Ipsa International Conference, Luxembourg 2010
Panel: European Elections and the Internet

EUROPEAN ELECTIONS IN THE ITALIAN WEB SPHERE: CAMPAIGNING 2.0?[1]

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Abstract

This article investigates the use of web 2.0 during the European elections campaign in Italy. The research was articulated in two phases: an analysis of candidates' websites and use of web 2.0 tools, on the one hand, and the monitoring of the campaign within social media (Facebook and YouTube). Though a persisting divide exists in the distributions of parties and coalitions online, most candidates who have a personal website have integrated web 2.0 tools. It is seemingly a strategic appropriation and adaptation of web 2.0, resulting in a hybrid communication model, in between 1.0 and 2.0. The campaigning activity on social media, instead, seems innovative insofar as it enables a re-embedding and re-localization of previously centralized and nationally coordinated campaigns.

1. Introduction

[1] An earlier version of the part on social media has been presented by Giovanna Mascheroni at the ESA Conference in Lisbon, ISCTE University, 2-5 September 2009. The article has been accepted by the CEU Political Science Journal and will be available online from Mid April. The work has been shared by the two authors in any part. Anyway, Giovanna Mascheroni is responsible for par. 1, 4, and 5; Sara Minucci for par. 2 and 3.

During the 2008 presidential campaign in the United States, more than half the population (and three quarters of internet users) went online to get news on the campaign, and 59% of internet users received and shared information on the campaign and political messages via email, social network sites (SNS), instant messaging and SMS (Smith 2009). Though a systematic investigation of "online political users" and their practices during election campaigns is still lacking in the Italian context, nonetheless there are signs of a growing relevance of the internet as a source of political information, and of social network sites as a place for sharing political messages and mobilizing offline activities. As regards political information, according to a recent survey on news media consumption, 34,7% of the entire population (58,9% of those aged 15-24, and 60,2% of those aged 25-34 years old) trusts the internet as the most independent source of information[2]. Meanwhile, political uses of social network sites are also increasing, as the case of the No-B Day has recently shown[3].

These practices are part of the emerging "convergence culture" (Jenkins 2006) which is significantly altering the boundaries between the production and consumption of media content: thanks to the applications usually labelled as "web 2.0" and characterised by an "architecture of participation" (O'Reilly 2005), users are increasingly

[2] demos & pi, *XXIII Osservatorio sul Capitale Sociale degli Italiani. Gli italiani e l'informazione* (demos & pi, 2009) [online report]; available at ww.demos.it/a00355.php

[3] No-B Day (No Berlusconi Day) was a demonstration organized by a group of bloggers through a Facebook group (called "Una manifestazione nazionale per chiedere le dimissioni di Berlusconi" and counting 370.519 members) and a website (www.noberlusconiday.org). It originated against the Prime Minister's attempts to pass laws giving himself (and some other top Italian officials) immunity from prosecution, and called for Berlusconi's resignation. The demonstration, which took place in several Italian cities and abroad on December 5th 2009, mobilized around one million people (350.000 only in Rome), gave rise to the so-called Purple Movement, still active in the defence of the Italian Constitution, and in reporting the Prime Minister's involvement in several trials.

co-producers or "produsers" (Bruns 2008) in that they tend to share, manipulate and re-assemble media content, or produce a consistent amount of user generated content (UGC) online. These grassroots practices are changing audiences' relationships not only with cultural industries and their products, but also with politics and traditional social institutions (Jenkins 2006).

For politicians, web 2.0 and social media represent a further public space to disseminate their political messages and to reach the dispersed audiences: since the last presidential campaign in the U.S. a vast array of candidates and politicians in Western democracies have opened a profile in Facebook or Twitter and have incorporated web 2.0 tools in their websites. At the same time, nonetheless, these new media pose some challenges to the traditional styles and patterns of political communication. As some recent studies on the use of web 2.0 by political parties in European countries point out (Kalnes 2009, Jackson and Lilleker 2009, Zittel 2009), what is under threat is precisely the control over the flow of information traditionally held by parties or candidates in their top-down communication process.

Drawing on the robust literature on the use of new technologies during election campaigns[4], and having its roots in the field of internet studies, this article aims to provide a picture of the electoral

[4] for the use of the web by Italian political parties and candidates see: Sara Bentivegna, *Campagne elettorali in rete* (Bari: Laterza, 2006). For the parties' web strategies in European elections see: Warner Lusoli, "The Internet and the European Parliament elections: Theoretical perspectives, empirical investigations and proposals for research", *Information Polity*, 10 (3- 4), (2005): 153-163 and Nicholas W. Jankowski, Kirsten Foot, Randy Kluver and Steve Schneider, "The Web and the 2004 EP election: Comparing political actor Web sites in 11 EU Member States", *Information Polity*, 10 (3- 4), (2005): 165-176. For the role of the Internet in the U.S: campaigns see: Bruce Bimber, Richard Davies, Campaigning Online: The Internet in U.S. Elections (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) and Robert Denton, *The 2008 Presidential Campaign: A Communication Perspective* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

web sphere surrounding the 2009 European elections campaign. To answer this question, we investigated two related aspects of the relationship between social media and politics: on the one hand we provided an analysis of the online presence of candidates from the main parties and coalitions running for a seat in the European Parliament; on the other we mapped the social discourses around the campaign issues and political messages concerning the EP elections which were disseminated in social media, and especially on *Facebook*. The choice to focus on Facebook is stems from its wide adoption by Italian internet users: this social network site, the most popular in Italy, has grown exponentially in 2008, increasing its community from the 216,000 registered users at the end of January 2008 to the 10,047,580 members at June 2009[5].

Candidates' websites and blogs have been monitored during the campaign (from the end of April to the first half of June) and then again between September and October, in order to distinguish among still active sites, inactive ones and those no longer online[6]. We analysed the websites produced by political candidates for the EP elections following - and adapting to the Italian electoral system and campaign context - the features which Xenos and Foot (2007) recognize as distinctive of a "web campaigning activity" as opposed to a more traditional online transposition of offline campaigning tools and practices. The authors identify some specific features of political candidates' online communication that manifest a deeper understanding of the web and a more sophisticated use of its potentials, while a variety of online campaigning activities represent still a mere adaptation of traditional campaigning to the web environment (*ibi*: 58). Analysing and comparing how Italian candidates use the web and adopt web 2.0 tools leads to identify a

[5] The Facebook community is still growing: it reached 12,450,000 members at the end of October, half of the internet population in Italy. These data are provided by Facebook ads.

[6] The final sample includes both active and inactive websites and blogs, with the exception of those which have been deactivated after summer 2009.

continuum of political websites according to their degree of interactivity – and the degree of users' participation to the production of content that the sites affords - and multimediality – the extent to which they combine textual and audiovisual materials to form a multimodal communication.

Facebook data were identified on the basis of a search through the descriptor "European elections 2009" and monitored during a three month period (March - June 2009). The data collected consisted of Facebook groups, causes and events[7], and were analysed combining quantitative and qualitative analysis in order to draw a comprehensive picture of the representation of the campaign in Facebook. Our goal was to identify the issues, actors and voices represented, the relationship between issues debated online and those in the media agenda, and the involvement of Italian citizens in the EP elections.

2. The 2009 European Election in Italy: an overview

Italian citizens voted for electing the 72 Italian new members of the European Parliament (MEPs) the 6th and 7th of June. The electoral law foresees a proportional method with the possibility of indicating candidates' names (the number of possible preferences is different among the five Italian electoral districts) and it also indicates the minimum percentage of vote (4%) necessary to a party to elect its candidates.

Only five parties obtained more than 4% of votes: Popolo della Libertà (PdL, the centre-right party of the Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi) 35.2% - 26 elected candidates – Partito Democratico (PD, the main centre-left party) 26.1% - 21 elected MEPs – Lega

[7] We will focus here on Facebook groups, since events primarily promoted offline campaigns activities, while causes were only 16, poorly supported, and largely overlapped with the most debated issues in groups.

Nord (LN, the right party that governs together with PdL) 10.2 % - 9 elected candidates – Italia dei Valori (IdV, the single issue party manly focused on justice that is part of the opposition to the Government) 8% - 7 elected candidates – and Unione di Centro (Udc, the Catholic centre wing party opposing the Government) 6.51% - 5 elected MPs.
In our study we analysed also three other parties: Rifondazione Comunista[8] (RC, the main left wing party, not represented in the Italian Parliament) 3,3%, Sinistra e Libertà (SeL, a left wing party, born from formerly Rifondazione Comunista, Comunisti Italiani, Verdi – the Green party – and left Pd members) 3,1%, Lista Bonino-Pannella (the Radical Party) 2,4%.

3. Lost in technology. Italian candidates on the web

Chart 1- Online candidates

	online	website	blog
PD	79,16%	78,94%	21,05%
PDL	66,17%	91,11%	8,88%
UDC	36,11%	88,46%	11,53%
LN	22,72%	93,33%	6,66%
IdV	75,92%	65,85%	34,14%
SeL	40,90%	62,96%	37,03%
PRC	26,47%	66,66%	33,33%
Radical	14,81%	25,00%	75,00%

The analysis of the online presence of candidates in the 2009 European election shows a scarce use of the Internet: a result that Italian candidates share with Italian and foreigners parties studied in previous work (Bentivegna 2006, Xenos and Foot 2007, Vaccari

[8] In 2009 European Election Rifondazione Comunista was part of a coalition in which there were also two other left wing parties, Sinistra Europea (European Left) and Comunisti Italiani (Italian Comunists).

2009). Nonetheless, there is a growth in comparison to the last European election in 2004, when only the 19.7% of the candidates were online (Bentivegna 2006: 14).

The low online presence of candidates is not homogeneous across different parties. This confirms, on the one hand, that parties which were already more present online (Bentivegna 2006) are still the most represented on the Internet and so have a greater familiarity with the medium. This results in a kind of "political digital divide" among parties, already pointed out in other studies (Margolis and Resnick 2000)[9]. On the other hand, our findings demonstrate that the relationship politicians have with the web still fits a traditional model of political communication, mainly focused on a top-down unidirectional diffusion of contents (Jackson and Lilleker 2009, Vaccari 2009). Furthermore, the resistance, or scarcity, of direct interaction with the public is also confirmed by the infrequent use of blogs.

Chart 2- The "web campaigning" (most relevant data)[10]

	PDL	PD	IDV	UDC	LN	PRC	SeL	Radical	TOTAL	% (n=23
Link to the party's web site	31	35	27	16	10	12	9	6	146	61,6%
Link to external web sites	30	40	29	17	9	12	8	6	151	63,7%
Link to candidate's page on Facebook, Twitter	28	35	28	11	6	9	4	5	125	52,7%

[9] Michael Margolis and David Resnick, *Politics as Usual: The "Cyberspace Revolution"* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications 2000) quoted in Sara Bentivegna, *Campagne elettorali*: 45

[10] The coding table included more aspects and features of candidates' websites, but we preferred to focus here only on those related to web 2.0 and the level of participation afforded to users. For more information on the database, please write the authors.

Audiovisual materials	27	45	36	16	4	13	5	7	152	64,1%
Capability of linking articles to visitors' site/ Facebook/Twitter	2	11	5	0	0	2	1	1	22	9,2%
Branding	3	2	8	0	0	2	2	0	17	7,1%

The same communicative model persists when looking at the adoption of "web campaigning" tools. As a matter of fact there is a gap between a minority of candidates who use a variety of resources in a synergic and sophisticated and a majority of them who incorporate in their sites some web 2.0 tools and use them in a superficial way. In our sample, the most common tools of "web campaigning" are the presence of links to external sites different from the one of the candidate's party and the availability of audiovisual material (used in 63.7% of sites and blogs), the link to the party's web site (61.6%), the link to the candidate's profile on two of the most famous SNS, Facebook and Twitter (52.3%). This is an interesting element because it remarks the importance the SNS gained in a short period of time even among politicians. Nonetheless their use seems to be in relation with the need of creating the illusion of a closeness with citizens: in fact, only 9.28% of candidates fully exploits the capabilities of SNS to spread messages in a viral way by introducing the possibility of linking sites' or blogs' contents to visitors' pages on Facebook and Twitter. Also the chance of branding other web pages with candidate's promotional materials – that is part of the same viral diffusion mechanisms typical of the online "world of mouth" – is scarcely used (7.1%).

The "web campaign" is mostly used by PD's candidates and, in a short distance, by those of IdV, while these tools are less common among PdL's candidates. This result makes possible to hypothesize, at least in the case of PD, the existence of a centralized strategy in

the candidates' use of the Internet. The IdV's performance on the web can be explained also by the "historical" online presence of its leader.

In evaluating the PdL's online campaign it is important to point out that, since the party is characterised by a strong and well identified leadership, it has a strong interest in concentrating attention on its leader. In fact, Silvio Berlusconi does not have a personal web site since it coincides with the PdL's site, but his name is present in a number of official fandom sites that echo the party line[11].

Finally, by analysing the distribution of the use of the web 2.0 among parties, we see that the most active candidates in online campaigning are those who already are the best known nationally: thus they reinforce their popularity also by using the Internet.

4. The discourses on the European Elections campaign in web 2.0

Chart 3 – Groups on Facebook

Group's typology	**N**	**members at 3/03/09**	**members at 5/04/09**	**members at 3/05/09**	**members at 7/06/09**
In support of candidates	143	369	1.360	11.097	19.778
In support of political parties and movements	47	5.752	8.292	24.842	29.572
single issues	148	14.244	34.568	58.064	62.902

[11] Such examples are www.silvioberlusconifanclub.org and www.forzasilvio.it. The community www.forzasilvio.it had regular and intense activity during the electoral campaign. After the campaign, activity became more sporadic and linked to critical political moments such as the failure of Lodo Alfano (the law to guarantee immunity to the four most important offices of the State, including the Prime Minister) by the Constitutional Court (October 6th, 2009) and the wounding of Silvio Berlusconi in Milan (December 13th, 2009).

During the three month period of our monitoring, from the beginning of March to June the 7th, 410 groups concerning the European elections were born in Facebook: the vast majority (265 groups) were minor groups, counting less than one hundred members; 130 groups' users were in between one hundred and one thousand; and only 22 groups could count on more than one thousand members. The above table shows the main categories of groups, with groups supporting single candidates and those debating single issues prevailing over groups campaigning for political parties or political movements[12]. The remaining 72 groups were parodist or offensive groups, while others were only partially related to EP elections[13]. The emerging picture, then, is that of a high fragmentation of the discourses related to the EP elections in a variety of groups and themes. A deeper analysis, nonetheless, highlights how the greater participation – that is the number of members joining groups - and the majority of groups deal with a few specific issues.

The topics and actors represented in the single issue groups challenge the idea of social media as constituting an 'alternative' public sphere: indeed, the most discussed issues largely reproduce the media agenda in the weeks before elections. The largest groups, respectively the first (European Elections + Referendum: against waste[14]) and the third (Join elections and referendum on 6-7 June/let's save 400 million euros![15]), counting 19,081 and 11,611 members, were born

[12] We labelled political movement associations – such as the Italian Movement for Disabled People, whose group was the fifth largest with 5,336 members – or ideological groups – such as the group calling for a single radical right-wing coalition- not referring to a single party.

[13] It is the case of groups dealing with local elections, which took place in several cities and areas on the same day. Indeed many groups referred to the "European and local elections" while concerning the local dimension only.

[14] The original title is: "Europee+referendum: contro gli sprechi".

[15] The original title is: "Unificare elezioni e referendum 6-7giugno! Risparmiamo 400Milioni di euro!"

just immediately after the earthquake in Abruzzo on April 6th to promote an election day which combined European elections, local elections and a referendum to devolve the conspicuous sum that could be saved for the reconstruction of L'Aquila and its surroundings. The earthquake represented a turning point in the discussions on the electoral campaign both offline and online.

A second major issue is represented by the controversial candidacy of the Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who chose to run for the European Parliament (EP) as leader of the PdL in spite of his institutional role. This choice produced a split in public opinion, divided among those supporting and those against his candidacy. On Facebook the opponents prevailed, with the group "we are not going to vote for Berlusconi at the European Elections"[16] growing exponentially from 232 members registered in the first week of April to the 11,961 participants by June 7th and taking second place among the most popular groups, and the group "Those who will NOT vote for Silvio at next European elections"[17] counting 3,904 members and being the seventh most populated group. Also popular was the quest for legality and opposition to political corruption, embodied in the groups in support of De Magistris[18] or Rita Borsellino's[19] candidacies; in groups against the candidacy of convicted or investigated politicians; and in the "meta-group" gathering all groups in support of Marco Travaglio[20]. Overall, these data are consistent with much of the research on EP election campaigns (Grossi 1996, Vand der Eijk and Franklin 1995), underscoring how the main focus

[16] original title: "Alle elezioni Europee noi NON VOTIAMO BERLUSCONI!!!!"
[17] original title: "Quelli che alle prossime elezioni europee NON voteranno per Silvio!"
[18] Luigi de Magistris is a former prosecutor, well-known for his involvement in trials against political corruption which involved well-known civil society actors.
[19] Rita Borsellino is the sister of a former judge killed by mafia.
[20] He is a popular Italian journalist, whose main areas of interest have been political and judiciary issues. He became well-known for his participation in popular talk shows and for investigating Berlusconi's business.

in both the campaign and its media coverage tends to be on national issues, or on European issues framed in a national perspective. Once again this deadline has proven to be a pretext to continue discussion of national issues and to assess the popularity of the government.

Turning to the other two main typologies of groups, as in mainstream media, so in Facebook, the activity of campaigning in support of single candidacies or political parties gained visibility only in May. Among these more campaign-oriented groups, we can note a stronger success achieved by radical left-wing parties and extreme right-wing parties: the official group of Sinistra e Libertà reached 9,511 members, and the group supporting the Lista comunista e anticapitalista (PRC and PDCI) 4,570 members, while the group invoking a single extreme right list declined in popularity during the monitoring, stopping at 2,356. This means that minor and extra-parliamentary parties, and minor political orientations, were overrepresented compared to PdL, Pd, Lega Nord and Idv, whose candidates won a seat in the European Parliament. Therefore, the higher visibility and participation gained by the above mentioned groups suggests that Facebook users, at least those interested in the EP campaign, tended to clump around either the 'radical left' or the 'radical right' pole. These findings are consistent with studies on the representation of different political orientations in the blogosphere, which highlight the political polarization of internet political users, or, alternatively, the social media's potential for reinforcing pre-existing political polarization (Lim and Kann 2008; Farrell, Lawrence and Sides 2008).

Regarding single candidates' campaigning, as already mentioned, strong visibility was reached by Rita Borsellino and De Magistris. Candidates from Pd and Pdl were also well represented, as were candidates from Lega Nord and UDC, perhaps balancing their otherwise low effort in "institutional" web campaigning with profiles and groups in Facebook. This use of social network sites by

otherwise invisible candidates, and the low membership their supporting groups reach – usually under one hundred members - also suggest that in political communication, as well as in interpersonal relationships, social network sites tend to be used to communicate with one's extended social network, that is people with whom someone has an offline connection (Livingstone 2008). These groups are strongly localized, thus enabling local candidates, who have limited, if any, visibility at the national level and in mainstream media, to manage a low-cost, highly personalized campaign. In this respect, the use of social media balances the trend of previous electoral campaigns, which have been deeply de-territorialized and centralized in recent years due to the transformations of the Italian electoral system and political communication (Bentivegna 2006), by re-localizing them. This is one side of the potential "e-ruption" (Kalnes 2009) enabled by the adoption of web 2.0 in political communication: a potentially disruptive effect in that it undermines the centralization of parties' campaigning activities, coordinated and organized at a national level, while giving back to single candidates the management of a localized and personalized campaign now conducted both online and offline.

5. Conclusive remarks

The European elections campaign in Italy has been characterised by a persisting divide, at both a quantitative and qualitative level, among political candidates and parties in their use of the web. Nonetheless, this campaign has also witnessed a strong popularity of social media tools, especially Facebook profiles, among candidates' online activities.

The adoption of new media doesn't imply, *per se*, more efficient communication nor improved or transformed campaigning communicative models (Bentivegna 2006[)]. Web 2.0 main features – namely the convergence of production and consumption, and the emerging participatory culture (Jenkins 2006) – are visibly

conflicting with a traditional political communication model understood as a top-down one-way flow of information. Web 2.0 has the potential to radically change this well-established model at least along two lines: vertically, in that it creates a two-way flow of communication where citizens are empowered and become co-producers of content; and horizontally, in the management of the campaign activity, in that national organizations abdicate control and management of the campaign to local party branches. Considering these two potential disruptive impacts of social media on political communication, the monitoring of European elections online in Italy provides some evidence of the use of web 2.0 as a tool for re-localizing campaign and empowering less visible, local political candidates. As far as communication among political actors and citizens is concerned, instead, we can observe a persisting gap of interactivity and participation when comparing the online communication strategies produced by candidates and the grassroots practices that social media users usually engage in. As Coleman and Blumler put it, "one of the most common mistakes made by top-down political leaders is to imagine online communication as a form of broadcasting" (Coleman and Blumler 2009: 181). Candidates seem to strategically adopt and adapt web 2.0 infrastructure and tools, without losing control over the communication flow: what emerges is a hybrid online presence, which has been successfully labelled as "web 1.5" (Jackson and Lilleker 2009). Web 1.5 refers to the "extensive use of the architecture of participation, but much less use of the community's democratic structure" (*ibi*: 248).

Looking at the EP elections' representation in *Facebook*, we have seen that groups tend to replicate online the key issues of the campaign offline – and its coverage in mainstream media – and to mobilize participation only in relation to domestic problems. Besides the persistent use of the campaign as a pretext to discuss national issues, the analysis of Facebook groups reveals another characteristic of the "second-order"(Reif and Schmitt 1980) nature of the European

elections: the limited involvement of citizens, reflected in the low number of members who joined these groups, when compared to other online mobilization[21].

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