to consider the different ways in which one can approach and “live” social networks. It is clear, for example, that social media as Badoo, which is mainly a large dating network, are based upon forms of “tactical interaction” and do not presume a participatory communication style. In this case we have preferred to use the concept of networked individualism, coined by Manuel Castells in 2001 to describe the sociality of web culture. Networked individualism is replacing the use of other types of social formations,
such as – according to Virginia Nightingale (2007) – informal formations.

At this point a question emerged: what about the users of social networks? What is their relation with the politics that has found a new territory in the web? Are they interactive people? Or networked individualists? What are the dynamics of trust and engagement?

In order to define social participation we have used – as I said – the AIP model, proposed by Nico Carpentier (2007), which is very similar to our CMCS model of mobile consumption (Sorice 2007b). In this model, participation is considered in three senses: a) Participation in the produced content; b) Participation in the-content producing organization; c) Participation in the technology-producing organization, which means having the technical and political skills to co-decide in technology and policy.

4. Participation, mistrust and disintermediation processes: the research

For this research, we have been working in the frame of a methodological approach which is close to discursive realism, while the theoretical basis is rooted in Giddens’s theory of structuration.

The research, even if it is interdisciplinary and uses a holistic approach, presents some critical points; we have no definite answers, due to the complexity of social action produced by actors operating with knowledge and understanding as part of their consciousness. Our knowledge of the social actors feeds into their reasonable behaviour (Giddens 1984). And in this road there is the part of our research which is focused on the interrelationships between political engagement and social participation. Our theoretical starting point is that reflexivity plays an important role in the social and political practices activated in/through social networking and – even if at a
The reflexivity of social life – as Giddens has stated – consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those practices, thus constitutively altering their character” (Giddens 1990: 28). In this frame, we have used both virtual ethnography methods and traditional focus groups (with people experiencing political communication in social networking).

We have avoided the study of the relations between contents and individuals, preferring a detailed investigation of the general landscape of people’s media consumptions from the point of view of involvement and participation/activism. We will spare you the boring detailed findings of the research, but we will try to offer an overview of our work. The aim of our study was to determine the interrelationships between social networking styles and political participation (including, of course, voting, attention to Italian social and political life, promoting and signing petitions, etc.).

Many scholars think that behaviours in some social networks (primarily Facebook but also MySpace and many others) may increase political participation and civic engagement, not only online but even in interpersonal “physical” relations. Summarising, we can say that this is partially true but only in a minority percentage. We have observed four tendencies:

a. the growth of networked individualism: in this frame we can locate some examples of social networking;

b. the growth of involvement with an impact on civic attention and engagement;

c. the third tendency is very important: the growth of new subjects (traditionally distant from the political sphere) approaching politics and pre-political forms of engagement.
d. the fourth tendency (a direct consequence of the third) is the growth of networking as a tool to increase social participation but mainly in subjects who already have political and social interests.

Another finding of our research concerns the gender question: if social networking is still largely a “male thing”, the political use of it appears to be less gender-specific than we were able to predict.

4.1 Political Use of the Social Networks

Exploring the prismatic universe of the Web 2.0 spaces for Italian politics we can confirm a simple taxonomy concerning the main functions of websites, networks, blogs, etc. In the research we have found four functions:

1) Information

According to some hypotheses, the Internet (and particularly so-called Web 2.0) represents a tool which may increase the fragmentation of political debate, even reaching a diffused (sometimes dispersed) public sphere. In this view, blogs (mainly but not only) constitute networks of mutual references, creating a separate arena in which all ideas are ideologically congruent. In fact, this is not always true: although political blogs prefer to link to similar experiences of the same political orientation, it is not unusual for them to engage in dialogue with blogs of different political positions and even to share information. In this perspective, blogs and the online community represent an important space of information or – at any rate – of its social representation.

At this level the opposition between electoral information and political communication is still strong and many blogs (sometimes
abandoned after electoral competitions) seem to be in the frame of permanent campaigns.

A good example of this tendency is constituted by the blog and the websites of the US Presidential campaign of 2004 and by the YouChoose Channel, created by YouTube for the 2008 US Presidential Campaign: in Italy, this function is fulfilled by the majority of the political parties’ websites and by a number of blogs that are more or less officially linked to particular political parties.

2) Fund raising
The second function is fundraising. It is not a specific function. Rather, it seems to be a transverse characteristic of all political online networks. Many social network sites were used by candidates in the US midterm campaign of 2006 to raise money, and the same happened with the innovative presidential campaign of Barack Obama. Social networks are really useful and effective: we found that even in Italy they reach audiences in a deeper way than traditional advertising. In fact, online donors have different characteristics from traditional ones: they are younger (12 years less on average), wealthier and better educated. Moreover, they prefer to give money to the campaign, not to the candidate, and the simple “interaction” activated by email and chats makes them feel involved in fundraising and sometimes as actors fully involved in political engagement.

3) Involvement
The online communities that use the tools provided by Web 2.0 represent the most important examples. Some political YouTube channels, for example, have opened a new form of interactive (sometimes only interlocutive) political communication, such as Labour’s YouTube Channel in the UK. In Italy, we have found many interesting cases that we can fit inside this frame: Arcoiris
TV, for example, or the online social network of the Democratic Party. If the latter case represents simply a good attempt to transform the information process into a shared database of diffusive communication – sometimes still linked to a merely informational function – the first case represents an excellent example of the convergence among television, internet, blogs, social network and user-generated contents spaces. Along the same lines as Arcoiris TV are articulated “blog systems” such as *Il Cannocchiale*. Another example of a TV channel that taps the potential of Web 2.0 and its networking style is *YouDem TV*, the channel of the Democratic Party.

The social media most widely used to fulfill this function is Facebook. Many Italian political actors use it regularly. According to many US political scholars and commentators, the regular use of Facebook (not only for specific political purposes) seems to promote the creation of a shared and de-territorialized “social capital” which can increase the probability for individuals to become active citizens. Whether Facebook can really improve civic participation is not yet clear. However, it is a fact that in Italy the movement of university researchers and students against the Government in October–November 2008 used Facebook and its specific sub-communities in a massive way. The same happened for the struggle against racism and xenophobia and, conversely, in the right-wing propaganda against the so-called “communists”. In some cases, these are also good examples of mobilization, which we can define simply as social and civic participation in a locality and in social spaces and institutions.

4) Mobilization
The fourth function – mobilization (a concept used by Denis McQuail to explain the functions of media in societies of late modernity and also, as we have mentioned, by Brian McNair) is
made up of three different levels:

a. **Representation**

b. **Belonging**

c. **Action**

- **In the first case** we can place many of the tendencies we have mentioned in the use of Facebook. A typical international example is *MyBarackObama*, a social network site that has enormously increased social participation. Many respondents in our focus groups have stated that they use Facebook as a “*showcase of participation, a place where I can freely submit myself and my ideas*”, in the words of one respondent (M, 23).

- **In the second case** (mobilization as community belonging) we can place some important experiences like the Italian *MeetUp* movement promoted by the politically active actor Beppe Grillo and the social network brand represented by *Anna Adamolo*. Beppe Grillo’s blog has been changing over the last few years into a social network very similar to *Meetup*, the social network in the USA that was an important tool for the campaign of Howard Dean in 2004. The aims of that site were to coordinate the activities of social groups (not only virtual) in order to activate face-to-face meetings. This particular type of hybrid community – E2F (electronic to face) as many scholars call it – represents an excellent example of how social networks complete the “*mobilization as community belonging*” function. We can consider the Meetup groups as new form of activism. In Italy the movement promoted by Beppe Grillo has also attempted to transform itself into a “party”, presenting its
electoral lists in the general election of 2008. At the same time, the failure of this movement indicates the divergence that still exists between mobilization as action and mobilization as a form of elective belonging.

The case of Anna Adamolo is more interesting. We studied it in the last days of 2008, when we ran some focus groups on this new expression of mobilization. Anna Adamolo is an anagram of Onda Anomala (abnormal wave), the name of the new student movement, and it is also a collective name which signs petitions, manifestations, etc. A toolkit with the Anna Adamolo brand is still available online. On November 14th 2008, Anna Adamolo even created a ghost website which was an alternative ministerial website. In Anna Adamolo’s blog, one could read: “From today the site www.ministérioistruzione.net becomes the site of the new minister, because we don’t like the former minister. But more than this we want to dispel the old ministry also from Google, so we ask everyone to participate in googlebombing against the former Minister of Education, Mariastella Gelmini, linking www.ministérioistruzione.net address with the words ministry of education”. It represents an interesting example of mobilization and, at the same time, it constitutes a border between mobilization as community belonging and mobilization as action, in the style of unconventional and guerrilla marketing.

• The third case of the mobilization function – mobilization as action – seems to be taking its first steps in Italy. Anna Adamolo represents a movement towards social network sites as sites of political engagement and social action but
there is still an evident split between community belonging and “action”, in the sense of political engagement in social and institutional spaces. Nonetheless, the most recent events seem to be shifting social networking towards the activation of political action in real territory and the development of social practices.

We propose a schematic representation of what we have just said. In the schema we have crossed the three levels of the model AIP with the four functions of social networking.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Access</th>
<th>Information</th>
<th>Fundraising</th>
<th>Involvement</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social curiosity</td>
<td>Symbolic involvement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Ie: Blogs (1st generation)</em></td>
<td><em>Ie: many social networks sites</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>Information exchanges</td>
<td>Representational belonging</td>
<td>Civic Attention</td>
<td>Ie: Facebook, Arcoiris TV</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Ie: Blogs (1st generation)</em></td>
<td><em>Ie: many social networks sites</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Information Producing</td>
<td>Social engagement</td>
<td>Community (group) belonging</td>
<td>Ie: Anna Adamolo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Ie: Facebook, Democratic Party social network</em></td>
<td><em>Ie: many social networks sites</em></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1. Communication Styles and Social Functions of Social Networks

The definitions used for the taxonomy resulting from the table are a simplified representation of more complex phenomena. In the last ten
years, participation has suffered some irreversible changes and, as Pippa Norris has emphasized (2007), these might be summarized as follows:

a) a general disenchantment with political parties by the electorate, manifested by a clear anti-party sentiment and a decline in membership in these organizations;

b) a more general decline in the significance of the traditional agencies of political participation in favor of new ones, characterized by more fluid boundaries, in the double sense of allowing easier entry and exit from the group and an extension that goes beyond national borders. These new agencies have a structure that aims to involve members in social changes and not only in traditional politics through social actions such as boycott actions and new lifestyle promotion;

c) the rise of cause-oriented activism, characterized by goals related to a single aspect of social life: consider also – in different way – the success of the “causes application” on Facebook.

The table in Fig. 1 shows the presence of at least nine different “models” of social networks used for political communication. In our research on the relationship between individuals and political communication in Facebook, we drew a map derived from cognitive-behavioural responses to interviews and verbalizations of the participants in focus groups. From the map – obviously the findings of a software-based method, not immune to criticism and therefore to be interpreted merely as a business tool – one finds two main styles which can easily be generalized and a border area of specific behaviours. The first style is that of the subjects who – with different nuances – show interest and knowledge of the social and political sphere (the “engaged”), whereas the second behavioural style is adopted by the people who instead manifest a certain skepticism about the horizontal nature of the relationship between citizens and politics in Facebook (the “lukewarm”), even if they consider positively the experiences of so-called Web 2.0. These subjects show a strong
absence of trust on political topics (“all politicians are just opportunists”, F, 29) and their use of social media seems to be limited to winning the electorate’s confidence.

To these two macro-trends we must add, as we said, a large border area, represented by those entities that use the political potential of the network, but at the same time consider it exhausted in the network. The two (plus one) tendencies can be superimposed on the findings emerging from Table 1. The result is shown in the table in Fig. 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Access</th>
<th>Information</th>
<th>Fundraising</th>
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<td>Community (group) belonging</td>
<td>Political Participation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 2. Communication styles and social functions of the social networks. People and behavioural logics.
Legend: yellow = lukewarm (tiepidi); orange = border area; blue = engaged (impegnati).

As we can see in this table, the different behaviours and their positions are partially predicted (De Blasio and Sorice 2009).

In particular, the “engaged” seem not to adopt “front stage” behaviours (typical of traditional political mediation) replaced by disintermediation practices; the lukewarm people seem more inclined
to consider Facebook a simple evolution of political mediation. In reality, looking at the findings in depth we can observe contradictory phenomena even among those people who most frequently use social networks as a place of knowledge, consensus and call for political action. In particular, the majority of our respondents (and subjects participating in the focus groups), do not underline the presence of real mechanisms of disintermediation, but a transformation of political mediation from vertical to horizontal and dialogic communication. It is difficult to say, at the moment, whether our findings are also the result of the transformation of the “party-form” or whether they are only a “meaning-effect” deriving from the relational characteristics of the social networks (Facebook particularly).

In “civic attention” and in “community belonging” we find many of the new experiences of political participation in Italy, from opposition to the racist and xenophobic positions of the Northern League (Lega Nord) to the many forms of antagonistic engagement against Berlusconi. But these forms rarely become social commitment beyond the Internet, and there is therefore a risk of maintaining the gap between the imagined nation and the real one. In other words, the disintermediation processes don’t seem to transform themselves quickly into new kinds of political intermediation. At least not always. At the same time audiences – even if surely no longer passive – seem only partially “participants”.

4.2 Trust and Participation

We studied the eight focus groups, putting the respondents’ verbalizations across two axes of continuity:

- a) the TRUST continuum
- b) the PARTICIPATION continuum

We obtained the following findings (as described in Fig. 3):
The findings that emerge from the focus groups confirm that social media seem to improve disintermediation processes in the relations between citizens and political actors. At the same time, this trend is not always evident and in some cases a new form of re-intermediation replaces the old one. The dynamics of trust seem to play an important role in the mechanisms of legitimation of political actors. In other words, if the new subjects of politics develop trust mechanisms within the same logic of “connectedness”, people more traditionally sensitive to politics (such as the cynics) feel the need for new mechanisms of intermediation: non-traditional ones, not exercised by traditional political parties, but still present and active.

Thanks to these considerations we can argue that - contrary to what many say – the social networks are not merely containers of political issues but are, at the same time, frame, content and tool of legitimization.
In particular, the majority of our focus group respondents highlight not so much the presence of disintermediation processes, but a transformation of political mediation into horizontal and "dialogical" communication styles. It is not clear, at the moment, whether this result is an effect deriving from the transformation of the party-form and, more generally, from the radical re-shaping of the political community or whether it is just a "meaning-effect" coming from the relational architecture of the social networks (Facebook in particular).

A special case, still under analysis, is represented by the practices adopted in Second Life. We waited to find a good participation of the Italian political actors in the metaverse experience (although surely not as good as in the US). Our research shows relatively little enthusiasm for representational experiences of political communication in Italy. In this case, our research (still in progress on this particular topic) is highlighting a different use of political communication comparing with social networking: it seems that the metaverse lends itself to the rediscovery of negotiation, a function of political communication, whose outlines were already highlighted by Paolo Mancini in 1990.
The “emotional public – an expression used, for other but not so different, purposes by Michael Higgins (2008, 106-109) – of Facebook seems to be the most interesting actor in the new political sphere and the real agent of change of political communication. Whether it will be able to play a role in preserving democracy is another story.
References

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ITALIAN POLITICS IN THE WEB 2.0: participation, mistrust and disintermediation processes

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