

Chapter 13

#M5S (Five Star Movement) and the National Political Campaign: New Media and Old-Fashioned Trust

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ABSTRACT

In 2009, a new political movement was born in Italy. It is called “Five Star Movement” (M5S) and it was positioned as a new voice of Italian people: alternative, populist, against élites, and against the traditional “way of doing” politic in the First and Second Republic Age. The power of this new political subject is linked with the use of social media platforms to communicate and share information, opinions, and positions with its “base” in a participative democracy perspective. In the last national political campaign, the M5S obtained 32% of the votes with a peak in the South of Italy. The chapter aims at presenting the main results of an empirical research focused on Sicilian voters of the East coast, in order to verify if and how digital communication helped in obtaining this success. Data show evidence about the relevance recognized to social media as first direct sources for collecting political information. The respondents express a large consent for traditional media that maintain in the public opinion a strong reputation in construction and share the public-sphere.

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POLITICS AND NEW PUBLIC SPACES: THE NET AND ITS POWER. A SHORT EXCURSUS

Over the years, as Norris (1997) reminds us, political communication has undergone profound changes, according to several communication process models¹. In the first place, since the appearance of television, political communication has relied on the publicist-dialogical model in which the media place themselves as the middle ground between the political class and the citizens. However, the publicist-dialogic model is absorbed by the media model in which the media identify themselves as the third actors of communication, capable of generating forms of political dialogue. Thus, political communication today passes through new media, including digital platforms, websites, and social networks. New media have been building a reality that political actors must come to terms with (Gerstlè, 1992). The Internet, which does not replace traditional media but is added to them (Shulz, 2004), has broadened the scenario within which political communication takes place. The Web becomes the virtual square, the arena of debate and political confrontation (Sorice, 2014), where information and public points of view narratively converge: it is the socio-techno context (Boccia Artieri, 2012) where people exchange political messages and post in different forms and languages (Epifani et al., 2011, p. 27).

Social network sites are ‘sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system’ (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211). They do not represent simply a tool or technological platforms; they are *nodes*, touch points, virtual expressions of connection, and a way to interpret the relation among users (Epifani et al., 2011).

Social media can be defined as ‘a constellation of communicative spaces in society that permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates, ideally in an unfettered manner, and also the formation of political will’ (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 148).

In other words, by the use of digital spaces, citizens can increase their “inadvertent” exposure to political contents: according to Brundidge (2010), users have a much better chance of getting in touch with different political ideas, even if they are unlikely to seek out such political difference on their own. The author points out that the exposure is simplified by “(a) less than perfect online selective exposure strategies, (b) non avoidance of encounters with political difference, and (c) weakened social boundaries between far flung geographic locations, between one discursive space and the next (blurred and porous boundaries creating increased inter-spatiality), between political and apolitical spaces of communication, and between the private and the public spheres” (p. 687).

The collection of information is accompanied by an increase in participation in the public debate. According with some authors, the opportunity of sharing opinion by users leads the so called “non-elite actors” to influence the nature and structure of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989; Castells, 2012). New digital environments offer opportunities to involve and empower citizens in campaigns and work of representatives and government: this phenomenon is called crowdsourcing (Effing et al. 2011).

Beside citizens, politicians have also come closer and closer to a strategic use of digital communication contexts. For instance, the use of social network profiles by politicians is a partial recent introduction that can be seen as a new field of public sphere which is qualitatively differentiated from the traditional one in terms of access and participation and characterized by unprecedented disintermediation processes and new modes of civic and political involvement (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Hermida, 2015).

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