Pandemic in the Instagram Era. The Visual Analysis of Italian Mayors' Communication[*]

Alessandra Micalizzi[a], Tiziana Piccioni[b], Claudio Riva[c]

Abstract

Over the last decade, political communication has been affected by a process of disintermediation thanks to the appropriation of social media not only by the n*etworked citizens*, but also by politicians, who are increasingly interested in exploring new forms of engagement and participation in the Res Publica (see among others Parisi and Rega, 2010). The opportunities hidden within these new forms of direct communication appeared more clearly during the pandemic crisis when citizens primarily were looking for correct information, practical instructions, and a kind of control of collective anxiety and fear (Jain et al., 2021).

The paper aims at presenting the main results of a wider research project conducted by the University of Padua, focused on the role of visual communication in social media platforms of Italian mayors. The study was based on the visual analysis of 54 mayors' profiles on Instagram between the 21st of April and the 21st of June. Moreover, we carried out 25 in-depth interviews with a subsample of local administrators. Among other goals, we identified the use (pragmatic vs. ideological one) of communicative threads about the pandemic.

Keywords: visual communication, COVID-19, social media communication, politics, Instagram, visual studies, mayors' profiles.

---

[*] This article should be considered as collective elaboration, especially for the paragraphs 1 and 4. However, paragraphs 1.1 and 1.2 are to be attributed to Claudio Riva, paragraphs 2 and 3.2 to Tiziana Piccioni, and paragraphs 2.1, 3 and 3.1 to Alessandra Micalizzi.

[a] Università Telematica Pegaso, Italy.

[b] Istituto Universitario Salesiano di Venezia, Italy.

[c] Università degli Studi di Padova, Italy.

1. The impact of (visual) social media in politic practices

With the transformations of the communication ecosystem, the practice of sharing images is changing, both from a general point of view and in specific arenas—in particular in the political arena, which is the focus of this paper.

In general, the images shared on social networks by different kinds of users contribute to creating and maintaining relationships, constructing social identities, and defining the heritage of collective meanings; each image contributes to reaching a specific goal, covering some meanings and excluding others, in the general process of social reproduction (Stocchetti, 2011).

At a more superficial level, contemporary communicative contexts are articulated as a field of continuous competition between images. This is also true in the political arena, with the aim of attracting attention (Scammell, 2015, 2016) and exploiting the images' ability to stimulate emotions and increase commitment in the contemporary situation of citizens' growing disinterest in politics (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). The development and spread of predominantly visual social networks, with the support of mobile devices that are increasingly configured as devices for creating and sharing images on the Web, highlights the need to take into account the theoretical as well as the methodological implications of this phase (Gemini, 2015).

Therefore, we have to consider the role of social reproduction that images play, as well as the critical implications of a digital media landscape that seems to favour democracy thanks to its new kinds of collective participation (Novelli, 2018). This concerns the phenomenon of targeting and segmentation of content with filters that favour the formation of ideological discussion (Riva, 2021); but also the broader phenomenon of the *platformisation* of social life, in which social networks are interpretable as means through which identity and models of the good life are promoted, maintaining and reinforcing their dominant character (Bucher, 2012; van Dijk, 2013).

We know that the digitisation of communication has also transformed the way politics is done. On the one hand, the role of audiences and, in particular, voters is becoming increasingly participatory (Riva, 2021); the possibilities for people to connect with each other, to express and exchange opinions as well as to access information globally and influence each other in actions to support politicians, are now reaching such significant levels that they can affect the fates of a political candidate (Graff, 2008; Golbeck et al., 2010).

On the other hand, social media have brought to a different level the practices and methodologies of opinion gathering, the promotion and marketing of the political proposals (Sorice, 2020), and the confrontation between the political system and *citizens/networked publics* (Boccia Artieri, 2012; boyd, 2010). In particular, the image in all its mediated declinations is one of

the pivotal elements of political communication, starting with the use of television as a medium to reach one's electorate (Farkas & Bene, 2021; Schill, 2012).

With social media, the strategy of politicians is further enriched with visual elements (Russmann et al., 2019) thanks to the core characteristics of these specific digital environments.

1.1 Pandemic and communication strategies

In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, citizens have seen many areas of their daily lives disrupted, finding themselves forced, especially in the first phase of the pandemic, to live exclusively within the closest territorial context, that of their municipality or neighbourhood. In this sense, public policies on the part of the national government and regional and municipal administrations have profoundly altered the relationship between citizens and their community of belonging (Boccia Artieri, 2020; Di Gregorio, 2020; Iannelli et al., 2020; Moroni, 2020).

More specifically, the communication of the pandemic had the same characteristics of an infodemic, with a multiplicity of information circulating that was frequently not completely reliable, or even outright false. This peculiar vicious circle pushed citizens to rely on direct sources to search for "sure" and up-to-date information on the pandemic situation in their territory and on the measures adopted by the public authorities (Bordignon et al., 2020; Vigevani, 2020). Among the direct sources were the local administrators themselves and their communication channels (Castriota et al., 2020; Garavaglia et al., 2021): together with newspapers and territorial TV broadcasters, the main channels for disseminating information were the social media, with the mayors' Facebook pages and profiles taking on a prominent role as an answer to the need to communicate the often complicated and sometimes even contradictory directives of national and local public authorities addressed to citizens. By transforming themselves into true means of institutional communication, administrators became important mediators between political decisions and the process of construction of the public opinion within the various local public spheres (Cavallaro et al., 2022). In order to describe this phenomenon and above all to distinguish its peculiar characteristics from the public sphere described by Appadurai (1996), Davis (2019) and other scholars (Schleisinger, 2020) uses the label post-public sphere that "refers to the phenomenon of change (disruption) in the public space that has led demos to enter a new communication arena that is different and does not even relate to the old public space" (Azizah, 2021, p. 32).

Cavallaro et al. (2022) argued that the use of social media by institutional actors during the COVID-19 pandemic is part of the type of communication that allowed rulers, whether national or local, to reduce the tendentially top-down nature of institutional communication (Bonsón et al., 2019) and to disseminate information, provide guidance, and enhance the transparency of decisions, thus increasing the legitimacy of their actions over the citizenry (Guillamón et al., 2016). Landi et al. (2021), for example, in a study on Facebook comments on government pages, show that public bodies that were able to establish an active and continuous dialogue received fewer critical remarks and had a comment section that was less exposed to fake news. Social media were also useful for monitoring evolving situations, observing public opinion through the identification of public needs intervening in misinformation and rumours, and reducing the uncertainty that can arise in rapidly changing crisis contexts. In this sense, social media has become part of the health strategy just as much as social distancing or the use of personal protective equipment (Han et al., 2020).

Within the framework of studies on the mediatisation of political communication, our study focuses on visual aspects in digital contexts. It helps to define the important role of social media in shaping the practices of political discursiveness and creating spaces for the definition of practices of political discursiveness and spaces for direct interlocution between citizens and political representatives (Mazzoleni, 2012, 2021; Sorice, 2016).

1.2 Personalisation in the politics of local administrators

Among the less-explored aspects, the visual political communication at the municipal level is particularly interesting. The mechanisms of mediatisation that affect the sphere of consensus play out not only at the national level, but are also increasingly identifiable in the dynamics of interaction between media, citizens, and the local political system. At the regional and municipal level, in fact, some of the mechanisms of mediatisation that already characterise national politics are found and sometimes accentuated: the polarisation of positions (Campus, 2020; Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009), the strategic study of the message (Cacciotto, 2019; Diamanti, 2020), consensus analysis (Diamanti, 2009; Natale, 2009), and the digitalisation of leadership and communication (Calise & Musella, 2019; Crisanti & Sensi, 2021; Giansante, 2014; Nunziata, 2021; Riva, 2021).

More specifically, electoral campaigns for the election of mayors particularly bring about significant forms of personalisation of politics (Calise, 2010; Bordignon, 2013; Legnante, 1999). This is due to the greater weakness of

parties in municipal elections and the emergence of personal civic lists, led by leaders who shift the focus from the political and administrative level to the contest between personalities.

Personalisation dynamics generate new forms of *micro-celebrity politics,* in which politicians' audiences are involved as if they were proper municipal/regional online fans. The citizen communities react to what is performed on the virtual stage through the sharing of posts, audio-visual contents, and images. The logic of celebration includes intimate politics, i.e., the staging of private and family life. These strategies are part of the intimacy framework that characterises the use of social platforms, channelling the expectations, connections, and affections of audiences (Raun, 2018). This phenomenon is part of the wider *platformization* of online practices and, previously, of online environments (van Dijck et al., 2018). "By introducing new cathegories and selection mechanisms, platforms reorganize value regimes (and) economies" (van Dijck et al., p. 47).

The possibility of reaching the public directly through communication strategies that highlight personal information rather than party positions is well favoured by social media communication. This personalisation, especially constructed by images, has been investigated in several studies that, beyond highlighting the phenomenon (Poulakidakos & Giannouli, 2019; Russmann et al., 2019), have distinguished between personalisation based on individualisation, which characterises the Facebook communication of politicians, and personalisation based on privatisation, which instead characterises their use of Instagram (Farkas & Bene, 2021). What happens in this sphere at the level of local politics is even more interesting if we consider that local contexts are increasingly the subject of major investments in communication (Diamanti, 2020; Riva & Diamanti, 2022), which include local and social media in strategies to gain consensus or communicate the actions of their administration. Institutions and elected officials, regional presidents and mayors, aldermen and councillors are frequently online, have their own profile, Facebook page, or Instagram or Twitter account that they use to communicate about themselves and their actions and administrative choices. These phenomena are part of the contemporary forms of disintermediation of the political-voter relationship (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2019) that see the transposition to local, city, and regional territories of *self-branding* logics that are already well-known at the national level (Novelli, 2018). However, other scholars highlight the other subjects in the processes of sharing information and contents, journalists, that could represent a new form of intermediation. Considering this perspective, "journalistic intermediaries carry out their work within a field of production and distribution of news that has been entirely redefined by exuberant communicative forms allowed by digital

communications (Chadwick, 2013)" (Solito, Sorrentino, 2018, p. 35). This triangulation (citizens, politicians, journalists) constitutes the basis for a form of *re-intermediation*.

This essay reflects on the communication that mayors adopted on social networks during the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to explore: a) the strategies and narratives used on digital media, b) the forms of *spectacularisation*, *personalisation,* and *popularisation* of mediated political discourse, and in particular c) the visual strategies on Instagram used in administrative contexts.

Finally, the research aims at investigating the role of visual contents and the connected strategic uses in the management of the institutional communication in the most complex crisis after the second world war and, more generally, in the process of *personalisation* and *intimisation* of communication at this juncture.

2. Mayors and the social/visual challenge: the design of the analysis

Images, particularly those shared via platforms based primarily on *visual conversation* (Gunthert, 2016), constitute an interesting field of investigation into the dynamics of political communication. If politicians see social networks as tools for self-promotion among voters (Golbeck et al., 2010), they have to apply specific grammar and rules respecting the characteristics of the platform. In this framework, analytical attention to image sharing and the adoption of visual platforms by politicians is indispensable.

If we consider a use of images as a communicative or expressive situation based on a system of signs (Lotman, 1980) and characterised by semantic coherence between its elements, then we have to go beyond the individual intentions for entering into an exchange. Images do not have a monolithic and incontrovertible content: on the one hand, they are subject to interpretation by the beholder; on the other hand, the interpretative process always takes place thanks to the interaction between several factors or, as Rose (2012) argued, in relation to the specific context. Therefore, images are situated and mediated elements, whose meanings are articulated based on shared resources.

On social platforms, photos, as Moroni (2020) points out, do not merely accompany the textual content of a post. Instead, they often replace it, thus acquiring *conversational power*. In other words, the aesthetic value fades in favour of "its potentiality of use" (p. 7).

Frequently, in digital contexts such as social network platforms, images are part of a macro-unit of meaning comprised of texts, images, hashtags, mentions, etc. Sometimes, moreover, images shared on platforms encourage comments from users, more often less articulate interactions such as likes. In other words,

the visual objects of social media are part of a narrative that is defined at a broad and complex level, characterised by a continuous and rapid becoming, thanks to the interactions among different social actors (users/authors).

On the one hand, therefore, this interdependence between images and other contents or interactional elements must be taken into account. On the other hand, however, the strong dynamic character of conversational platforms, with their particular mode of visualisation, favours the rapid succession of visual contents and the configuration of a fragmentary narrative, made up of elements that are autonomous from each other. This aspect entitles us to consider these contents as autonomous *textual units* with respect to the overall narrative that characterises the activity on the platform by the user observed.

2.1. Methodological framework

Our research aims to reconstruct forms and modes of visual communication by Italian mayors, placing the study within the field of *sociology of images* (Harper, 1988), in which images become a fragment of social construction, a minimum unit of meaning for the exploration or definition of a culturally relevant phenomenon.

The analysis involved the visual communication of 54 mayors' profiles[1] on Instagram over a 3-month period (April-June 2021) and the conducting of 25 in-depth interviews with a sub-sample of them. The general goal is to reconstruct communication practices on Instagram. In the next section, indeed, we will focus mainly on the contents, both visual and textual, about the fourth phase of the pandemic, which required a more local management of social rules for the containment of the contagion, giving mayors a crucial mediating role in communication and relations with citizens (Cavallaro et al., 2022). Through visual analysis and interviews, we wanted to: a) identify the main rhetorical and communicative characteristics of mayors' social media communication contributing to a precise frame of meaning; b) investigate the level of proximity (personal vs. institutional); and c) define the use (didactic vs. political-ideological) of content around the pandemic.

The descriptors' sheet included six categories, plus open fields for in-depth description (both of text and image). The corpus was composed of 2203 elements, and for each element it was necessary to define the type of image (web visual cards, photo, video or other), the context (public vs. private), the

---

[1] The profiles come from a systematic sampling that identified 996 names of mayors and mayoresses with at least one account among Fb, Ig and Tw (Riva, 2022): for our analysis, the largest Ig users were selected.

situation (formal vs. informal), the general topic (political-administrative vs. personal communication), the specific topic, and the type of representation according to the interpretative model previously developed and used for other studies focused on the same topic (Micalizzi & Piccioni, 2020, 2021).

This model is called SMePi (*Social Media Politics Image*) and is based on the use of two conceptual drivers: the authorship of the photo (the politician vs. others) and the main subject of the photo (the politician vs. other). Authorship helps us to identify the point of view of the shot, which may be personal or external; the subject captured in the photo allows us to make explicit the centrality of the political figure according to its visual representation.

The intersection of the two axes defines four quadrants. On the left-hand side we find cases in which the image is dedicated to the political figure, either as a form of *self-representation* (self-shot or self-made video) typically coinciding with the selfie, or as a *representation of the self*, in which the point of view of an external observer is captured and which is generally characterised by more formal style choices.

Figure 1. SMePi (Social Media Politics Image) model (Micalizzi and Piccioni, 2020).
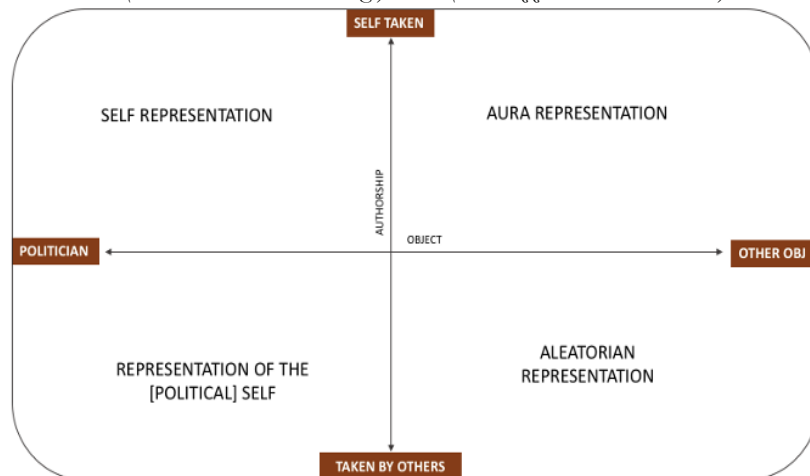

At the top right we have the forms of *aura representation*, generally coinciding with shots, taken by the politician, of aspects of reality that can add meaning and value to his or her aura. This category includes, for instance, photos dedicated to their own municipality to enhance certain views of it, pictures of the results of concrete political actions, or pictures of symbolic objects. At the bottom right we find the *aleatory representations*, with which we have identified all those visual elements that are external (both in terms of authorship and object)

to the political figure, which we can locate at the margins of the construction of the mayor's image. These are generally re-mediated contents (Bolter & Grusin, 2003), fragments of various communications (institutional, political, and even pop-cultural) already in circulation, which are re-semanticised within the frame of his/her profile.

3. Pandemic on Instagram: visual and narrative elements of a narrative through images

Of the 2203 images selected, 412 are included in this analysis, which are those that can be related to the specific COVID-19 topic. As can be seen from Figure 2, the topic constitutes the highest percentage (18.57%) among those used for the classification of all the data, numerically superior to the contents related to the promotion of the municipality and to those that we have defined as *personal*, i.e., not directly related to political or administrative aspects.

Figure 2. Pie chart of the topics used to categorise the posts (text and images) under analysis [Percentage values N=412].
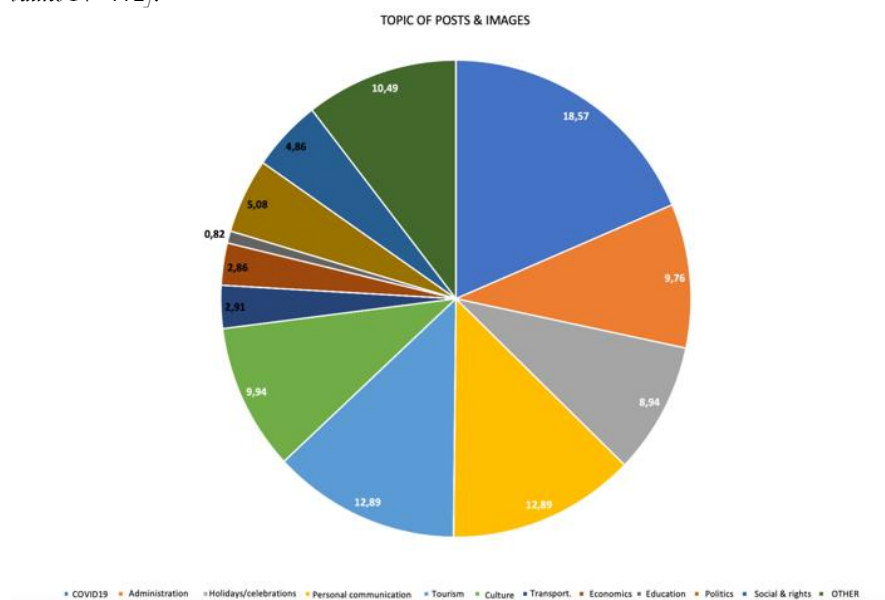

The COVID-19 macro-theme presents three threads with different rhetorical and usage characteristics:

- *Updates on the virus and its spread*: where there are posts dedicated to the number of infected people, restrictive rules, specific positive and avoidable behaviours, information organised by 'colour' of the area about the use and distribution of safety devices;
- *Information on vaccinations and the relevant centres set up to administer the jab*: where we find communications on the managing the distribution of vaccines according to ages, on the coverage percentages, and also more personal and customised messages about doctors, nurses, and other figures involved or the mayor's personal choices on the subject;
- *Proposals/initiatives related to the post-pandemic restart*: this third thread, with its less defined borders, includes the promotion of public initiatives concerning re-openings (including events, shop openings, etc.), linked with specific access rules.

Considering the purposes of the shots (Fig. 3), the analysis revealed a continuum rather than a dichotomy. Indeed, we distinguished between *informative*, *educational*, *proactive,* and finally *political-ideological purposes*.

Figure 3. Diagram representing the informative/political-ideological continuum.
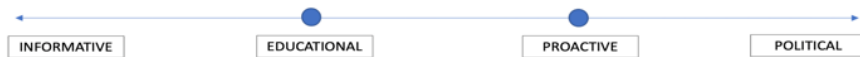

With the expression *informative purpose* we refer to the narrative visual communications that focus on pure information, generally numerical, and that aim exclusively to offer a quantitative update of the situation, about either contagions or vaccinations; *educational* are those messages that add, to the mere public service announcement, operational indications with respect to the rules, which were subject to continuing changes and differentiated according to the *colour* of the region. *Proactive purposes* refer to the posts, more focused on a particular zone of the municipality, that describe the attempts to restart social life, always in compliance with the rules; finally, we expected in the analysis phase to find more *politicised* communications, aimed at addressing the dissent and protests against restrictive measures and regulations of the state of emergency, and instead we didn't find them. However, we think it was important to include the category *political-ideological purpose* in our analysis, in order to highlight its absence.

If we focus on the type of image, we note that (Fig. 4) our sub-sample is predominantly made up of *web visual cards* (Novelli, 2018)—WVCs—that can be included to the aleatory representations (62.62%). Absolutely underrepresented

are selfies (0.73%), together with videos (1.94%). This specific distribution gives us an idea of the type of communication preferred by local administrators regarding COVID-19, defining specific rhetorical styles and uses.

Figure 4. Band chart relating to the classification of images by type [percentage values N=412].
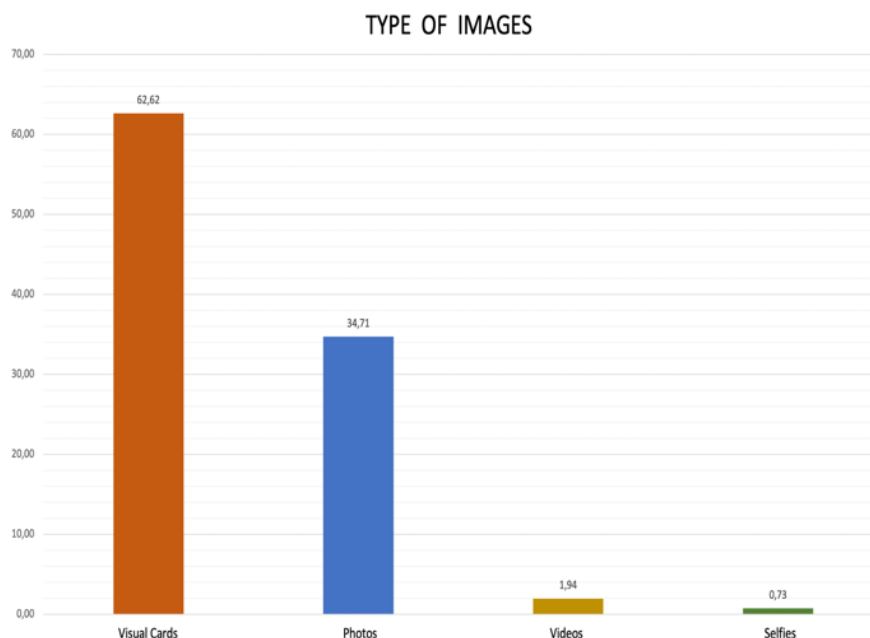
3.1. Web visual cards pandemic: an analysis

We have considered *web visuals* (Novelli, 2018) to be all those images that present a composition of several visual elements—such as graphics, iconic representations, symbols, collages or patchworks of photographs—with textual elements.

The WVCs that can be traced back to the COVID-19 macro-topic, besides being the most numerous in our sample, present recursive characteristics—such as the colour, the font setting, the syntax of the image itself—in order to build a certain familiarity as well as an immediate distinction from the general flow of posts on one's profile. They are in fact images that are easily identifiable from the gallery and characterised, in some cases, by a specific template, which somehow becomes an expression of a grammar of civic connective participation. In some cases, mayors share digital contents previously published

by the Ministry, becoming the *hub of redundancy* of precise recognisable messages, in order to make the institutional communication less ambiguous, more coherent and clearer than that coming from other sources.

If we look at the three identified threads, in the specific case of web visual cards, proposals for restart are less represented, while the status of contagiousness and information on measures are the most present topics, with differences mainly related to the location of the municipality within a specific area.[2]

The uses determine, as anticipated, different communicative and rhetorical style choices. The informative WVCs, in fact, are generally characterised by *service information* contents, whose only purpose is to update the current situation. They are often related to the number of jabs or to the percentages of those infected and cured, specifically referring to referring to the mayor's own municipality: numbers that we could define as *truer* because they are perceived as *nearer* (at least geographically) to the citizens. The textual part of the post does not add content to the image, which reproduces the same information: in fact, the alphanumeric code generally prevails over the use of other visual elements (cf. Fig. 5).

Figure 5. Examples of informative Web Visual Cards [from left to right: data regarding contagions; communication about the end of the lockdown; the graph of contagions].

The informative WVCs constitute a clear example of the disintermediation of the political-citizen relationship (Parisi & Rega, 2010; Mazzoleni & Bracciale 2019) in response to a conjunctural need related to the pandemic situation:

---

[2] The period of the research coincided with the division of Italy into zones according to infection trends: white, yellow, orange and red. The latter provided for time-limited and very restrictive lockdowns for the management of contacts and commercial, public, and educational activities. Colour changes were updated every fortnight. The speed of these changes meant that it was difficult to become accustomed to the rules of the one's own zone and there was a general need for the dissemination of clear, unambiguous, and consistent information.

citizens needed real-time updates coming from reliable and verifiable sources. The interviews clarified this aspect, detecting the attitudes of mayors towards their role in this particularly complex and, in some ways, communicatively confusing moment: several participants emphasised the responsibility they felt invested with, even tacitly, and how mayors immediately networked, helping to standardise communication practices and enhancing the most effective strategies.[3]

WVCs for educational purposes are those in which communications concretely have a direct effect on the citizens' lives: changes in rules, opening of new vaccination centres, how to register to obtain services, facilitaties or specific health indications, regulation of access to offices, etc. In this case, therefore, the intention is not simply to photograph and share a specific situation (usually in numerical terms), but rather to ensure that information generates correct implementation in practice. This is why, unlike in the previous cases, the visual component prevails over the text, schematisations are preferred and, more than in other images, a precise format is used that is always repeated over time to facilitate the recognition of this type of communication. This is also the case when some mayors use the *re-mediation* (Bolter & Grusin, 2003) of material from other institutions (cf. Fig. 6).

Figure 6. Examples of images with educational purposes [from left to right: the list of infopoints to ask for masks; how to adhere to the vaccination campaign; good habits].

As these categories form a continuum, there are posts with a combination of educational and informative purposes, depending on the use of text and images.

Finally, we have defined web visual cards with a proactive purpose as those in which initiatives, actions, and rules relating to restarting are described (cf. Fig.7). Also in this case, the interviews with the mayors were valuable as they

---

[3] Several interviewees emphasised the role of WhatsApp in building virtual networks aimed at the immediate updating of citizens and more general emergency management. These networks with citizens worked in parallel to networks, both formal and informal, with other institutions.

allowed us to investigate the meaning of these communications aimed at instilling hope, telling of a return to a (new) normality that seemed to be far away: they have a positive connotation and a lighter tone, which is conveyed by the images. In this case, there is a preference for symbolic references that draw on cultural content. They are the least numerous; however, a trace of *hypermemetic* logic is recognisable in them (Shifman, 2014): the message is closely anchored to the cultural framework, recalls its codes and symbols and follows the rules of normalisation typical of memes (Lolli, 2017; Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2019).

Figure 7. Examples of images for proactive purposes [from left to right: the nternational Worker's Day of the first May poster; the re-opening of shops poster].

3.2. *The presence of the politician between images and texts*

Among the four categories of images identified by our model, the aleatory representations are mostly made up of Web visual cards, discussed above, and, to a lesser extent, screenshots or photographs of existing images.

These posts can almost always be linked to the informative, educational, and proactive dimensions of pandemic communication: for instance, a printed poster informing about the hours of a vaccine centre, a microscopic shot of the Sars-Cov2 virus, an image of an arm and a syringe at the moment of injection, a cartoon recalling the need to return to the usual pre-pandemic activities.

In contrast, the set of posts based on aura representations, self-representations, and representations of the self are more closely associated with political purposes, although without ever assuming ideological overtones and without any reference to the party: in these groups of images the educational and propositional values prevail, even if with some silent political framing.

The sub-corpus of images we are going to analyse is made up of 11 videos, and 108 static images. More specifically, we have 6 self-representations, or selfies, 34 aura representations, and 68 representations of the self, distributed among 30 mayors and mayoresses, with a minimum of one post to a maximum of 20 posts per account. In line with the general activity of mayors on Instagram during the period analysed, the proportion of visual communication dedicated to the emergency is therefore characterised by the predominance of the administrator's self, represented as an active subject together with others in the management of the emergency. The mayor, in fact, is directly or indirectly involved when the opening of a vaccination centre is the subject of the post, or when the images bring us inside a doctor's surgery, or even when the caption invites us to recognise the work of health workers and volunteers: the mayor is the subject of the photos. If this confirms a high level of personalisation of communication on Instagram, the same cannot be said for the tendency to personalise the relation with users through the sharing of shots of private life (Farkas & Bene, 2021). For the most part, the content collected is related to the work sphere, although the situations represented are not always formal. The private and intimate sphere plays a marginal role in our corpus of images (cf. Fig. 8).

Figure 8. Examples of self-representation and representation of the self.

It is interesting to note how updates on the progress of the pandemic are communicated by some administrators who make extensive use of self-representation. We can take the case of the mayor of Castiglion Fiorentino. The frequent images that portray his close-up at a microphone, often in formal

clothes and mayor's band, or at the computer in his office, are accompanied by a caption updating the data on the health emergency. In this way, posts providing that specific information are made easily recognisable to followers. In addition, the space of one mayor's Instagram grid Instagram grid is optimised according to self-promotional goals. Finally, the association between the work of the administrator and the work of updating data is suggested.[4]

Figures 9 and 10. Two posts in which the mayor of Castiglion Fiorentino updates about the pandemic.

A vaccination centre seen from the outside, or some details of the interior, people queuing for the vaccine, an attendant engaged in vaccination-related

---

[4] Rarely do these posts give the possibility of tracing a source.

practices, a team of health workers posing as if for a souvenir photo, members of the Red Cross or the Alpini involved in support activities, a surgical mask in the foreground: these are mainly the shots that, dispensing with the presence of the politician's self (aura representation), put in the main scene the actors of the municipal management of the pandemic.

Figure 11. Example of an aura representation [closing of COVID-19 ward communication].

A particular case of aura representation is the one that includes an urban foreshortening or an architectural detail that pinpoints a specific location linked to the administered municipality and which, in itself, is not at all related to the theme of the pandemic. These types of photos are anchored to a caption that, once again, updates on the emergency; or the images are used to write about restarting (cf. Fig. 12).

Even those posts that do not show the mayor may include him or her through other strategies that involve the relation between texts and images: for instance, when the first-person plural (we) is used in the caption in reference to the activity depicted. This is the case of a post of 11 June 2021 on the profile of the mayor of Bacoli (Naples), Josi Della Ragione, whose image depicts the interior of a vaccination centre with the staff, while the text says: "it is midnight, and at the Royal Park of Fusaro *we are* continuing to vaccinate". The idea of an ever-present and active mayor is thus reinforced. Several interviewees described, in fact, how intensive their engagement was during the management of the emergency activities. The narratives dealt with the transmission of communication: giving information to citizens, especially clarifying instructions issued by other bodies.

Figure 12. Aura representations supporting captions dedicated to the theme of restarting.

Through their social channels, mayors have been able to contribute significantly to shaping the situation and reinforcing their status as first citizens. One interviewee, mayor of a small-medium municipality in the North, told us about daily reports, each articulated in a post with a long text and a static image: a fixed output which he called a "community journal".

Within this framework of the widespread presence of the figure of the mayor, we can identify a triple rhetoric of proximity.

Firstly, the posts represent the administrator as an institutional actor close to his fellow citizens because he communicates with them and, with an almost paternalistic impetus, highlighted especially in the interviews, performs tasks necessary to manage the emergency, primarily, and secondarily pushes for the re-establishment of pre-pandemic activities.

Secondly, the mayor is portrayed as a citizen among other citizens, and not so much because he is shown in his home recovering from COVID-19 or outside wearing a mask, but because, as we often found, he undergoes vaccination at the local health centre and perhaps, like everyone else, waits his turn.

Thirdly, the posts create frequent connections between the different actors involved in the emergency. Indeed, the mayors in our sample dedicate a portion of their social stage to other social actors, much more than in other situations. Moreover, they often associate their actions with the voluntary dimension of the collective work carried out by citizens, for example through shots in which they appear with members of the civil protection.

Indeed, as some interviews revealed, the exceptional burden of commitment that the pandemic placed on mayors assigned new expectations to their role. They had to promote decisions taken at the highest levels of the institutions, and if this type of engagement facilitates the management of the emergency, it also allows the politicians to pursue personal goals of legitimisation and consensus growth: it is here that the political significance of the mayors' social communication in the emergency takes on a more decisive character. As the following quotation exemplifies, several mayors have seen a return, in terms of popularity, for their efforts in managing the emergency through social media:

"During the pandemic I made a short live on my personal profile every night... I had almost a hundred thousand people listening to me. We had peaks with a hundred and fifty thousand people, that is practically half a province [...] they were following my live stream: why? Because the others were not communicating. [...] they were connecting because that crazy mayor of [*name of municipality*] at least tells us something. And, in this way, I reached an absolutely unexpected level of popularity, which then also led me to hold roles and positions that I did not expect, such as regional secretary of the party" [mayor of a municipality of 24,000 inhabitants].

In the centrality of communicative practices for pandemic management, between a sense of duty[5] and strategies for consensus, the self-represented on the visual platform contributed to the actualisation of that protective pact between rulers and ruled that reinforces the authority of the rulers (Latour, 2020) and included the administrator in the network of actors of the management of the emergency, not only from a communicative point of view.

4.   Conclusions

The results of our study confirm the centrality of the role of local administrators in the complex management of the pandemic emergency, within which social media have become means—sometimes complementary, other

---

[5] This is how one interviewed mayor defined the push for effective participation in the management of the pandemic.

times central—to the health strategy implemented above all at the territorial level.

Mayors were called upon to be active players of the institutions in a process of communicative proximity that was essential for those months of uncertainty and fluidity: in their Instagram profiles, they represented themselves as true *dis-intermediators of emergency communication* and responsible nodes in the complex connective network of which their fellow citizens were a part.

Instagram, our interviewees confirmed, was part—albeit with its limitations—of the several active channels towards citizenship, alongside WhatsApp, which was more instant and direct, and Facebook, which was more participatory and integrated thanks to the use of multiple languages.

The analysis of the posts highlighted the search for the right communicative distance: between *the intimate politics* sought and the institutional-political discourse enacted in other contexts, between *privatisation* and *individualisation* in the personalisation dynamics that characterise social media communication (Farkas & Bene, 2021; Van Aelst et al., 2012).

Although the data confirms the renunciation of a top-down approach, a complementarity between mayor and citizens is evident for some uses—for example in informative and educational communication—since the role that local administrators believed and felt they had to take on, by duty or by strategy, is similar to that of the *good family man*: present, attentive, and capable of dosing information so that it is always verified, clear, and unambiguous in its interpretation.

In the proactive uses we find instead a greater emotional consonance, a participation of the first citizen in the life of the community as an actor and a *gear* in the change, with a lighter and more attractive (visual above all) communication.

With respect to the interpretative model used, we have seen the prevalence of so-called aleatory representations over shots centred on the figure of the mayor. We have already dwelt on the differences in both rhetoric and usage. Here, we would like to emphasise that this choice in a sense confirms the role that administrators have assumed in the complexity of the emergency: that of (dis)intermediaries in the communication process and, at the same time, an active part of the community.

Although Instagram continues to remain an *ancillary* digital space, more aimed at the young electorate and less actively inhabited by mayors, it also played a role in communicating the emergency and then the restart, tracking the evolutions of the state of crisis and the different ways of interpreting the sense of responsibility invested in the first citizens.

The administrator—in re-posting in his personal social channels the institutional communications of the emergency, accompanying them with his

own interpretation, sometimes even directly provided to the individual citizen—simplified the mediation chain: in fact, he positioned himself as a direct link with the central governments, balancing the perception of distance from the institutions and the distrust generated by the governmental actions of crisis management (Pellegrino, 2020).

Ultimately, we can say that if the current model of politics described by scholars is involved in a strong process of *commodification*, where the emphasis is on life-style as well as media performances and where the structural core becomes increasingly coincident with personalities (Mancini, 2010; Wodak, 2011), our investigation highlights a low degree of activation of this mechanism. The very model of *intimisation* of politics leaves room to the construction of a proximity with the co-citizens based on the politician's traditional task of protecting them. We have seen that the needs related to the emergency have been interpreted by mayors, through Instagram, in the direction of the provision of information regarding both the pandemic data and the various services made available by institutions, as well as the definition of those good practices through which each citizen can contribute to the management of the pandemic. This favours a social representation (Moscovici, 1989) of the local administrator first and foremost as a bridge between institutions and citizens and, secondly, as a contributor to the network of actors, especially collective, who play a key role in the municipality and in the crisis management.

Our overall results lead us to say that, in the general framework of the platformisation of societies, our mayors and their visual communication stand, if not as breaking elements of current trends in political communication, certainly as deviating elements. So, we would like to close this essay with a question: is that just a parenthesis due to the emergency, or starting from local political communication can we begin a mapping of cases that contradict the apocalyptic aura often accompanying digital communication?

References

Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

Azizah, N. (2021). Communicative Action and Post-Public Sphere Phenomenon. *Palakka: Media Islamic Communication*, 2(1), 32-45.

Boccia Artieri, G. (2012). *Stati di connessione. Pubblici, cittadini e consumatori nella (Social) Network Society*. Milano: Franco Angeli.

Boccia Artieri, G. (2020). A voce alta. Pandemic politics: un nuovo campo discorsivo per la ricerca sulla politica. *Comunicazione politica*, 3, 443-449.

Bolter, J. D. & Grusin R. (2003). *Remediation. Competizione e integrazione tra media vecchi e nuovi*. Milano: Guerini e Associati.

Bonsón, E., Perea, D., & Bednárová, M. (2019). Twitter as a Tool for Citizen Engagement: An Empirical Study of the Andalusian Municipalities. *Government Information Quarterly*, 36 (3), 480-89.

Bordignon, F. (2013). *Il partito del capo: da Berlusconi a Renzi*. Sant'Arcangelo di Romagna: Maggioli.

Bordignon, F., Diamanti, I., & Turato, F. (2020). Il contagio delle opinioni. Cittadini e democrazia ai tempi del Coronavirus. *Comunicazione politica*, 3, 389-418.

boyd, D. (2010). Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications, in Z. Papacharrisi (Ed.) *A Networked Self* (pp. 47-66). New York: Routledge.

Bucher, T. (2012). Want to be on the top? Algorithmic power and the threat of invisibility on Facebook. *New Media & Society*, 14(7), 1164-1180.

Cacciotto, M. (2019). *Il nuovo marketing politico*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Calise, M. (2010). *Il partito personale*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.

Calise, M., & Musella, F. (2019). *Il principe digitale*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.

Campus, D. (2020). Celebrity Leadership. Quando i leader politici fanno le star. *Comunicazione Politica*, 2, 185-204.

Castriota, S., Delmarco, M., & Tonin, M. (2020). National or Local? The Demand for News in Italy during COVID-19. *IZA – Institute of Labor Economics*, http://ftp.iza.org/dp13805.pdf.

Cavallaro, M., Carone, M., & Riva, C. (2022). Raccontare l'imprevedibile: i sindaci italiani su Facebook durante la pandemia da COVID-19, in C. Riva (a cura di) *I social nella politica locale* (pp. 27-45). Torino: UTET Università.

Chadwick, A. (2013). *The Hybrid Media System*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Crisanti, G., & Sensi, T. (2021). *Digital Politik . Elezioni e consenso nel regno di internet*. Milano: Lupetti.

Davis, A. (2019). *Political Communication: A New Introduction for Crisis Times*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Diamanti, G. (2020). *I segreti dell'urna. Storie, strategie e passi falsi delle campagne elettorali*. Torino: UTET.

Diamanti, I. (2009). *Mappe dell'Italia politica*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Di Gregorio, L. (2020). Comunicazione di crisi: 5 lezioni dall'era Covid-19. *Rivista di Politica*, 2, 63-68.

Farkas, X., & Bene, M. (2021). Images, Politicians, and Social Media: Patterns and Effects of Politicians' Image-Based Political Communication Strategies on Social Media. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 26(1), 119-142.

Garavaglia, C., Sancino, A., & Trivellato, B. (2021). Italian mayors and the management of COVID-19: adaptive leadership for organizing local governance. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 62(1), 76-92.

Gemini, L. (2015). Visual Networking. Appunti sulla dimensione visuale dei media
sociali. In G. Boccia Artieri (Ed.) *Gli effetti sociali del web. Forme della comunicazione e
metodologie della ricerca online*. Milano: Angeli.

Giansante, G. (2014). *La comunicazione politica online: come usare il web per costruire consenso
e stimolare la partecipazione*. Roma: Carocci.

Golbeck, J., Grimes, J. M., & Rogers, A. (2010). Twitter use by the US Congress.
Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, 61(8), 1612–1621.

Graff, Garrett M. 2008. *The First Campaign: Globalization, the Web and the Race for the
White House*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux.

Guillamón, M. D., Ríos, A. M., Gesuele, B., & Metallo, C. (2016). Factors influencing
social media use in local governments: The case of Italy and Spain. *Government
Information Quarterly*, 33(3), 460-471.

Gunthert, A. (2016). *L'immagine condivisa. La fotografia digitale*. Roma: Contrasto.

Han, E., Tan, M. M. J., Turk, E., Sridhar, D., Leung, G. M., Shibuya, K., Asgari, N.,
Oh, J., García-Basteiro, A. L., Hanefeld, J., Cook, A. R., Hsu, L. Y., Teo, Y. Y.,
Heymann, D., Clark, H., McKee, M., & Legido-Quigley, H. (2020). Lessons
learnt from easing COVID-19 restrictions: an analysis of countries and regions
in Asia Pacific and Europe. *The Lancet*, 396 (10261), 1525-34.

Harper, D. (1988). Visual sociology: expanding sociological vision. *The American
sociologist*, spring, 54-70. Trad it: Orizzonti sociologici. Saggio di sociologia
visual. *Sociologia della comunicazione*, 10(19) 1993, 15-31.

Iannelli, L., Splendore, S., Valeriani, A., & Marino, G. (2020). Studiare la
polarizzazione politica nello "shockdown mediale". *Mediascapes Journal*, 15, 189-
202.

Jain, N., Malviya, P., Singh, P., & Mukherjee, S. (2021). Twitter Mediated
Sociopolitical Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis in
India. *FRONT. PSYCHOL.* 12:784907. Original research published: 24
December 2021, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.784907.

Landi, S., Costantini, A., Fasan, M., & Bonazzi, M. (2021). Public Engagement and
Dialogic Accounting through Social Media during COVID-19 Crisis: A Missed
Opportunity? *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, 35, 35-47.

Latour, B. (2020). La crisi sanitaria ci induce a prepararci al cambiamento
climatico. *Antinomie,* 1/4/2020.
https://antinomie.it/index.php/2020/04/01/la-crisi-sanitaria-ci-induce-
a-prepararci-al-cambiamento-climatico/.

Legnante, G. (1999). Personalizzazione della politica e comportamento elettorale.
Con una ricerca sulle elezioni comunali. *Quaderni di Scienza Politica*, 3, 395-447.

Lolli, A. (2017). *La guerra dei meme. Fenomenologia di uno scherzo infinito*. Ortobello:
Effequ.

Lotman, J. M. (1980). *Testo e contesto: semiotica dell'arte e della cultura*, Laterza, Roma-
Bari.

Mancini, P. (2010). Beyond Berlusconisation. *Public Lecture*, LSE, 21 January 2010.

Mazzoleni, G. (a cura di). (2021). *Introduzione alla comunicazione politica*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Mazzoleni, G. (2012). *La comunicazione politica*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Mazzoleni, G., & Bracciale, R. (2019). *La politica pop online. I meme, le nuove sfide della comunicazione politica*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Mazzoleni, G., & Sfardini, A. (2009). *Politica pop. Da Porta a Porta a L'Isola dei Famosi*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Micalizzi, A., & Piccioni, T. (2020). Instagram-Politics: il linguaggio per immagini delle donne in politica. *Problemi dell'informazione*, 2, 237-266.

Micalizzi, A., & Piccioni, T. (2021). I politici nella Rete: il ruolo delle immagini nella narrazione social, in C. Riva (a cura di) *Social media e politica. Esperienze, analisi e scenari della nuova comunicazione politica*. Novara: UTET Università.

Moroni, C. (2020). Opinione pubblica e pandemia: cosa resterà delle distorsioni causate dal Covid-19. *Rivista di Politica*, 3, 68-73.

Moscovici, S. (1989). *Le rappresentazioni sociali*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Natale, P. (2009). *Attenti al sondaggio!* Roma-Bari: Laterza.

Novelli, E. (2018). *Le campagne elettorali in Italia: protagonisti, strumenti, teorie*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.

Nunziata, F. (2021). Il platform leader. *Rivista di Digital Politics*, 1(1), 127-146.

Parisi, L., & Rega, R. (2010). La comunicazione degli attori politici: tra disintermediazione e media sociali, in E. Cioni e A. Marinelli (a cura di) *Le reti della comunicazione politica*, (69-97). Firenze: Firenze University Press.

Pellegrino, G. (2020). Emergenza, pandemia e libertà. *Il Mulino*, 2020(3), 497-505.

Poulakidakos, S., & Giannouli, I. (2019). Greek Political Leaders on Instagram: Between 'Soft' and 'Hard' Personalization, in A. Veneti, D. Jackson & D.G. Lilleker (Eds.) *Visual Political Communication*. Cham: Springer International.

Raun, T. (2018). Capitalizing intimacy: New subcultural forms of micro-celebrity strategies and affective labour on YouTube. *Convergence*, 24(1), 99-113.

Riva, C. (a cura di) (2021). *Social media e politica. Esperienze, analisi e scenari della nuova comunicazione politica*. Torino: UTET Università.

Riva, C., & Diamanti, G. (2022). I social in politica, i social per la politica locale, in C. Riva (a cura di) *I social nella politica locale* (pp. 3-25). Torino: UTET Università.

Riva, C. (a cura di) (2022). *I social nella politica locale*. Novara: UTET.

Rose, G. (2012). *Visual Methodologies*. Third Edition. London: Sage.

Russmann, U., Svensson, J., & Larsson, A. O. (2019). Political Parties and Their Pictures: Visual Communication on Instagram in Swedish and Norwegian Election Campaigns, in A. Veneti, D. Jackson & D.G. Lilleker (Eds.) *Visual Political Communication*. Cham: Springer International.

Scammell, M. (2015). Politics and Image: The Conceptual Value of Branding *Journal of Political Marketing*, 14, 1-2, 7-18.

Scammell, M. (2016). *Designer politics: How elections are won.* London: Springer

Schill, D. (2012). The Visual Image and the Political Image: A Review of Visual Communication Research in the Field of Political Communication. *Review of Communication*, 12(2), 118-42.

Schleisinger, P. (2020). After post-public sphere. *Media, Culture & Society*, 42(7-8), 1545–1563.

Shifman, L. (2014). *Meme in digital culture.* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Solito, L., & Sorrentino, C. (2018). Political Communication and Social Change. Political Communication and Challenges in the Digital Age. *Icono*, 14, 16 (1), 22-41.

Sorice, M. (2016). *La comunicazione politica.* Roma: Carocci.

Sorice, M. (2020). *La sociologia dei media.* Roma: Carocci.

Stocchetti, M. (2011). Images. Who gets what, when and how? In M. Stocchetti & K. Kukkonen (Eds.) *Images in Use. Towards the critical analysis of visual communication* (pp. 11-37). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Wahl-Jorgensen, K. (2018). The emotional architecture of social media. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.) *A networked self and platforms, stories, connection* (pp. 77–93). London: Routledge.

Wodak, R. (2011). Disenchantment with politics and the salience of images. In M. Stocchetti & K. Kukkonen (Eds.) *Images in Use. Towards the critical analysis of visual communication* (pp. 69-90). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Vigevani, G. E. (2020). Sistema informativo e opinione pubblica nel tempo della pandemia. *Quaderni costituzionali*, 4, 779-795.

Van Aelst, P., Sheafer, T., & Stanyer, J. (2012). The Personalization of Mediated Political Communication: A Review of Concepts, Operationalizations and Key Findings. *Journalism*, 13(2), 203–20.

Van Dijck, J. (2013). *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & de Waal, M. (2018). *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.