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Pop politics and transmedia storytelling:
How Italian and Northamerican political leaders use pop cultural
references and transmedia approaches to influence public opinion on
social media

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Introduction

The aim of this Master's thesis is to investigate how social media have become a powerful tool that has strongly modified the dynamics of political communication. The media are essential for aggregating and shaping people's political and social behaviour; the study of political communication and its evolution is thus crucial for understanding the development of political society. More specifically, this thesis' main focuses are the phenomena of pop politics and transmedia storytelling, which are investigated with the support of case studies relating to the Italian and to the North American political context. The goal of the analysis is to exemplify their role in influencing public opinion and to demonstrate a gradually increasing merging of features of the world of entertainment into the world of politics.

In order to introduce the main topic, this thesis shall provide theoretical insight into the general concept of political communication through definitions given by Mazzoleni[1], Sorice[2], McNair[3] and Lilleker[4]. Next, the first chapter discusses how the transition from old politics to neo politics has been influenced by the dominant mediatic environment and therefore illustrates the shift from mass media to social media and its effects on political communication, among which the phenomena of agenda-setting and framing are given particular attention. Furthermore, the figure of the spin doctor is presented; the term refers to professionals who choose, coordinate, and design governments' and politicians' communication strategies, whose influence has risen gradually over the last few decades, particularly as a result of the phenomena of mediatization. Then, a section is dedicated to the art of storytelling and specifically to digital storytelling as a tool for political persuasion. Finally, the role of images in online political communication, which would prove increasing attention to the image that the politician conveys over ideology, is briefly discussed.

The second chapter of this thesis discusses in further detail the phenomena of pop politics and transmedia storytelling. Pop politics is "the transformation of the political

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[1] G. Mazzoleni, *La comunicazione politica*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1998
[2] M. Sorice, "Comunicazione e politica", in *Dizionario della comunicazione*, ed. by D. E. Viganò, Roma, Carocci, 2009
[3] B. McNair, *An Introduction to Political Communication,* London, Routledge, 1995
[4] D. G. Lilleker, *Key Concepts in Political Communication,* New York, SAGE Publications, 2006

system and political communication towards forms of spectacularisation and personalization, in which the media are the driving force but politicians are enthusiastic actors", as Ilvo Diamanti[5] defines it. Gianpietro Mazzoleni, with Anna Sfardini[6] first and with Roberta Bracciale[7] later has largely contributed to the analysis of this phenomenon and has created neologisms to explain new concepts such as infotainment, soft news and politainment, emblematic of the increasing popularisation of politics. The three actors (political leaders, the media and the citizen/user) involved in this process of popularisation are then briefly presented before discussing the role of memes in the political public debate. According to Highfield[8], humorous content such as political memes is currently one of the most popular methods for users to analyse and discuss politics on social media. At this point the attention shifts to transmedia storytelling, which is anticipated by a brief discussion about convergence culture, which indicates "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want"[9]. According to the theoretical father of the concept, Henry Jenkins[10], this type of storytelling is the distribution of material across various media platforms, a technique where key elements of a tale are methodically delivered across a range of platforms in order to provide a seamless and well-coordinated entertainment experience. The main typologies of transmedia storytelling and the seven principles that characterise a valid transmedia project are then illustrated. After offering theoretical insight, various examples of transmedia storytelling in political campaigns are provided and the final subsection deals with three examples of transmedia activism, to show the vast employability of transmedia strategies.

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[5] I. Diamanti, "Prefazione", in *Politica Pop. Da «Porta a Porta» «all'isola dei famosi»*, ed. by G. Mazzoleni - A. Sfardini, Bologna, il Mulino, 2009, p. 7 (my translation)
[6] G. Mazzoleni - A. Sfardini, *Politica pop. Da "Porta a Porta" a "L'Isola dei famosi"*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2009
[7] G. Mazzoleni - R. Bracciale, *La politica pop online: I meme e le nuove sfide della comunicazione politica*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019
[8] G. Mazzoleni - R. Bracciale, *La politica pop online: I meme e le nuove sfide della comunicazione politica*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019, p.89 quoting T. Highfield, "Tweeted Joke Life Spans and Appropriated Punch Lines: Practices around Tropical Humor on Social Media", in *International Journal*
[9] H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York, New York University Press, 2006, p.2
[10] H. Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling: Moving Characters from Books to Films to Video Games Can Make Them Stronger and More Compelling" in *MIT Technology Review* https://www.technologyreview.com/2003/01/15/234540/transmedia-storytelling/ (15 Jan. 2003)

The third chapter's focus is the presence of pop politics in Donald Trump's communication and his influence on the extremization of this phenomenon in the already pop-politicised North American political landscape. The chapter firstly investigates how the former President's career has always been characterised by a tendency towards the world of entertainment, from his participation in the show "The Apprentice" to his candidacy for President, which has undoubtedly influenced his communication style after entering politics. His political communication strategy is then presented, for example concerning his relationship with the media and his consequent use of social media, Twitter in particular, to avoid intermediation, the use of slogans, and so forth. Particular importance is given to his employment of fake news and misinformation as a communication strategy. A further section is dedicated to the analysis of three memes posted by the former President that employ references to the show Game of Thrones as a way to transmit political and propagandistic messages, based on the analysis by Anja Boato[11]. It demonstrates the influence of pop cultural references on political discourse. The chapter terminates with the analysis of some attempts of imitating Donald Trump's memes among some Italian politicians.

The final chapter investigates the application of transmedia storytelling, which has been generally studied with products of the entertainment industry, to political campaigns. Analytical frameworks have been developed taking into account the characteristics of this type of content. For this reason, this chapter will try to partly fill the gap by focusing on a case study, which is the V-day event of Beppe Grillo, to a) demonstrate that a political project can be considered transmedial; b) show the applicability of said frameworks to analyse transmedia political campaigns and c) demonstrate the presence of features of the world of entertainment in contemporary politics. The chapter first introduces the protagonist, Beppe Grillo, and briefly delineates the path from his career as a comedian to the foundation of Movimento 5 Stelle. Then, the concept of anti-politics, which is largely associated with Grillo and with the movement, is explained along with how it differs from the concept of populism. A further section is dedicated to the relationship between Grillo and the various media he uses, such as television, rallies, blog, the Rousseau platform and social media, analysing how his

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[11] A. Boato, "La comunicazione politica nell'era della transmedialità: tre esempi di intrecci tra politica e cultura popolare" in *Social media e politica: Esperienze, analisi e scenari della nuova comunicazione politica*, ed. by C. Riva, Torino, UTET Università, 2021, pp. 115-127

behaviour and his language vary and adapt to each of them. Later, the V-day event, which is the first case in Italy where an event with such a positive response in terms of participation has been organised and promoted through a personal blog, is presented in detail before applying the transmedia analytical framework developed by Renira Rampazzo Gambarato in her work "Transmedia Project Design: Theoretical and Analytical Considerations"[12].

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[12] R. Rampazzo Gambarato, "Transmedia Project Design: Theoretical and Analytical Considerations" in *Baltic Screen Media Review*, 1:1 (2013)

1. Political communication and new media

1.1 Political communication: definitions and functions

Political communication constitutes a key element for the development of political society because it plays a fundamental role in aggregating and developing people's political and social behaviours. Although it undeniably represents a complex phenomenon that leads to many different interpretations, it is possible to provide a general and broad definition of political communication thanks to the identification of actors and channels of communication: based on the definition given by Mazzoleni, it can be defined as "the exchange and confrontation of contents of public and political interest produced by the political system, the media system and the citizen-voter"[13].

According to Sorice, two main interpretive strands come out of the major studies: the first defines political communication as "all forms of communication, including interpersonal communication with political content", while the second concentrates on the communicator's intention and only includes "forms of communication aimed at influencing the political opinion of the audience"[14] under this definition. A journalist's editorial on a governmental issue and two friends' conversations about the upcoming elections are placed on the same level as both examples are political information as indicated in the first typology, which includes all cases of communication, even informal ones, with a political theme. This concept is fairly broad and encompasses all unintentional and/or indirect "political information" acts. The second macro-definition restricts the scope of the study to all purposeful and intentional messages that aim to sway public opinion. By including (a) all forms of communication used by political actors to accomplish specific objectives (b) all forms of communication addressed to political actors by non-political actors (journalists, voters, civil society in general, etc.), and (c) all forms of communication regarding political actors and their actions (contained in newspapers, media, public debates, etc.), it is possible to better elaborate the concept of political communication (*ibid.*). From this perspective, political communication encompasses all types of political discourse[15]. The content itself is not confined to spoken messages; rather, it is expanded here to include less overt and

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[13] G. Mazzoleni, *La comunicazione politica*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1998, p. 34 (my translation)
[14] M. Sorice, "Comunicazione e politica", in *Dizionario della comunicazione*, ed. by D. E. Viganò, Roma, Carocci, 2009, pp. 1091-1111 (my translation)
[15] B. McNair, *An Introduction to Political Communication,* London, Routledge, 1995

seemingly voluntary aspects in the process of influencing public opinion, such as attire, aesthetics, setting, or elements such as the background music of an election spot, for instance. In this sense, the message is multidimensional; it is not just the words that matter, but also the feelings, perceptions, and experiences that are connected to the message that is meant to be conveyed. Politicians' image is as well influenced by paralinguistic cues including body language, attitude, and clothing, which are also acts of communication.

The focus of the study of political communication is the link between three key elements: politicians, the public, and the media. Political actors, according to Brian McNair (*ibid.*), are people whose goal is to sway the decision-making process through institutional and organisational means. The author includes in this definition political parties, public organisations, pressure groups and terrorist organisations. The target of their persuasion – the audience – is the second element. The audience members represent those who ultimately determine whether the message is successful or not and who can disseminate political messages within the public sphere that can influence political decisions within the social communities they are surrounded by[16]. The target audience could be wide, for example the totality of the voters, or it could be more restricted. Any political communication, regardless of audience size, aims to have an impact. The media organisations, which include print, radio, online channels and so forth, make up the third component. Therefore, political communication has always been a key component of the policymaking process. However, over the past years, several significant structural changes have occurred; political communication has been moving away from traditional media such as newspapers, radio, and television towards the Internet, fundamentally changing this process. A significant part of political communication now consists of discussion on blogs and other online activities like uploading videos to YouTube; the trend has iintensified with the rise of social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and more recently Tik Tok.

1.2 From Mass media to Social media: a new arena for political marketing

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[16] D. G. Lilleker, *Key Concepts in Political Communication,* New York, SAGE Publications, 2006

The book "La politica pop online: I meme e le nuove sfide della comunicazione politica" by Mazzoleni and Bracciale describes mediatization of politics as "the process of adaptation of political communication to business logic"[17]. The habitually autoreferential and tedious political language has gradually adapted to television's and the entertainment industry's narrative rhythms through the development of specific communication skills and strategies. The so-called "personalisation of politics" is also a consequence of mediatization. The authors highlight that the conflicts between political parties are thought to be more spectacular and engaging for the audience if there is a single, charismatic personality representing the whole party. The ideology fades into the background; the politician becomes an entertainer ("politainment") and news outlets tend to build a show around political information, both prioritising emotions over facts and political beliefs ("infotainment"). Political infotainment is, for obvious reasons, considered to be detrimental for the citizens whose right is to be competent and informed about the political situation of their own country; democracy itself is deemed to be endangered by this approach; however, this discussion is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Mazzoleni and Bracciale (*ibid.,* p. 13-17) also outline the transition from old politics to neo-politics, characterised by technological developments that have led to a predominance of online political communication. The authors identify three main stages in this process, concerning the Italian context:
-Silvio Berlusconi's emergence onto the Italian political landscape in 1994 and the use of television as the main means of communication with the audience;
-The diffusion of the World Wide Web and social networks;
-Beppe Grillo and the use of online platforms (in his case, the blog) as a form of communication with the electorate and as a form of activism.

In order to explain the current situation, Mazzoleni and Bracciale mention Chadwick, who refers to a "hybrid media system"[18] in which political communication is situated, making use of both old media and new media. In this system, citizens' political

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[17] G. Mazzoleni - R. Bracciale, *La politica pop online: I meme e le nuove sfide della comunicazione politica,* Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019, p.34 (my translation)
[18] G. Mazzoleni - R. Bracciale, *La politica pop online: I meme e le nuove sfide della comunicazione politica,* Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019, p.34, quoting A. Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System. Politics and Power*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013

engagement online and offline are hardly distinguishable; the citizen, which is in this context the user, is now able to interact and intervene in public political discussion.

The transition to the age of digital media has changed and is changing political communication in a radical way: it removes spatial and temporal barriers; messages can be spread quickly and widely around the world. This makes it more convenient to produce information and opens up possibilities for pervasive action, either individual or collective, on an ever-increasing scale. In this regard, online information is often a mix of information and entertainment, where politicians but also users tend to share it adding their interpretations and frames, in a way that is not too distant from the mass media infotainment that was mentioned in the previous paragraph.

The process of political communication has undergone a general change in recent decades as the flow of information has become massive. Every day, politicians have to deal with and be updated about a very large amount of news. As Sorice[19] explains, this has led to the development of a media-centred democracy, in which the media play a central role in shaping political debate and confrontation. There is a crucial connection between the media system and the world of politics, which shows its influence not only on political communication itself. In fact, one effect of this connection is that politicians tend to conduct a permanent campaign, a phenomenon that was first addressed by the journalist Sidney Blumenthal; it is almost not possible to distinguish between general political and electoral communication. According to Christian Salmon the politician, who is constantly placed under the media spotlight, has to change constantly, adapting to the fluctuating circumstances of the moment; "he will be mouldable at will, able to work on his style, to change his look seamlessly in a permanent political morphing. He must campaign without ever stopping"[20]. With the prevalence of online communication, there is no longer a distinction between the regular political cycle and the election campaign period, in which politicians' communication tended to remarkably increase. The dynamics of communication have become that of a permanent campaign, in which the electoral campaign extends beyond the actual period that was habitually reserved for it. This includes the 'spectacularization' of political information, as well as the prevalence of the need to communicate with the public and be present for the

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[19] M. Sorice, *La comunicazione politica*, Roma, Carocci, 2011

[20] C. Salmon, *Fake: Come la politica mondiale ha divorato sé stessa*, Bari, Laterza, 2020, p.97, translated from French by L. Falaschi (I ed. *L'Ère du clash*, Paris, Fayard, 2019), (my translation)

user/elector over the reasoned drafting and consequent presentation of programmes, on which consensus through votes will eventually be sought. On this subject, Mazzoleni and Bracciale (*La politica pop online: I meme e le nuove sfide della comunicazione politica,* p.29) accentuate the role of digital media in offering politainment new space for expression through digital pop-political content, in which politicians can be subjects or objects of entertainment and that is able to transform the latter into celebrities.

Online political communication is managed and organised by professional spin doctors, who work with politicians with the aim of shaping the image that they intend to convey and helping them influence public opinion. As will be further explained in the next section, these techniques are carefully developed to ensure maximum visibility for political figures or groups, making the language more accessible and spreading the message and information to as many people as possible. Political communication can be aestheticised, which means that the professional politician becomes a media personality, paying attention to their appearance, style and charm, often even more than to the substance of their arguments. Sorice (*La comunicazione politica*) highlights that this trend has led to new forms of communication, branding and political marketing; or, in other words, to the identification of the candidate (leader) as a product, who, in fact, serves the same market logic. The strategy consists therefore of creating a communication strategy to 'sell' the product and to gain consensus, notoriety and legitimacy. This is done especially by promoting disintermediation on social media and avoiding the traditional filters of the political party and the institutional reality of politics. Political and electoral marketing appear therefore to be closely related, although the idea of a 'permanent campaign' has been credited with overcoming the distinction between the two.

1.2.1 Agenda setting and framing

The media operate a decisive influence both on the audience and on the political actors; this double level of influence results in a significant rethinking of their language and rituals and is reflected in the media's power to set the political agenda, which means to

have the autonomy to choose the issues they deem worthy of importance and give them more relevance. As illustrated by Mazzoleni[21], setting the agenda involves two steps:

- Agenda setting: the concept is analysed by McCombs and Shaw[22] and corresponds to the degree of influence exerted by the media on the audience's perceptions of socio-political issues. It focuses on the political involvement and information of the citizens/voters and tends to highlight correspondence between the choice of issues covered by the media and the level of importance it assumes for the target audience.
- Agenda building: this refers to the type of influence that the media has over political actors, emphasising how the former are able to 'impose' certain issues on the latter that, in their opinion, are more interesting than others. This causes the political debate to be directed toward the issues that the media have favoured (*ibid.*).

Furthermore, Mazzoleni (*ibid.*, p. 224) explains that reality can, for these reasons, be transmitted and shaped by the media, thus functioning as providers of keys to the interpretation of political reality, the so-called "frames". The study of the concept of framing is attributed to the sociologist Erving Goffman, who understood it as the process of framing reality through "schemes of interpretation"[23], through which certain aspects of reality are selected, given a certain degree of importance emphasising a particular perspective on the issue at hand, a certain interpretation, or a possible solution. The various framing strategies employed by the media will eventually have an impact on the perception that the final users/citizens will develop about that particular issue, also in relation to their own emotional, psychological and social cognitions, which influence their consequent attitude and choice.

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[21] G. Mazzoleni, *La comunicazione politica*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2012

[22] G. Mazzoleni, *La comunicazione politica*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2012, p. 100, quoting McCombs & Shaw, *The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972

[23] E. Goffman, *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience,* Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1974

In addition, Bruni[24] highlights that each community/culture shares the same frames and is ready to receive the political message in accordance with a specific set of cultural predispositions and values because the type of culture in each society creates narrative patterns over time and space. In addition, the author explains how the decision-making process, which is the base for building consensus, involves mainly emotions and feelings, which play a central role in political cognition, shaping it: enthusiasm and fear are the most involved ones and are declined in many ways by media campaigns that tend to use them as a tool for the creation of shared values, with the aim of influencing predispositions, choices and decisions. Lakoff defines the complex narrative structures used in the political sphere as "cultural narratives"[25], conceptual metaphors capable of recalling cognitive structures in order to convince and influence the electorate.

It can be deduced from the framing techniques implemented in political debates that they, therefore, play a role that is not only limited to that of the transmitters of political information, but is also, at will, a manipulator of the same. The result is the so-called 'media bias'[26]: it might be argued that the selectivity enjoyed by the news media could bring to the foreground only certain political viewpoints, certain aspects of an issue, or even only certain issues, hiding others deemed to be unattractive or saleable from the media perspective, or by proposing them in a particular layout that may coincide with their interests. An essential contribution to the study of media bias has been given by Noam Chomsky and Edwar Herman in 1988. In "Manufacturing Consent"[27], they argue that the US mainstream media promoted propaganda in order to serve elite and governmental objectives: these would in fact represent "powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function, by reliance on market forces, internalised assumptions, and self-censorship, and without overt coercion" (*ibid.*, p.306). Thus, according to the authors, the function of this filtering would be to help the government's domestic policy agenda gain popular support.

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[24] D. Bruni, "Il peso del framing narrativo nella costruzione del consenso politico", in *Rivista Italiana di Filosofia del Linguaggio*, (2016), http://www.rifl.unical.it/index.php/rifl/article/view/371 (accessed on 20th Oct. 2022)

[25] G. Lakoff, *The Political Mind: Why You Can't Understand 21st Century Politics with an 18th Century Brain*, New York, Viking, 2008

[26] D. G. Levasseur, "Media bias", in E*ncyclopedia of political communication*, ed by. L. L. Kaid, New York, Sage Publications, 2008

[27] E. S. Herman - N. Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1988

1.2.2 Spin doctoring: who pulls the strings?

A figure that is common and well-established in this field is that of the spin doctor, which is a specific type of political consultant. As anticipated above, we refer thereby to the experts who choose, organise, and create the communication plans for governments and politicians, whose influence has grown steadily over the past few decades, especially as a consequence of the phenomenon of the mediatization of politics that was addressed previously in this work. Treccani defines a spin doctor as

> A communication expert who works as a consultant on behalf of political figures. His task is to elaborate by means of precise image strategies a suitable appearance of the politician to be submitted through the media to the public opinion, in order to gain electoral consensus or more generally to gain support for his political mandate[28].

It could be argued that the growing power of this figure represents the political world's reaction to the expanding power that communication has gained in this field; its significance has grown to the point that it is now able to determine political actors' success or failure.

Salmon (*Fake*, p. 34) considers 1984 as the symbolic date of its birth. It was at this time that Ronald Reagan made use of professional spin doctors for the first time and initiated the so-called "spin era", where the myth of Reagan as a great communicator represented only the visible side of a behind-the-scenes work performed by his spin doctors. Instead, the first example in the Italian political landscape was represented by Berlusconi who, working with his former spin doctor Luigi Crespi, entered politics after the Tangentopoli scandal with his party Forza Italia and was able to make the most of the television medium by adapting his own language and persona to it, implementing a strategic communication plan which resulted in his triumph at the 1994 elections.

The effectiveness and speed of social networks are slowly pushing television down the list of peoples' favourite media. This is mostly because interactivity is the key distinction between the two tools. Indeed, social media sites like Twitter and Facebook allow voters to freely communicate with politicians and share a variety of content with

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[28] "Spin Doctor", *Enciclopedia Treccani*. https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/spin-doctor/ (accessed on 22nd Oct. 2022), (my translation)

them or at least seem to do so. The traditional media and politicians' monopoly on the news has therefore been challenged by the internet, which offers alternative viewpoints that have a significant impact on political agenda. Party leaders realised they needed to penetrate the internet in order to control it as they were losing control over the agenda of political issues. For this reason, they have once more turned to spin doctors for assistance in order to accomplish this, who have an even more sensitive task to complete than the consultant working before the internet boom; nowadays, politics has become "fast"[29], which means that communication takes place 24 hours a day on social networks and everything is archived on the web and therefore always potentially retrievable. An efficient spin doctor must be familiar with web-specific features in general and with those of the social network that the politician will use to communicate in particular; the professional must also be able to identify a specific target around which a communication strategy will be developed. Giansante[30] lists the tasks a spin doctor should be able to accomplish on social media: help the leader spread the message of his/her campaign; create and stimulate interaction; stimulate discussion that could impact offline activities as well; fundraising; define the image of the candidate that they intend to convey and be consistent with it. Furthermore, to cite a contemporary example, the main goal of Matteo Salvini and his team, which is directed by the spin doctor Luca Morisi, was and is to completely dominate the media and, consequently, the political agenda. The party chooses its issues wisely, opting for those through which they can gain more consensus: in order to control the agenda, one must be able to divert the media during times of political unrest.

Although winning the election is the ultimate goal, controlling the media is the first step in making this potential a reality. In fact, the media never claims to be impartial during an election. The purpose of spin doctors is to craft the ideal narrative for the media and to use these to convey a story that can shape the candidate's narrative identity, which the citizens should be able to relate to. This is due to the fact that a politician's personality and behaviour in election campaigns matter more than his or her messages and ideas.

1.3 Political persuasion: storytelling

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[29] M. Cacciotto, *Il nuovo marketing politico: Vincere le elezioni e governare al tempo della politica veloce*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019
[30] G. Giansante, *La comunicazione politica online*, Roma, Carocci, 2014

When we discuss storytelling, we are referring to the practice of constructing the message as a narrative, in politics, where it is considered to be able to influence the decision-making process of voters, as in many other fields. In his book "Storytelling: La fabbrica delle storie"[31], sociologist Christian Salmon explores how the narrative turn that has occurred in the social sciences since the middle of the 1990s has combined with the explosion of the Internet and information technologies to bring about the triumph of storytelling across all industries, including marketing, media, management, political communication, etc. Salmon expresses a very critical point of view about the way storytelling strategies are employed by these industries. His main concern is related to the fact that as narrative thinking spread to other disciplines, historians, lawyers, economists, politicians and psychologists rediscovered the ability of stories to create reality. These stories might be so convincing that some critics fear they are becoming a dangerous substitute for facts and rational arguments (*ibid.*, p. 8). Furthermore, the presence of a growing number of specialists, consultants, and managers who view storytelling as a collection of mere oratory strategies for achieving professional success has contributed to this scepticism. Salmon claims that storytelling has created a new narrative structure with the intention of manipulating audiences and promoting political and economic propaganda.

As Salmon puts it, "a true narrative and a simple exchange of anecdotes (stories)"[32] are two separate things. Expert in political communication Gianluca Giansante (*ibid.*, p. 29) emphasises the value of using metastories in political discourse. It is important to emphasise that the metastory is a story within a story and serves as an example of a topic or concept. It can be expressed verbally or visually. The narration of an experience that illustrates a campaign element or topic, such as Silvio Berlusconi's anecdotes about Naples tourism or the historical campaign Ashley's Story promoted by the former president of the United States George Bush, is what we refer to as "metastory". When analysing Berlusconi and Obama's communication, Giansante emphasises how each of them exploited particular events that occurred in their own countries. In Berlusconi's

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[31] C. Salmon, *Storytelling: La fabbrica delle storie*, Roma, Fazi, 2008, translated from French by G. Gasparri (I. ed. *Storytelling: La machine à fabriquer des histoires et à formater les esprits*, Paris, Éditions La Découverte, 2008)

[32] G. Giansante, "La narrazione come strumento di framing: le metastorie nel discorso politico di Berlusconi e Obama", *Revista Académica Hologramática,* 10:2 (2009), 21-43 quoting C. Salmon, S*torytelling: La fabbrica delle storie*, Roma, Fazi, 2008, p. 10

example, the "tragedy of Naples' rubbish"[33] and the consequent international media frenzy were used as metastories to support the narrative of the "tragedy of the left". In Obama's case, on the other hand, the scenario he intended to convey concerned the consequences of the economic crisis on the American middle class through metastories that the majority of the electorate can relate to, thereby building the ground for the narration of himself as saviour.

By involving the audience, narratives establish and consolidate the "frames" that categorise common reality. By giving each event a purpose that keeps the audience engaged and enables them to draw a lesson from the tale, the narrative mode links events together. Ventura[34] defines this continuous narration that politicians make of themselves as "ongoing storytelling"; the leaders perform this type of storytelling by intersecting public speeches, social network posts, autobiographical books, interviews, etc. They share symbols and pop-cultural references with their audiences, which allows them to develop a relationship that seems to almost be based on complicity. They must combine a number of functions that, as Peverini[35] explains, are typically distributed throughout a multitude of profiles. The political leader's profile must be promoted in order to establish a close connection of trust between the electorate and the candidate. The politician must be educated about all the major issues that are at stake in the election rather than focusing on just one. Finally, the leader must be able to communicate to and persuade the audience on any subject, even those that do not immediately affect him. Donald Trump can be seen as a striking example: he engages in debates on any domestic issue affecting the United States, from climate change to the cultural landscape. The ability to impose one's own frame on others becomes fundamental since it leads people to discuss the issues on which the politician seems to have more influence than his rivals. The likelihood of polarising discourse on these topics and on themselves increases proportionally with their narratives, the range of issues about which they intervene and their persistent presence on social networks.

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[33] Events involving the improper disposal of toxic waste and the absence of garbage collection in the Province of Naples.
[34] G. Mazzoleni - R. Bracciale, *La politica pop online: I meme e le nuove sfide della comunicazione politica,* Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019, p.41, quoting S. Ventura, *I leader e le loro storie. Narrazione, comunicazione politica e crisi della democrazia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019, p. 75
[35] P. Peverini, "Reputazione e influenza nei social media, una prospettiva sociosemiotica", in *Corpi mediali. Semiotica e contemporaneità* ed. by I. Pezzini - L.Spaziante, Pisa, ETS, 2014

1.3.1 Digital storytelling

When contents are created employing digital tools and are shared online, the narration is performed through digital storytelling, enabling the message of the candidate to be shared more widely. Thanks to recent developments in social media, digital storytelling is gaining increasing importance among the tools of political communication.

The modern phenomena of multimedia and media convergence are made possible by digitalization. Convergence is a process whereby different communication and information tools merge into each other thanks to the potential of digital technology, creating a single interface ready to contain different types of messages. There are two forms of convergence: ″digital″, which consists of the fusion of individual media into a single platform and ″multimedia″, which brings the same content onto different platforms. As stated by Cosenza[36] , "multimedia is the text that brings together: a plurality of media understood as forms of communication, through a unified communication strategy, in a combination of elements that we are not yet used to seeing together, that seems new to us, and that we enjoy through more than one sensory channel". With the use of digital tools, multimedia stories with a significant emotional impact can be produced. The combination of new channels of transmission, which enable the vivid rendering and narration of events, circumstances, and reflections, is the foundation upon which digital stories derive their expressive potential. The main principle of digital storytelling is that the act of using digital tools to tell a narrative may be a vehicle for thought and education about a wide range of topics and circumstances for both the person and the community. Due to its low costs, relative ease of use, versatility, and ease of content correction and editing, digital technology gives individuals and groups access to new forms of expression for telling their own stories. The elimination of physical boundaries, which made possible the immediate worldwide circulation of the political message and enabled new kinds of large-scale collective action, even outside of formal organisations, was one of the most significant features according to Kreiss[37].

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[36] G. Cosenza, *Introduzione alla semiotica dei nuovi media*, Bari, Laterza, 2014, p. 31 (my translation)
[37] D. Kreiss, T*aking our country back: The crafting of networked politics from Howard Dean to Barack Obama*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012

In his book "Fake", Salmon exposes a slightly critical perspective; according to the author, the politician on social media must:

> unveil his intimacy, exhibit emotions that are easy to decipher and capable of 'shocking' the user, of arousing reactions of anger or disgust as strong feelings of adhesion, fear or empathy. In short, he must provide guarantees of its passionate 'humanity'. The laws of political representation, with their rituals and protocols, give way to a logic of transgression and exhibition, the two fuels used to capture attention[38].

Furthermore, he highlights how web 2.0 would favour the spread and multiplication of tales and support the establishment of new behaviours, including deception, propaganda, and obfuscation tactics.

To conclude, Giansante (*La comunicazione politica online*) emphasises that participation must transfer from the web into real life, because that is where the political message must be applied. Digital storytelling can only fully realise its potential if it can also inspire actions outside of the network environment. The entire online communication strategy must be created to inspire supportive offline actions, such as voting, attending events, and organising to persuade others.

1.4 The role of images in online political communication

Nowadays, visual public content and visual private content are considered on the same level in the communication process, thanks to the extensive use of social media, platforms that are able to simplify access and appropriation of visual content[39]. Moroni[40] emphasises that pictures are not always shared on social media in combination with text; instead, pictures frequently substitute text. Consequently, according to the author, pictures acquire a conversational power; their appearance loses importance, while their potential of use gains prominence. Furthermore, images should not be considered

[38] C. Salmon, *Fake: Come la politica mondiale ha divorato sé stessa*, Bari, Laterza, 2020, p.76, translated from French by L. Falaschi (I ed. *L'Ére du clash*, Paris, Fayard, 2019), (my translation)
[39] A. Micalizzi - T. Piccioni, "I politici nella Rete: il ruolo delle immagini nella narrazione social" in *Social media e politica: Esperienze, analisi e scenari della nuova comunicazione politica*, ed. by C. Riva, Torino, UTET Università, 2021, pp. 63-79
[40] A. Micalizzi - T. Piccioni, "I politici nella Rete: il ruolo delle immagini nella narrazione social", p.65 quoting C. Moroni, "La politica si fa immagine" in *H-ermes. Journal of communication*, 15, pp. 185-228, 2019

stand-alone content; when shared on social media platforms they receive feedback from users (likes, comments) and thus should be examined as part of a broader and more complex narrative. However, it is possible that this narrative could be fragmented and therefore a visual content could be autonomous and not related to the broader narrative; in this case, the image carries a dynamic meaning that is open to interpretation (*ibid.*, p. 66). Politics is involved in this process as well; politicians use social media platforms to create and transmit a certain image of themselves (which should ideally correspond to their political message and their values) adopting strategies that are not too distant from those of regular users; their contents appear to be more and more connected to their private life than to the country's issues. This leads to the personalization of politics that was discussed before in this thesis and has the ability to immediately engage the audience, making it easier to receive feedback (for example through likes and comments): the politician is portrayed as a competent professional leader but also as a person leading an ordinary life (private persona). Tools such as the selfie are functional to this goal; according to Karadimitriou and Veneti[41], the selfie has a strong impact because it is an uncensored image that conveys a sense of intimacy, is a tool for self-promotion and is able to catch the attention of the media. In order to enhance the engagement of the audience, even spontaneous pictures are usually strategically designed, so that the ideals and values that they intend to transmit appear to be actually internalised and therefore authentic (we can think of countless politicians sharing supposedly spontaneous pictures of themselves shaking hands of ordinary citizens).

Furthermore, political actors tend to portray themselves, through the pictures they share on social media, both as ordinary citizens and as "celebrities" that feel the need to share their private moments with their followers, contributing to activating an emotional response in the user and therefore to establish a deeper politician-elector relationship as an effect of the phenomenon of personalization. In their paper, Mattias Ekman and Andreas Widholm analyse Instagram's features in the context of visual political communication in relation to the theories of mediatization and celebrity politics. They

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[41] G. Mazzoleni - R. Bracciale, *La politica pop online: I meme e le nuove sfide della comunicazione politica,* Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019, p.45, quoting A. Karadimitriou - A. Veneti, "Political Selfies: Image Events in the New Media Field" in *The Digital Transformation of the Public Sphere: Conflict, Migration, Crisis, and Culture in Digital Networks*, ed. by A. Karatzogianni, D. Nguyen e A. Serra, London, Palgrave, 2016, pp. 321-340

focus on the structure of the platform as the reason for choosing this type of self-centred approach, stating as follows:

> This form of 'celebritization' contributes to a depoliticization of public discourses, primarily by shifting focus from ideological questions to lifestyle politics. Even when political issues are manifested, they come to the fore with an emphasis on the persona or on the achievements of the particular individual. Depoliticization should not be seen as a general characteristic of politicians' communication through social media. Rather it should be seen as an adaptation to the socio-technical affordances of Instagram as a communicative platform where style, looks and visual performativity are central features.[42]

They conclude by observing that, based on their study, "politicians with a less self-centred style have lower network centrality and fewer followers, which indicates that they need to adapt to Instagram's aesthetic conventions in order to be successful" (*ibid*.). A similar opinion is also proposed by Xénia Farkas[43]: according to the author, visual political communication on social media not only gives political actors control over how their visual presentation and messages are framed but on these platforms, everything can be and presumably needs to be presented visually due to social media's predominantly visual nature.

To conclude, this chapter has introduced, on multiple occasions, topics that are strictly related to the concept of popularisation of politics. The next chapter will discuss this notion and present the actors in more detail, before focusing on the relevant phenomenon of transmedia storytelling and its strategic application in political campaigns.

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[42] M. Ekman, A. Widholm, "Political communication in an age of visual connectivity: Exploring instagram practices among swedish politicians" in *Northern Lights*, 15:1 (2017), p.29 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325767652_Political_communication_in_an_age_of_visual_connectivity_Exploring_instagram_practices_among_swedish_politicians (accessed on 14th Nov. 2022)

[43] X. Farkas, *Visual politics: Visual political communication on social media*, Doctoral Thesis, Budapest, Doctoral School of international relations and political science Corvinus University of Budapest, 2022

2. Pop politics and Transmedia storytelling

2.1 What is pop politics?

According to the definition given by Ilvo Diamanti, pop politics is "the transformation of the political system and political communication towards forms of spectacularization and personalization, in which the media are the driving force but politicians are enthusiastic actors"[44]. On this subject, Mazzoleni and Sfardini state that "we are witnessing a popularisation of media culture in which the contents of political communication and information become like other products, objects of wide consumption and thus respond to the logic of media industries and production of popular culture"[45]. This means that facts, subjects, stories and words that belong to the political field, which is traditionally associated to complexity and self-referentiality and considered as a world distant from ordinary citizens' daily lives, become through the media familiar realities, objects of curiosity and interest, topics of discussion, sources of entertainment, which could be considered almost at the same level of stories and characters that actually belong to the world of entertainment. Political leaders tend to express themselves almost exclusively through media performances, aiming to entertain the public and foster a form of popular involvement in politics.

Mazzoleni and Bracciale (*La politica pop online: I meme e le nuove sfide della comunicazione politica*, p.29) affirm that the development of new pop politics, which transcends traditional media, particularly television, and is enhanced through online platforms and the creativity of their users, is rooted in the new ecology of political communication. The authors highlight that the employment of pop cultural elements, especially on social media, is a very interesting object of study since it would allow stories, subjects and facts to be deconstructed and then reconstructed through new codes and narrations, becoming objects of entertainment that are not, however, detached from political aims. As a result, contents that are contaminated with pop cultural references become tools employed by various political actors (leaders, parties, activists, supporters) in an effort to increase engagement and visibility.

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[44] I. Diamanti, "Prefazione", in , *Politica Pop. Da «Porta a Porta» «all'isola dei famosi»*, ed. by G. Mazzoleni - A. Sfardini, Bologna, il Mulino, 2009, p. 7 (my translation)
[45] G. Mazzoleni - A. Sfardini, *Politica pop. Da "Porta a Porta" a "L'Isola dei famosi"*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2009, p. 26 (my translation)

Concerning the popularisation of politics, Van Zoonen[46] draws attention to the fact that it can appear in two distinct modalities: 1) the pop representation of politics, political stories and their protagonists in media products, and 2) the employment of pop codes by political actors when performing on media stages. In the former, the media process political contents (mainly information) intentionally or unintentionally, through a form of "self-production"[47], the latter includes various forms of adaptation of political actors to the logic of mediatisation. This thesis' main aim is to explore in more detail the second form of popularisation of politics, which concerns the employment of pop cultural elements by political actors on social media; however, it will be interesting throughout this work to give insight into both forms of pop politics.

2.1.1 Infotainment, soft news and politainment

In order to describe the processes of popularisation, scientific literature employs three neologisms: infotainment, soft news and politainment, concepts that have already been introduced in the first chapter of this thesis and that will be further elaborated in this section.

As anticipated previously in this work, the term 'infotainment' refers to the merging of information and entertainment performed by the media. Mazzoleni and Sfardini (*Politica pop. Da "Porta a Porta" a "L'Isola dei famosi"*, p. 28) explain that it is used both for political information transmitted in an entertaining way and for entertainment programmes that address political issues and talk about political leaders. Infotainment programmes transmit political news and other tabloid or chronicle news with the same tone, always emphasising its more popular and sensationalist side. Satire programmes such as 'Striscia la notizia', widely known as a satirical news programme, represent another type of infotainment programme, where politicians and political issues are treated with irony and favouring a 'politically incorrect' approach. Besides, one of the ways infotainment is realised is favouring the transmission of 'soft news', a term that refers to news told in a sensationalist manner, often in the form of gossip; it is a way of

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[46] G. Mazzoleni - A. Sfardini, *Politica pop. Da "Porta a Porta" a "L'Isola dei famosi"*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2009 quoting E. Van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2005

[47] G. Mazzoleni - A. Sfardini, *Politica pop. Da "Porta a Porta" a "L'Isola dei famosi"*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2009 quoting F. Boni, *Il superleader. Fenomenologia mediatica di Silvio Berlusconi*, Roma, Meltemi, 2008

lightening the news and making it more pleasant and less boring. Therefore, for some time now, hard news has given way to soft news, at the expense of serious and objective political information[48].

The third term, 'politainment', similarly to that of infotainment, indicates the union of politics and entertainment; however, there is a main difference: it is performed by the political actor and not by media, who appear in the various products of popular culture, such as films, soap operas, gossip magazines, talk shows, etc. and is presented as a celebrity. However, there is a form of politainment where politics and politicians become the objects of entertainment: numerous songs, books, movies, comedy shows and more pop cultural products aim to inspire engagement, support a cause or criticise others. With the diffusion of web 2.0, a shift to online politainment has occurred, which benefits from new spaces for creation and fruition on the various social media platforms available (*ibid.,* p. 39).

Besides, Mazzoleni and Sfardini (*Politica pop. Da "Porta a Porta" a "L'Isola dei famosi"*) argue that neo-politicians or aspirants to politics belonging to the world of entertainment have a need, related to their "primary" profession, to frequent television studios and exploit all the opportunities the show offers since television is the source of their popularity and, consequently, their political fortune. As a result, television weaves into its discourse elements that refer to one role or the other, favouring the principle of discordance between the communicative situation and the guest's competencies on which pop politics depends (*ibid.*). Numerous examples are available of both politicians entering the world of entertainment and of celebrities/entertainers starting a career in politics. As concerns the first category, few politicians can be excluded nowadays; however, some represent a very striking example: we can think of Silvio Berlusconi, who has been one of the first to attend entertainment programmes on a regular basis. As concerns the second category, which is of greater interest due to its minor popularity, the art critic Vittorio Sgarbi offers a clear example of this merging: he started as a host in the Maurizio Costanzo Show and his 'loud' personality has proven to be ideal for the political arena of the 1990s, becoming member of the Parliament numerous times. To cite a contemporary example in the Italian context, the television host Rita dalla Chiesa

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[48] G. Mazzoleni - R. Bracciale, op. cit., p.35

has been elected Member of the Chamber on the occasion of the presidential elections of 25th September 2022. Lastly, the last Northamerican elections offer us an interesting case: with the pseudonym of Dr. Oz, Mehmet Öz, a surgeon, opinionist, television host and Trump supporter, ran for the Senate, yet failed.

To conclude, the three actors (political leaders, media, citizen/users) involved in this new communication system, which is characterised by disintermediation and horizontal interactivity, seem to have found in pop political contents a meeting point, since all three express their political engagement with the production or the fruition of these contents[49].

2.1.2 Actors of online pop politics

In this section, the characteristics and motivations of the three actors involved in the fruition and production of online pop politics will be presented.

First of all, political leaders or parties acknowledge the potential of pop cultural references in their social media posts and activities and therefore tend to employ these pop resources to increase visibility and ameliorate the communication with the citizen/user proving their mutual closeness by means of shared knowledge. According to Mazzoleni and Bracciale (*ibid.,* p. 41), the key to a successful communication is to use the *koine* of the world of entertainment, which is widely known and shared, making pop politics one of the most effective means for the citizen to get closer to the world of politics. What the concepts that were introduced before, such as personalization, intimization, celebrity politics and lifestyle politics have in common is on one side the progressive leaderization of politics; on the other side, the merging of everyday life and politics, making these perfectly fit in the classification of pop politics' dynamics (*ibid.*, p. 42). We could provide many examples of politicians adopting these strategies, indeed the authors name Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, Northamerican politician and activist, as a representative of celebrity politics since her behaviour resembles that of an influencer, who shares many moments of her private life with her followers that she considers as friends. As concerns the Italian landscape, Matteo Salvini perfectly embodies the

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[49] G. Mazzoleni - R. Bracciale, op. cit., p.40

strategy of intimate politics, in light of the fact that his private affairs are widely shared and discussed on social media platforms, along with his numerous selfies (*ibid.*, p.44). The former president Donald Trump, instead, is a particularly valuable example when it comes to Twitter as a means to communicate directly with the citizens; Salmon, in his previously mentioned book Fake (p. 27) analyses Trump's use of Twitter and argues that he cannot be considered a storyteller, since his aim is exclusively that of fostering anger through his tweets filled with resentment and often based on fake news. Lives on Facebook, games and contests, are some further techniques that leaders employ in order to exploit pop cultural references' potential to progress towards disintermediated communication with the citizen and greater visibility.

Secondly, the media represent an additional actor involved especially in the distribution of pop politics in the form of politainment. Mazzoleni and Bracciale[50] identify three modalities in which traditional media and new media cooperate and intersect:
- when traditional media such as television or books produce content dealing with the impact of new media (we can think of the series "Black Mirror") or analysing the use of digital media in political campaigns, for example;
- when traditional media, such as television shows dealing with politics ("Propaganda Live" is the example provided by the authors), share content that is traditionally generated and shared on the web (memes, tweets, videos, pictures);
- when new media share content that is traditionally transmitted on traditional media (for example the clip of a political rally transmitted on television).

Finally, the third actor to be considered is the citizen/user. Their engagement in political issues is proven by the numerous user-generated content that appear in social networks' feeds. This is particularly observable in pre-electoral periods or in general when a political issue is more present in public debate. Memes are a form of expression that is more peculiar when talking about pop politics and user-generated content.

2.2 Memes as a pop cultural phenomenon

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[50] G. Mazzoleni - R. Bracciale, op. cit., p.48

When discussing digital popular culture and pop politics, the humorous-satirical register is one of the preferential registers. The *meme* can be considered the most significant cultural product. In an effort to explain how culture spreads, the biologist Richard Dawkins, in his text "The Selfish Gene"[51], proposed that memes exist as the cultural equivalent of genes, as both facilitate the transmission of information through a process of evolutionary imitation. The word "meme" is a translation of the Greek verb "mimema", which means to imitate. To further emphasise the similarities between the two ideas, Dawkins then abbreviated the phrase to meme so that it would rhyme with gene. Dawkins claims that memes are products (such as melodies, artefacts, and so forth) containing the instructions for the replication of culture, whereas genes carry the instructions for the reproduction of specific biological features (*ibid*.).

Nowadays, with the diffusion of the Internet, the concept has thoroughly evolved; when we mention memes, we refer mostly to internet memes, of which an academic definition is not easy to find. In his paper, Carlo Mauricio Castaño Díaz attempts to reconstruct a definition of the internet meme (IM) as follows:

> An *internet meme* is a *unit of information* (idea, concept or belief), which *replicates* by passing on via *Internet* (e-mail, chat, forum, social networks, etc.) in the *shape* of a hyper-link, video, image, or phrase. It can be passed on *as an exact copy or can change and evolve.* The *mutation* on the replication can be by meaning, keeping the structure of the meme or vice versa. The mutation occurs by *chance, addition or parody,* and its *form* is not relevant. An IM *depends* both *on a carrier* and a *social context* where the transporter acts as a filter and decides what can be passed on. It *spreads horizontally* as a virus at a *fast and accelerating* speed. It *can be interactive* (as a game), and some people relate them with creativity. Its *mobility, storage, and reach* are web-based (Hard disks, cell phones, servers, cloud, etc.). They *can be manufactured* (as in the case of viral marketing) *or emerge* (as an offline event taken online). Its *goal* is to be known well enough to replicate within a group.[52]

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[51] J. Carter, *Enchanting Memes: Memetic Politics In The Face Of Technocratic Control*, Dissertation, Lincoln, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2016, p. 6 quoting R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1976, p.192

[52] C. M. Castaño Díaz, "Defining and characterizing the concept of Internet Meme" in *CES Psicologia*, 6:2, Copenhagen, University of Copenhagen, 2013, pp. 82-104

Knobel and Lankshear[53] have proposed a classification that takes into account the communication objectives of the producer and the type of meme that is produced. The first typology is connected to the communication object that the authors name "social commentary purposes", associating serious ideas with vernacular interpretations with the aim of commenting on or criticising contemporary social issues. The second typology only comprises humorous aims, which the authors call "absurdist humour purposes". It encompasses products such as parodies of mainstream cultural products, photoshopped images, etc. The meaning of both types of meme has to be interpreted by analysing the product as a semantic field, with multiple levels of meaning, in order to be correctly understood[54]. Mazzoleni and Bracciale (*ibid.*) point out that in memes with a political theme, there are two levels of interpretation: a pop element that is present in the collective consciousness and an element that is connected to an issue covered by the media and widely shared on social media. In order to exemplify this, we can observe and analyse the following meme (Fig. 2.1):

Fig. 2.1

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[53] G. Mazzoleni - R. Bracciale, *La politica pop online: I meme e le nuove sfide della comunicazione politica,* Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019, p.61 quoting M. Knobel - C. Lankshear, "Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Production" in *A New Literacies Sampler*, ed. by M. Knobel - C. Lankshear, New York, Peter Lang, 2007, pp. 199-227
[54] G. Mazzoleni - R. Bracciale, *La politica pop online: I meme e le nuove sfide della comunicazione politica,* Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019, p.63 quoting L. Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 2014

Meme "Luke, sono il tuo congiunto". Source: Il Corriere della Sera, "Il 2020 in 20 meme virali sui social", 22 Dec. 2020 https://www.corriere.it/tecnologia/cards/da-morgan-bugo-scarpe-lidl-2020-20-meme-virali-social/i-meme-2020-congiunti.shtml

The pop cultural element that could potentially be recognizable by the majority of the users is clear: the visual element is a reference to Star Wars and in particular to the famous scene when Darth Vader confesses to Luke that he is his father. There is, however, a second element to be considered: the political issue. The text "Luke, sono io il tuo congiunto" (Luke, I am your relative) contains a reference to the register adopted in the decrees issued by the Italian government during the lockdown period due to the Covid-19 pandemic. "Congiunti" is the term that appears in these decrees to indicate close relatives that can be visited; this is the reason why the meme employs this word in place of the word "father". In order to recognize this second element, the user must preferably live in Italy and be informed about the political events of the country; it depends therefore on the context of fruition. As a result, for the users who can understand both the cultural and the political references, this meme will appear as successful humorous content.

2.2.1 The role of memes in political public debate

Highfield[55] affirms that nowadays, political memes represent one of the most common ways for citizens/users to analyse and discuss politics on social media, making them one of the major modalities of expression of online pop politics that are able to amplify the possibilities of participation in public debate. Previously in this thesis, the concept of "mediatization" of politics has been addressed, in particular when referring to the role of television; in this section, instead, we will observe how politics is undergoing a process of "memeification" on social media.

Three actors are mainly included in this discussion: political leaders, the media and citizens/users. The strategic use that political leaders make of this type of

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[55] G. Mazzoleni - R. Bracciale, *La politica pop online: I meme e le nuove sfide della comunicazione politica,* Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019, p.89 quoting T. Highfield, "Tweeted Joke Life Spans and Appropriated Punch Lines: Practices around Tropical Humor on Social Media", in *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 2014, pp. 2713-2734

communication has been defined as "participatory propaganda"[56]; this definition includes the attempt to influence electors' perceptions and behaviours and to foster grassroot movements to undertake action and help spread information. The leaders themselves, in fact, often tend to share memes on their social media feeds with the aim of increasing their visibility, spreading a certain message, gaining consent and encouraging mobilisation. This is the case, among others, of the Vice President of the Council and leader of the Lega Matteo Salvini, who is particularly active in the production of memes as a way to communicate with the electors. The following image (Fig. 2.2) represents humorous content created by Matteo Salvini using a popular template and shared on his social media accounts. His aim is to criticise the decisions taken by Giuseppe Conte in his role as President of the Council during the pandemic, ridiculing his position, trivialising the decisions taken and provoking the spirits of the most intolerant. In this meme, Matteo Salvini puts the decrees that forbade transitions between municipalities and the revision of the immigration decree on the same level.

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[56] G. Mazzoleni - R. Bracciale, *La politica pop online: I meme e le nuove sfide della comunicazione politica,* Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019, p.99 quoting A. Wanless - M. Berk, "Participatory Propaganda: The Engagement of Audiences in the Spread of Persuasive Communications", in Proceedings of the Social Media & Social Order, Oslo, Culture Conflict 2.0 Conference, 2017

Fig. 2.2

Meme shared by Matteo Salvini on his Facebook and Instagram accounts. His intention is to highlight how Giuseppe Conte took decisions against the transition between municipalities during the pandemic but would be favourable to receiving immigrants from Africa. Source: Matteo Salvini (Facebook account), 6 Dec. 2020 https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10158266698588155&set=a.10151670912208155

Furthermore, the figures below (Fig. 2.3, Fig 2.4) represent a case of self-parody. The first image is part of a campaign initiated by the Secretary of the left-wing Partito Democratico, Enrico Letta. A dichotomous scheme was chosen; the black and red campaign aims to polarise the electorate before the Italian elections of September 2022, opposing the colour traditionally associated with the extreme right (black) and the colour which is traditionally associated with the left (red). In this figure in particular, he opposes two values: discrimination and rights, while his figure appears on the background of the red side of the image along with the slogan "Scegli" ("Choose") and the logo of the Party. However, the campaign incorporates multiple images with the

same scheme: "With Putin" versus "With Europe", "Fossil fuel" versus "Renewable energy" and so forth.

Fig. 2.3
Part of the black and red campaign initiated by Enrico Letta and shared on his Twitter profile. Source: Enrico Letta (@enricoletta), Twitter, 26 Aug. 2022 https://twitter.com/enricoletta/status/1563059176518979584

After a relatively short amount of time, the Secretary shares a meme on Twitter (Fig. 2.3), created on the same scheme but representing a dichotomy which is, of course, not relevant in the political context: the choice is now between "pancetta" and "guanciale" as the principal ingredient of carbonara, with the sole aim of being ironic and probably trying to exploit the force of humour to gain greater consent. Later, the leader of the Lega Matteo Salvini takes the chance to repropose this format and use it against his creator, with the dichotomy "I go to France" and "I stay in Italy", referring to the leader's past years in Paris, when he was the director of the institute of political studies

Sciences Po. This meme has also triggered the reaction of the users/electors, who have responded by creating numerous memes with the same scheme.

Fig. 2.4
Enrico Letta shares this meme created on the scheme of the black and red campaign on Twitter. Source: Enrico Letta (@enricoletta), Twitter, 26 Aug, 2022 https://twitter.com/EnricoLetta/status/1563055609867804673

Mazzoleni and Bracciale (*ibid*., p.106) identify two functions in the relationship between media and memes: the first is the necessity to cover viral news and events circulating on the web and avoid isolation, generally resorting to user-generated content, while the second concerns the self-production of memes to regain centrality in this new communication environment and gradually emancipate from the mere distribution function. The following video frame (Fig. 2.5) represents a valid example of the first case: the Italian satirical television program "Striscia la Notizia" displays a collection of memes following the Italian elections of September 2022, at the same time fulfilling the information function (in this case, the slow formation of the government after the

election of Giorgia Meloni) and trying to avoid isolation adapting their modality to discuss politics to the current dominant communication environment.

Fig. 2.5

A video frame of the satirical television program "Striscia la Notizia". Source: Striscia la notizia, "Giorgia Meloni e la Fdi governo, i meme più divertenti", 7 Oct. 2022 https://www.striscialanotizia.mediaset.it/video/giorgia-meloni-e-la-squadra-di-governo-i-meme-piu-divertenti_78166/

The third actor, the citizen/user, according to Mazzoleni and Bracciale (*ibid.*, p. 111) becomes an essential part in the process of covering the issues of the public agenda. In fact, thanks to the production of these multimedia humorous and satirical content, what the authors call "media citizenship" evolves from having a representative status to gaining a productive one, which concerns not only the humorous and satirical dimension but also the active involvement and participation in political issues. The citizens might therefore share memes solely for a humorous purpose, but in the case of political memes, they undoubtedly express, in the majority of cases, a polarised political point of view and help the community of users to have an idea of current events. As a consequence, memes indeed represent a powerful means of expression that can help spread and support certain ideologies and contrast and criticise others. They can consist of remixed images, videos, songs, and so forth, as in the case of "Io sono Giorgia". During a rally in Rome in 2019, the now President of the Council Giorgia Meloni expressed her values by uttering the phrase "Io sono Giorgia, sono una madre, sono

italiana, sono cristiana" ("I am Giorgia, I am a mother, I am Italian, I am Christian") during a speech against LGBTQ+ claims. Afterwards, a music remix appeared on the Youtube channel of two Italian DJs, which soon acquired large visibility. This remix fostered the creation of numerous memes, videos and music covers and also reached television programs, both with the aim of mocking Giorgia Meloni's conservative ideologies and with the sole purpose of entertaining. Giorgia Meloni herself was then able to exploit the success of her phrase and the popularity the video had achieved by mentioning it or singing it on several occasions, among which rallies and interviews in talk shows, with the aim of transmitting the image of a politician who can overcome the borders between politicians and electorate, can make fun of herself and can adopt a modern approach, although the message emphasised the party's conservative imprint. However, this episode in particular shows an increased importance of the entertaining and pop side of the meme at the expense of the political message[57] ; the chance to exploit such viral content for constructive purposes has in this case been missed, yet it should be considered that it is unquestionably not always the case.

In order to describe the popularity that memes acquired in public debate, Michieletto quotes Beckwith[58], who provides an example noticing how Barack Obama was awarded the title of "first meme President" after his election against Republican candidate Mitt Romney in 2012, during the campaign that was later defined "Meme election" because of the large number of memes it generated. Instead, the 2016 election, which had Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton as unquestioned protagonists, was labelled "Great Meme War"[59], during which electors were influenced through manipulated messages pro-Trump and against Clinton shared through memes. It is interesting to see how politicians from all over the world, as public figures embodying specific clichés, enter the collective language of users through the countless numbers of memes that feature

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[57] J. Stevanovic, "La politica pop online: i meme nella sfera pubblica" in *Social media e politica: Esperienze, analisi e scenari della nuova comunicazione politica*, ed. by C. Riva, Torino, UTET Università, 2021, pp. 95-113

[58] M. Michieletto, *Internet meme come strumento di legittimazione nel marketing e nella politica*, Bachelor Thesis, Università degli studi di Padova, Padova. 2020, p. 75 quoting R. Beckwith, *Obama: The first meme president*, 2016
http://www.mercurynews.com/politics-national/2012/10/obama-thefirst-meme-president/ (accessed on 28th Oct. 2022)

[59] Mazzoleni - R. Bracciale, *La politica pop online: I meme e le nuove sfide della comunicazione politica*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019, p.126 quoting W. Merrin, "President Troll: Trump, 4Chan and Memetic Warfare", in *Trump's Media War*, ed. by A. Hoskins - W. Merrin, Cham (CH), MacMillan, pp. 201-226

them or even convey meanings unique to them, sometimes crossing national boundaries and becoming global icons.

2.3 Convergence culture and Transmedia storytelling

The audience's expectations of how, when, and where information is consumed are shifting as a result of the complex contemporary media landscape. New kinds of storytelling, in which integrated narratives are delivered across numerous media, are being developed as a result of media convergence, making it more and more usual to engage audiences through games, content remixing, and original user-generated content[60]. Due to the emergence of convergence culture, the interaction that individuals have with media on a daily basis has become more complicated from the perspectives of the media platforms and made the distinction between public consumption and production more obscure (*ibid.*).

Transmedia storytelling is closely related to convergence, which Jenkins defines in his essay "Convergence culture" as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want"[61]. Furthermore, in the aforementioned work, Henry Jenkins analyses contemporary culture in relation to media elements more thoroughly. Jenkins uses the terms inventive (new technologies are subject to constant development), convergent (there is a convergence of new and old media), daily (since media are now a part of daily life), interactive (they are able to interact with media products), participatory (the consumer becomes producer), global (interaction with products is possible regardless of their place of origin), generational (different generations access the same media with different approaches), and unequal (there is a digital divide based on economic possibilities, education, quality of infrastructure, age or gender, etc.) to define the current media environment (*ibid.*). Jenkins also theorises the transition from consumption to participation. The user evolves from being merely a consumer of

[60] R. Rampazzo Gambarato - S. Medvedev, "Transmedia Storytelling Impact on Government Policy Change" in *Politics, Protest, and Empowerment in Digital Spaces,* ed. by Y. Ibrahim, Hershey, IGI Global, 2017, pp. 31-51 quoting P. von Stackelberg - R. E. Jones, "Tales of our tomorrows: Transmedia storytelling and communicating about the future" in *Journal of Futures Studies*, 18:3 (2014), pp. 57–76
[61] H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide,* New York, New York University Press, 2006, p.2

content to also being a producer; it is important to highlight that one does not exclude the other. The users whose online activities in relation to contents are both active and passive are called "produsers"[62] a portmanteau of the words *producer* and *user* coined by Axel Bruns, and defined as "active audience"[63] by Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri. According to Jenkins (*Convergence Culture*), one may speak of "participatory culture" in this context when describing the consumer who becomes a producer in their own right. Jenkins thus connects the idea of convergent culture to participatory culture, which offers users of the Internet a wider range of options for content creation and consumption. This is a cultural shift rather than a strictly technological one because it encourages individuals to search for and consume content across several mediums.

Transmedia storytelling is described by Henry Jenkins, who is considered the theoretical father of this concept, as the "flow of content across multiple media channels"[64]. He argues that in its ideal form, transmedia storytelling should promote creative evolution by utilising each media platform's creative potential. Thus, transmedia storytelling refers to a technique where essential components of a story are systematically distributed across a variety of channels in order to produce a cohesive and well-coordinated entertainment experience. Each media potentially adds something special to the narration. A similar definition is proposed by Morreale and Chayaa: "a transmedia project uses different types of media in a complementary and coordinated way to tell a story"[65]. Arcagni, in addition, emphasises the importance of narrative environments, stating as follows:

> A transmedia narrative dissociates from a traditional narrative scheme because it acts by narrative environments. Narrative environments evaluate both cultural and technological mediums as different use modalities so that the contents can be adapted for different mediums and the public can make use of it in any time, way and space. A fundamental aspect is consumption because each content spread on a specific medium has to consider the specific

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[62]A. Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond: From Production to Produsage,* New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 2008

[63] S. Bentivegna - G. Boccia Artieri, *Le teorie delle comunicazioni di massa e la sfida del digitale*, Bari, Laterza, 2019, pp. 143-146.

[64] H. Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling: Moving Characters from Books to Films to Video Games Can Make Them Stronger and More Compelling" in *MIT Technology Review,* 2003 https://www.technologyreview.com/2003/01/15/234540/transmedia-storytelling/ (accessed on 31st Oct. 2022)

[65] D. Morreale - P. Chaaya, "Transmedia Series and Project Dissemination" in *Emerging Series Journal,* n.5, pp. 38-49, Torino, Edizioni Kaplan, 2016, p.41

features, the technological limits and also the cultural and social characteristics of the consumption modalities and the engagement of the public. Building a transmedia narrative means having a wide vision at the origin of the narration and designing it as a generative, liquid and alterable narration.[66].

Furthermore, Francoli[67] defines a transmedia campaign as a coordinated set of activities and organised efforts that use several media channels to accomplish a social, political, or commercial purpose. As an example, one may imagine a story full of intrigue, mystery, and action launched through a short film and an episodic e-book that can be downloaded from the project's website that explores the story of each character. Additionally and above all, the user experience can be made more engaging by means of social media, for example bringing the plot to life through a contest. The case portrayed exemplifies a transmedia work, whose narrative form perfectly suits a new audience that is constantly in search of a narrative universe that can be explored and in which users can intervene.

2.3.1 Types of transmedia storytelling

The article "Transmedia Project Design: Theoretical and Analytical Considerations" by Renira Rampazzo Gambarato[68] illustrates two different classifications of transmedia storytelling types: the first one was developed by Christy Dena and the second one, whose exclusive difference lies in the fact that a third typology was added, was formulated by Robert Pratten.

Two main transmedia types are mentioned by Christy Dena: the first type is commonly known as "franchise", or a collection of mono-medium stories that the author calls "intracompositional", in which, for instance, a book, a movie, and a video game each contribute with different stories to one single and broader story-world; the second type

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[66] Nefula, "Simone Arcagni: Transmedia means building narrative environments", 2017. https://nefula.com/conversation/arcagni-transmedia-means-building-narrative-environments/ (accessed on 2nd Nov. 2022)
[67] D. Morreale - P. Chaaya, "Transmedia Series and Project Dissemination" quoting M. Francoli, "Exploring the concept of "social media campaign."" in *Transforming politics and policy in the digital age* a cura di J. Bishop, Hershey, IGI Global, 2014, 133–144
[68] R. Rampazzo Gambarato, "Transmedia Project Design: Theoretical and Analytical Considerations" in *Baltic Screen Media Review*, 1:1 (2013), pp. 81-100

refers to a multitude of media that tells a single story, for instance, a show that airs concurrently on television and the web[69].

Despite the employment of a different nomenclature, Robert Pratten describes three forms of transmedia storytelling: a) transmedia franchise, where different media outlets (for example a book, a tv series and a movie) are independent but involved since they cover different narrative spaces, such as prequels and sequels of the same story; b) portmanteau transmedia, where various platforms work together to provide a single experience and the content of the story is concurrently delivered across a variety of media platforms, each making a significant contribution to the overall narrative; c) complex transmedia experience, which combines franchise and portmanteau and thus provides the audience with a wide-ranging experience[70]. Because it embraces the intrinsic complexity of transmedia projects more clearly, Gambarato considers Pratten's classification to be the most relevant in this context (*ibid.*).

2.3.2 The seven principles

Henry Jenkins, in his famous speech "Revenge of the Origami Unicorn: Seven Principles of Transmedia Storytelling" held at MIT in November 2009, outlined the founding concepts of transmedia, proposing seven key principles that characterise transmedia storytelling: Spreadability vs. Drillability, Continuity vs. Multiplicity, Immersion vs. Extractability, Worldbuilding, Seriality, Subjectivity, and Performance[71].

1) Spreadability: Jenkins (*ibid*.) refers hereby to the capacity of audiences to actively participate in the social network-based distribution of media content in a so-called "going viral" process, hence increasing its economic and cultural value. This can happen accidentally or be engineered.

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[69] R. Rampazzo Gambarato, "Transmedia Project Design: Theoretical and Analytical Considerations" quoting C. Dena, "Do you have a big stick?" in *Hand Made High Tech: Essays on the Future of Books and Reading* ed. by S. Groth, Brisbane, Institute for the Future of the Book in Australia, 2011, pp. 47–50, p.48

[70] R. Rampazzo Gambarato, "Transmedia Project Design: Theoretical and Analytical Considerations" quoting R. Pratten, *Getting Started in Transmedia Storytelling: A Practical Guide for Beginners,* Seattle, CreateSpace, 2011

[71] H. Jenkins, "The Revenge of the Origami Unicorn: Seven Principles of Transmedia Storytelling", in *Henry Jenkins* http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2009/12/the_revenge_of_the_origami_uni.html, 12th Dec. 2009 (accessed on 7th Nov. 2022)

Drillability: Jenkins (*ibid*.) claims that a new category must be included to capture how the audience interacts with the story. Some contents engage a typology of fandom which encourages viewers to dig deeper in order to understand the complexity of a story and its narrative.

The opposition between spreadable and drillable should not be thought of as a hierarchy, but rather as opposing modes of engagement. Spreadable media typically engage vast audiences who do not necessarily show long-term engagement. Drillable media engage fewer people, but occupy a greater amount of their time in a vertical descent into the complexities of a text.

2) Continuity: many transmedia franchises try to build a strong sense of 'continuity', which makes audiences praise them for the coherence and credibility of their fictional world. This principle is seen as a benefit of collecting scattered narrative fragments across several platforms.

   Multiplicity: this principle allows audiences to take pleasure in alternative narrations, where characters and events are seen from new perspectives, for example through fanfictions (*ibid*.).

3) Immersion: Jenkins (*ibid*.) affirms that this refers to the perceived relationship between transmedia fiction and everyday experience. The audience desires to escape reality and the presence of a fictional world encourages immersion.

   Extractability: this principle indicates that audiences can take aspects of the story and employ them as resources in everyday life (for example, themed gadgets). It can be considered a consequence of immersion.

4) Worldbuilding: Jenkins made a reference to this concept already in "Convergence Culture", stating as follows:

   > When I first started you would pitch a story because, without a good story, you didn't really have a film. Later, once sequels started to take off, you pitched a character because a good character could support multiple stories. And now, you pitch a world because a world can support multiple characters and multiple stories across multiple media[72].

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[72] H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide,* New York, New York University Press, 2006, p.114

According to the author (*The Revenge of the Origami Unicorn: Seven Principles of Transmedia Storytelling*), the concept of world-building is close to the principles of immersion and extractability, since both are ways of involving consumers more directly in the worlds represented by the stories, treating them as real spaces that somehow intersect with the realities in which we live, as proven for example by the production of maps of fictional places.

5) Seriality: this concept is significant in the context of elaborating a narrative into various independent sequels or sagas, which are not adaptations. The narrative must be dispersed over many media platforms in order to meet the definition of the concept of seriality, and the new content must advance the story rather than retell it (*ibid*.).

6) Subjectivity: according to Jenkin's definition, the point of view and therefore the subjectivity of each character of a story can give it a certain complexity. As a result, more products are created where the story is told through secondary characters' viewpoints, for example (*ibid*.).

7) Performance: the audience becomes part of the story, of the fictional world. They are encouraged to extend the fictional world into reality creating complementary content across various media channels (*ibid*.).

2.4 Transmedia storytelling in political campaigns

Transmedia storytelling and its principles have generally been developed and theorised based on cultural products belonging to the entertainment industry, such as movies, tv series, books, comics, and so forth. However, it is evident as of now that this thesis focuses on political communication; these concepts have been addressed in order to be applied to the storytelling strategies employed by political actors. In fact, we can count numerous cases where transmedia has been applied to political campaigns by political leaders in order to increase visibility or transmit certain values and build a certain image of themselves, or cases where campaigns have been developed in order to impact governmental decisions (such as policy change) or as a form of grassroot campaigning.

This section will provide some examples with the aim of showing the applicability of transmedia storytelling to the context of political communication.

Firstly, Professor Zac Gershberg writes a chapter in which he discusses how "Donald J. Trump's political rhetoric was supported by a transmedia storytelling campaign that dominated a profuse platform of discursive channels"[73]. According to the author, also his senior adviser and spin doctor, Steve Bannon, had an important role, in that he developed strategies which had a significant impact on politics and the media. Another common strategy for marketing corporate entertainment in transmedia storytelling would be to encourage fans to create user-generated content on message boards, blogs, and fan fiction websites, for example. Trump offers his supporters many options to "participate" in his story through watching shows, buying books, going to rallies, and retweeting his fans. The author states as follows:

> Trump facilitated what can be considered a comprehensive transmedia branding and storytelling campaign - a concept that encapsulates creative corporate synergies between mass entertainment and fandom. Relying on the work of unpaid prosumers, or everyday people such as fans, transmedia storytelling solicits creative contributions across news media platforms such as online message boards, Facebook, and Twitter to publicize a corporate brand. [...] Though transmedia storytelling has traditionally been understood in the context of corporate media entertainment with the publicity surrounding movies or video games, the Trump campaign expanded its scope to include politics. Inspiring a constellation of multiplatform entertainments that generated publicity in various effective ways across traditional, online, and social media, Trump benefited from this process and understanding political transmedia storytelling helps contextualize the role of all forms of media in the 2016 presidential election. (*ibid*.).

Transmedia storytelling seems to operate in a more engaged manner with regard to conspiracy theories, which would explain how it differs from traditional propaganda. The author cites "pizzagate"[74] as one particular fake news story that is alarming yet instructive in the context of transmedia storytelling strategies employed in politics, explaining how "ideology is subordinate to the entertaining narratives" (*ibid*.). Obama

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[73] Z. Gershberg, "Rhetoric in a Transmedia Storytelling Campaign: How Trump Deployed the Paranoid Style in 2016" in *The Presidency and Social Media: Discourse, Disruption, and Digital Democracy in the 2016 Presidential Election,* ed. by D. Schill, J. Allen Hendricks, T. E. Patterson, New York, Routledge, 2017

[74] In the course of the 2016 US presidential election, a series of e-mails gave rise to the unfounded conspiracy theory known as "Pizzagate," which claimed that multiple American restaurants (among which the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria) and US political officials were involved in child abuse and human trafficking.

and his 2008 campaign are also mentioned when the author discusses how the user-generated content in the form of motivational posters and YouTube videos helped him win the primary election and then the general election. Analysing Trump and Obama's cases, political transmedia storytelling seems to be most successful when it is connected to a brand, similar to corporate entertainment. Obama and Trump, despite their political differences, both have distinct, recognizable brands: while Trump's narration delivered the apocalyptic intensity of paranoia, Obama's narrative was based on hope and was rhetorically operationalized through mediated content (*ibid*.).

Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, in her aforementioned paper "Transmedia Project Design: Theoretical and Analytical Considerations", affirms that being a relatively new field, transmedia storytelling lacks its distinct approaches and methodologies of analysis. According to the author, transmedia initiatives are also intricate phenomena with many facets, including narrative, cultural background, marketing, financial strategies, and legal framework. Therefore, in this article, an analytical model is developed to describe key aspects of the design approach used for transmedia projects and campaigns, including a series of questions about various topics: premise and purpose, narrative, worldbuilding, characters, extensions, media platforms and genres, audience and market, engagement, structure and aesthetics. In her subsequent work in cooperation with Sergei Andreevich Medvedev[75], the two authors apply this approach to the Fish Fight by The Great British Property Scandal and Food, Inc campaign with the objective of measuring "the impact of transmedia campaigns aimed at achieving a certain level of government policy change" (*ibid*.), which found to have a significant role in raising awareness and influencing policy change.

To conclude, an example where transmedia storytelling is applied in grassroot campaigning is provided once again by Renira Rampazzo Gambarato and Sergei Andreevich Medvedev (*ibid*.). The conceptualization of transmedia storytelling tactics in the context of participatory politics is part of the theoretical framework of the paper; the methodology is based on Gambarato's transmedia analytical model (*Transmedia Project Design: Theoretical and Analytical Considerations*). The authors investigate the

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[75] R. Rampazzo Gambarato - A. S. Medvedev, "Grassroots Political Campaign in Russia: Alexey Navalny and Transmedia Strategies for Democratic Development" in *Promoting Social Change and Democracy through Information Technology* ed. by V. Kumar - J. Svensson, Hershey, IGI Global, 2017, pp. 165-192

transmedia strategies employed by the candidate Alexey Navalny during the elections for Moscow's mayor in 2013. His westernised, grassroots political campaign was unprecedented in the nation; it included elements such as door-to-door campaigning, online fundraising, volunteer recruitment, digital initiatives, and in-person meetings which were planned on Facebook. The writers support the thesis that, although Navalny lost the election, his campaign signified advancement in terms of new media use and the support of democratic development in a dictatorial Russia.

2.4.1 Transmedia activism: #Renziscappa and The Handmaid's Tale

The strategist and storyteller Lina Srivastava coined the term 'transmedia activism' in 2009, stating as follows:

> Looking at this issue in the simplest of terms, 'transmedia activism' is one of the best ways to have people connect to a cause, by exposing them to a variety of media properties over various distribution channels—which opens up avenues for dialogue and provides an audience an educational experience about workable solutions—and then working with the most creative and engaged audience segment to facilitate the creation of their own content that further explains the cause and inspires action around it.[76]

Constance-Chock's[77] work explores the impact of social media in the organisation of protest actions; the author defines transmedia mobilisation based on the bottom-up involvement of activists, not only on participatory media production practices through various platforms. For the author, this form is based on network logic and allows a wide circulation of narratives. With digital media, the possibility of grassroot participation increases considerably by also developing new forms of communication and activating network distribution. In the context of activism, whose protagonists are mainly citizens rather than political leaders, numerous examples of transmedia approaches are available. The aim of this section is to illustrate some of them.

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[76] L. Srivastava, "Transmedia Activism: Telling Your Story Across Media Platforms to Create Effective Social Change", *Namac* 04 mar 2009
https://web.archive.org/web/20130515174049/http:/www.namac.org/node/6925 (accessed on 12th Nov. 2022)
[77] F. Ciammella, "Transmedia activism e co-creazione di narrazioni grassroots: teorie, modelli e pratiche" in *Scientific Journal on Digital Culture*s, 6:1 (2021), pp. 51-62 quoting S. Costanza-Chock, *Se ve, se siente: Transmedia mobilization in the Los Angeles immigrant rights movement,* PhD dissertation, Los Angeles, University of Southern California, 2011

A case where activism employs transmedia strategies in the Italian context is presented by Paolo Saporito, who in his paper "#Renziscappa: The Transmedia Story of a Hashtag between Online and Offline Activism"[78] examines how the adoption of the hashtag #Renziscappa helped to connect offline and online political activism. The hashtag was first shared by the Italian collective Wu Ming in November 2014 to promote the online reporting of any offline protests against Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. The collective and its supporters used #Renziscappa to contrast and dismantle the aura of popularity built around Renzi's image and to spark and coordinate offline protests. Furthermore, offline participation connected the hashtag to politically significant actions. Although a weaker connection to the offline protests was caused by Movimento 5 Stelle's appropriation of the hashtag, this relationship was safeguarded via the coordinated transmedia dissemination of #Renziscappa via Wu Ming's blog Giap and interactive maps. The maps framed the hashtag in terms of the offline movement's socio-political composition, geo-temporal locations, and genealogical development. The author states that an alternative narrative to the mainstream was created by the network of these transmedia extensions, which allowed users to view the movement's collective aspect from a national viewpoint and encouraged the development of political identity (*ibid*.).

A further example of transmedia activism in a more international context is provided by Daný van Dam and Sara Polak in their article "Owning Gilead: franchising feminism through Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and The Testaments"[79]. The authors analyze Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel "The Handmaid's Tale" (1985), which has become a tv series in 2017, and the sequel to its story world, "The Testaments" (2019). Van Dam and Polak observe how these products have been adapted across various media, giving shape to what we have previously defined as a media franchise.

The events occur in the imaginary totalitarian Republic of Gilead, where infertility has become a widespread issue and the only fertile women left are kidnapped, assigned to wealthy families and subjected to child-bearing slavery. The story portrays a "hyperreal patriarchy-as-terror-regime" (*ibid*.), transmits a moral that can be considered timeless and therefore has now become a popular symbol in feminist activism all over the world.

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[78] P. Saporito, "#Renziscappa: The Transmedia Story of a Hashtag between Online and Offline Activism" in *Italian Culture,* 39:1 (2021), pp. 73-92

[79] D. van Dam - S. Polak, "Owning Gilead: franchising feminism through Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and The Testaments" in *European Journal of English Studies*, 25:2 (2021), pp. 172-189

The adoption of the values transmitted by the series as symbols of the protests for women's rights would have first spread in response to Donald J. Trump's election and events such as limiting or negating abortion in multiple states of the USA. Anja Boato[80] refers to the events of March 2017, when a group of activists of NARAL Pro-Choice, thus supporting the right to abort, went to the Senate wearing the typical clothes that the handmaids wear in the tv series adaptations. The images went viral through social media and have therefore inspired similar protests in the rest of the world, from Ireland to Argentina; examples are available also concerning the Italian context. In October 2018, feminist protests occurred in Verona, where measures against abortion were approved by the city council; some months later, similar protests took place around many Italian cities against the anti-abortion draft legislation proposed by the ex-member of the Senate Simone Pillon (*ibid.*, p. 125). To conclude, Van Dam and Polak (*Owning Gilead: franchising feminism through Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and The Testaments*) argue that this would represent "a form of political enfranchisement in that it offers tools and language for calling out patriarchy" (*ibid.*), therefore overtaking the mere commercial utility of creating a transmedia franchise that is usually associated with it and highlighting the profound socio-political meaning it acquired.

Lastly, Fabio Ciammella presents a case of grassroot transmedia activism in his paper "Transmedia activism e co-creazione di narrazioni grassroots: teorie, modelli e pratiche"[81]. The subject is an Instagram campaign launched by the Casa delle donne Lucha Y Siesta, a centre run by a feminist and transfeminist collective born in Rome to offer shelter to women in need and advocate for women's rights. In 2018, ATAC notified the eviction and the sale of the building; the activists, therefore, launched a creative communication campaign which had a huge response in terms of participation. The 'Luchadora' (female version of the Mexican wrestlers wearing a coloured mask) was the protagonist of the challenge: the users needed to draw one in their own style. The intention was to activate pop communication in contrast to the classic languages of grassroots movements. However, the main purpose of the challenge was to engage a wider audience. The challenge launched on Instagram; the picture of the first drawing,

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[80] A. Boato, "La comunicazione politica nell'era della transmedialità: tre esempi di intrecci tra politica e cultura popolare" in *Social media e politica: Esperienze, analisi e scenari della nuova comunicazione politica*, ed. by C. Riva, Torino, UTET Università, 2021, pp. 115-127
[81] F. Ciammella, "Transmedia activism e co-creazione di narrazioni grassroots: teorie, modelli e pratiche" in *Scientific Journal on Digital Culture*s, 6:1 (2021), pp. 51-62

made by a cartoonist who worked with the activists, was shared along with the instructions for creating the content, a template of the frame, the text to include in the caption and the hashtags to use: #luchaallacittà, already used in previous campaigns, and #drawinyourstyle. The former contextualised the action in the communication campaign, the latter described the action itself. It follows that the idea of doing a challenge with the Luchadoras was born precisely from a transmedia approach: a recognisable narrative universe, a story with a conflict, characters, meanings and imagery (*ibid*., p.57). The author concludes that transmedia activism is useful for understanding how global principles such as feminism, environmentalism or immigration become narratives merging with local principles, such as common goods, occupied spaces, and the city. As a result, transmedia activism would be capable of coordinating participatory narratives that are uniformly distributed between different media, generating civic and political engagement (*ibid*., p. 60).

The following chapter of this thesis will investigate how former US President Donald Trump would embody the extremization of the phenomenon of pop politics in the United States after having analysed his relationship with social media and the role of fake news in his communication strategy.

3. Case study: Donald Trump and pop politics

3.1 From "The Apprentice" to the presidency: an ongoing show

Donald John Trump is a billionaire who made his fortune in the luxury real estate market in New York City. After engaging in incautious financial manoeuvers that nearly bankrupted him, Trump gained notoriety and expanded into the entertainment industry by appearing on the national tv show "The Apprentice" aired on NBC from 2004 to 2015 and becoming a real pop icon. On the show, Trump pitted aspiring business leaders against one another in a series of tasks, evaluated their performances and eliminated the losing contestants with the phrase "You're fired". The program facilitated Trump's access to a broad audience and, for many viewers, validated his reputation as a charming and successful businessman. Trump's affiliation with the show was officially ended by NBC only when he launched his presidential campaign with anti-immigrant and racist remarks[82].
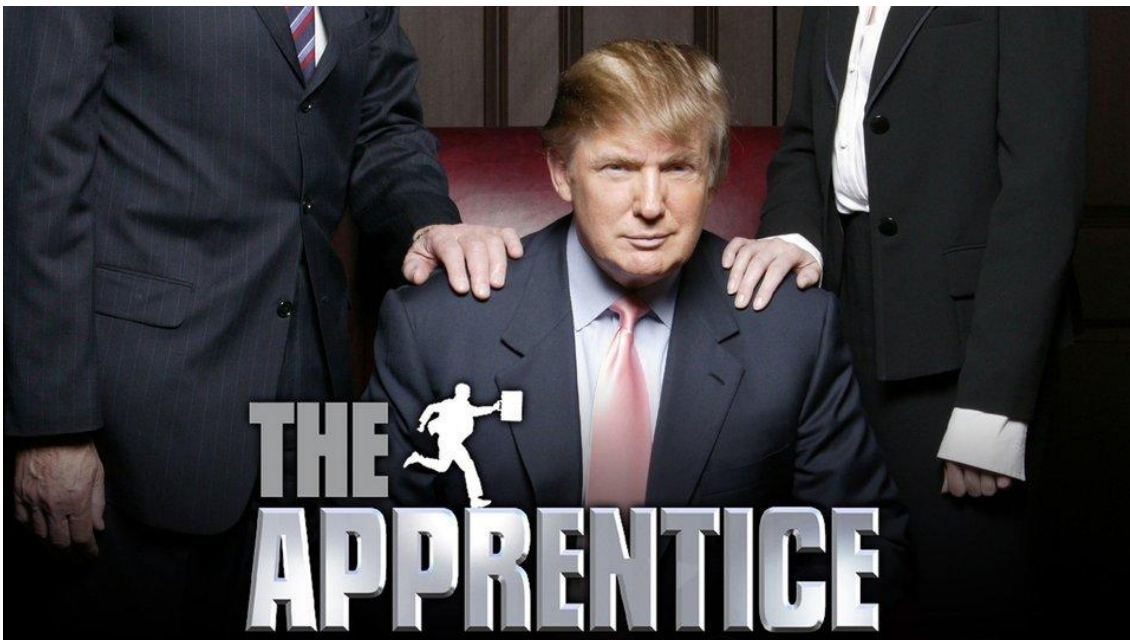

Fig. 3.1

Donald Trump in the show 'The Apprentice'. Source: Tv Insider, "The Apprentice" https://www.tvinsider.com/show/the-apprentice/

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[82] B. C. Waterhouse, "Donald Trump: Life before the Presidency", *Miller Center,* University of Virginia n.d https://millercenter.org/president/trump/life-presidency (accessed on 16th Jan. 2023)

The New York Times notices how the show has been fundamental in influencing his communication style during his presidential campaign:

> Mr Trump seems to have learned from his apprentices. Facing elimination by him in the boardroom on "The Apprentice" was like being trapped in a cage with a capricious monster; you didn't know what might anger him or why, but it was your job to make sure he ate your opponent instead of you. The situation rewarded fast talking and improvisation. And Mr Trump's campaign style is nothing if not improvisatory — tactical eruptions to throw rivals off-balance, to dismiss tough questions, to promise easy answers without details, to survive until the next episode. He's lived and campaigned by reality-show creeds: there is no such thing as bad attention; apologies are weakness; whining is for haters and losers.[83]

Many have tried to research and analyse the reasons behind the success that a billionaire managed to achieve even among the working class, consequently becoming the 45th President of the United States. In their paper, Kira Hall, Donna M. Goldstein and Matthew Bruce Ingram argue that the entertainment provided by Trump's campaign could have played an important role:

> Trump's campaign to become the Republican nominee was successful because it was, in a word, entertaining—not just for the white rural underclass, not just for conservatives, but also for the public at large, even those who strongly oppose his candidacy. Whether understood as pleasing or offensive, Trump's ongoing show was compelling. [...] Many good analyses offer insights into Trump's popular appeal, and we draw on some of these discussions here. But we believe it is also important to consider the specifics of Trump's entertainment value—that is, how Trump's comedic media appearances over the course of the Republican primary season built momentum in a celebrity and mediatized culture. Social scientists and humanities scholars from both neo-Marxist and poststructuralist perspectives have long asserted that late capitalism values style over content. Trump's rising popularity during his journey from candidate to Republican presidential nominee provides a strong example of this claim.[84]

Thus, the general claim is that Trump would benefit from his unorthodox approach to politics in general and to his campaign in particular even though it could at first appear

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[83] J. Poniewozik, "What 'The Apprentice' Taught Donald Trump About Campaigning", *New York Times*, 09 Oct. 2015
https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/arts/television/donald-trump-campaign-the-apprentice.html
(accessed on 16th Jan. 2023)
[84] K. Hall - D. M. Goldstein - M. B. Ingram, "The hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, gesture, spectacle" in *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 6:2 (2016), pp. 71-100
https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/epdf/10.14318/hau6.2.009 (accessed on 18th Jan. 2023)

as harmful or disadvantageous; the reason behind this would be that his entertaining behaviour perfectly fits into a strongly mediatized public realm:

> Humorous performance, as Erving Goffman (1959, 1961) once argued, is protected from the scrutiny that would be applied in other discursive domains (cf. Chun 2004; Jaffe 2000). In this sense, humour functions as a kind of containment strategy (Irvine 2011; Fleming and Lempert 2011), enabling its users to invoke taboo topics without breaching the norms that define these topics as toxic (Goldstein [2003] 2013). [...] Drawing on cultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and rhetorical theory, we consider how Trump elevates his entertainment value by crafting comedic representations of his political opponents as well as himself. [...] Many of these enactments were repeated across multiple campaign speeches and became emblems of the political persona that Trump presented to his electorate. The media's conflicted response to the social meaning of these bodily displays, together with Trump's easy deniability of what he intended by them, suggests that comedic gestures may accomplish ideological work that exceeds even what can be conveyed in the already protected category of verbal humour. [...] Trump's embodiment may be incongruous with how strong political embodiment is normatively understood, but its dense link to entertainment now brings voters along with viewers. (*ibid.*, p.74-75)

The authors then focus on the phenomenon of celebrity politics, which has been mentioned previously in this thesis and is in fact particularly relevant to the analysis of the relation between Trump and pop politics, and on the former President's contribution to it:

> Trump, who belongs to this billionaire culture, is a mastermind at keeping his celebrity status frontline news, a talent he exercised for decades as a corporate millionaire in the public eye. [...] In the case of Trump, however, rather than a politician turned celebrity, we have a celebrity turned politician. If Trump is a "rule breaker," as the front cover of Time (2016) proclaimed, it is because he used his craft as an entertainer to forge a new hybrid of politics and comedy. Trump is certainly not the first celebrity entertainer to become a politician, and his ascendency in the Republican primaries is in many ways unsurprising given the ongoing hybridization of politics and entertainment in contemporary US society. But Trump's dense use of a derisive form of comedic entertainment to attract media attention—no matter how negative that media attention may be—is a strategy that previous entertainer candidates such as Ronald Reagan did not pursue. (*ibid.*, p. 75)

To conclude, Trump's communication can be seen as a constant show precisely because of his capacity to combine disparate forms of entertainment into his campaign for

President of the United States. He represents a figure that based his success on his ability to comprehend the intimate connection between business, media and politics[85]. After discussing this theory and providing insight into the close relationship of entertainment and politics and their role in Trump's communication strategy, the next section will explore Trump's online behaviour in further detail.

3.2 Donald Trump's online communication strategy

According to Graziosi (*ibid*.), the ability to connect with crowds has always been one of Donald Trump's greatest strengths, which materialised in a strategy that allowed direct contact with the public both digitally and physically, such as during his numerous live rallies and through social media posts. In order to build a direct link with the electorate, the Republican leader used Twitter with the objective of avoiding any journalistic intermediaries. This served a twofold purpose: the practical need to transmit the message immediately and the ideological need to avoid the media environment he has explicitly fought against.

The author (*ibid*.) then explains how Trump uses social media, and particularly Twitter, differently from his predecessor Obama; while the former uses Twitter to challenge the establishment and communicate from the bottom in an attempt to reach the top, the latter uses it to speak from the top of his presidency to the people. In her study, Enli[86] has identified the differences between Trump's and Hillary Clinton's Twitter use during the 2016 presidential campaign. The fundamental distinction would lie in Clinton's professional and Trump's amateur approach. The use of social media by Clinton during the 2016 US election, according to the author, supports theories about the professionalisation of election campaigns in Western liberal democracies, whereas Trump's campaign social media use was seen as more amateurish but at the same time more authentic (*ibid*.). In fact, Graziosi explains how for Trump, political professionalism represented an adversary that needed to be defeated and for precisely this reason, he took the disintermediation process that Obama had started to extreme

[85] S. Graziosi, *Apocalypse Trump*, Milano, Edizioni Ares, 2018
[86] A.S. Ross - D. J. Rivers, " Discursive Deflection: Accusation of "Fake News" and the Spread of Mis- and Disinformation in the Tweets of President Trump" in *Social Media + Society*, 4:2 (2018), pp. 1-12 quoting G. Enli, "Twitter as arena for the authentic outsider: Exploring the social media campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 US presidential election", in *European Journal of Communication*, 32 (2017), pp. 50–61

lengths. The 2016 US presidential election, in which Trump was elected, was perhaps the first in which social media had a significant impact. In fact, certain statistics were unexpected: in the 2016 presidential election, Hillary Clinton's campaign spent five times as much money as her Republican rival, proving that because of social media, greater advertising expenditures no longer guaranteed more positive election outcomes. It is worth mentioning in this context the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal: exploiting the power of social media and big data tools, Trump and his communication counsellors utilised information from Facebook and the political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica with the objective of creating specific tools to target and influence electors, individuate potential voters and customise messages in order to obtain positive response[87].

Trump's ability to evoke emotions of dread by using exaggeration and hyperbole, the use of examples from real life, and making often references to himself, are the fundamental processes underlying his rhetoric of exaggerating the American crisis and finding a scapegoat in his political opponents and/or predecessors and in minorities. One of the reasons Donald Trump is a successful candidate could be found in the fact that he frames himself as an "outsider"[88], an anti-political figure that is not part of the same system that has been damaging the United States and as a consequence, as being incorruptible. The degree of message specificity directed at the target stood out more than any other feature of the 2016 election campaign. Donald Trump used slogans to address the white and upper middle class, such as the famous "Make America great again", whereas Hillary Clinton talked to the nation and to all Americans of all racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. In a speech on June 16th 2015, when he formally declared his campaign for president in 2016, he portrayed the United States as being financially destroyed by the incapacity of its previous leaders. According to Christian Salmon[89], Trump used Twitter and Facebook in order to gather that portion of the population that was animated by various forms of discontent, regarding the

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[87] M. Kakutani, *La morte della verità: la menzogna nell'era di Trump*, Milano, Solferino, 2018, p.137-138 translated from English by A. Cristofori (I. ed. *The Death of Truth. Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump*, 2018)

[88] A.Pagani, "Da Obama a Biden passando per Trump. Come cambiano comunicazione e politica nell'America di oggi" in *Europa Atlantica,* 1 Feb. 2021 https://europaatlantica.it/usa2020/2021/02/da-obama-a-biden-passando-per-trump-come-cambiano-comunicazione-e-politica-nellamerica-di-oggi/ (accessed on 12th Jan. 2023)

[89] C. Salmon, *Fake: Come la politica mondiale ha divorato sé stessa*, Bari, Laterza, 2020, pp. 25-26, translated from French by L. Falaschi (I ed. *L'Ère du clash*, Paris, Fayard, 2019)

demographic or financial situation for example, and incited them against the political class that had been ruling before him, adopting rage and hate as his trademarks. His main objective would not be to improve the system but to discredit it (*ibid*.).

As the journalist and expert David Neiwert[90] notices, it was the first time that a presidential contender condemned immigration and those who have permitted this phenomenon to grow on the day he announced his candidacy. This allowed the right wing, who up until that point had refrained from making explicit remarks against immigration, to gain further support. Thus, it can be noticed how Trump made a weapon out of his overt refusal of political correctness, which had instead characterised its predecessors' election campaigns (*ibid*.). Furthermore, the political communication that helped Trump win the 2016 election was characterised by slogans used to denigrate his rival and increase his own support. Christian Salmon explains Trump's strategy by comparing him to his predecessor, Barack Obama, stating that the latter established Facebook politics and introduced the power of narrative to social media, while the former abruptly interrupted this process during his campaign for president: Trump's strategist, Steve Bannon, was apparently not concerned about having a story to tell. The author compares his "post-narrative" technique to the "Shock and Awe" military tactic during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, thus metaphorically using firepower to paralyse the adversary and make them completely blind to the battlefield (*ibid*., p. 36-37).

3.2.1 Trump campaign's main topics

Trump addressed a range of subjects in his speeches, social media posts, and live rallies. What these have in common is that they always show Trump's tendency to identify a scapegoat instead of proposing solutions, leaning on people's rage and fear to gain consent. Three keywords that characterised Trump's communication strategy during the 2016 campaign were "wall", "crooked" and "rigged". The "wall" represented a relevant and omnipresent theme: according to Trump, the only effective method to stop illegal immigration would be to build a wall along the border with Mexico and which would be paid for by the latter. This message spoke directly to the white voter, who was looking for a scapegoat for the severe economic hardship that affected the US. However, a large

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[90] D. Neiwert, *Alt-America: L'ascesa della destra radicale nell'era di Trump*, Bologna, Minimum fax, 2019

number of Hispanic Americans who did not want to share their acquired position also supported Trump. Connor A. Madden expresses his point of view on Trump's insistence on the topic, stating that it could be seen as a strategy to further promote his personal brand:

> Mr. Trump's proposal to build a border wall and have Mexico pay for it had little if anything to do with immigration policy. Instead, Mr. Trump used the broad context of immigration as a policy issue to highlight the two most important features of his personal brand: "Mr. Trump the Builder" and "Mr. Trump the Deal Maker." He brought to the forefront of our national dialogue perhaps the only broad policy issue that Mr. Trump, given his professional background, was uniquely qualified to act on immediately. Furthermore, the border wall represented nativism, protectionism, American elitism, and an emphasis on law enforcement which were at the heart of Mr. Trump's political ideology. Simply, it was the perfect intersection of the personal brand/professional expertise (builder, deal-maker, etc.) he needed to make sure everyone understood, and the political ideology he was championing – "America First". The essence of Mr. Trump's communicative genius is the silent advancement of message and vision via incessant, aggressive, unapologetic, captivating, and controversial statements that efficiently shepherd that message and vision into mainstream consciousness.[91]

"Crooked" was another central term in that campaign used in reference to his opponent Hillary Clinton. The literal meaning is "corrupt"; in fact, corruption is one of Donald Trump's favourite topics. As highlighted by Christian R. Hoffmann, the start of the campaign and its end have been characterised by Trump's continuous claims of Clinton's moral deficiency, denigrating her as a corrupt representative of the "political establishment"[92]. His speeches were usually accompanied by grimaces of disgust, which then became the object of humorous user-generated content such as memes. In Trump's electoral campaign, there is one more crucial adjective: "rigged", in reference to the alleged manipulation of the voting process. In actuality, he will win the presidency of the United States of America thanks to that election process. But only four years later the same process will bring the Democrat Joe Biden to the White House, allowing him to restart a protest against the system.

As concerns the employment of slogans, during the presidential campaign of 2020 the new "Keep America great" has replaced the well-known "Make America great again".

[91] C. A. Madden, *Free media: An analysis of political communication strategies and their role in the 2016 presidential election*, Bachelor Thesis, University of Texas, Austin, 2018, p.34-35
[92] C. R. Hoffmann, "Crooked Hillary and Dumb Trump" in *Internet Pragmatics,* 1:1 (2018), pp. 55–87

On a general note, the events that occurred in the US and throughout the world in the months leading up to and during the election campaign had a significant impact on the 2020 election. In fact, the shallow approach he adopted towards the Covid-19 pandemic and the failed promise of significant economic growth had as consequence the loss of his position as president of the United States. Furthermore, numerous aspects of the 2020 election season were similar to the previous one. Despite a different adversary, Trump remained loyal to the communication strategies that helped him win the election in 2016. On April 25th 2019, the President tweeted "Welcome to the race Sleepy Joe," after learning of Biden's candidacy. As we can notice by the various nicknames assigned to his opponents, such as Crooked Hillary, Sleepy Joe, Crazy Bernie (the socialist Bernie Sanders), or even Little Rocket man (the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un after his threats to use nuclear weapons), the targets of Donald Trump's communication strategy have changed, but not his communicative approach.

3.2.2 Deflection: fake news as a communication strategy

In 2017, the US linguist George Lakoff[93] has posted on his Twitter account a table in which he divides strategies employed in Trump's tweets into four categories:

● Preemptive framing: be the first to frame an idea. As an example, Lakoff cites Trump's focus on the hacking of the DNC (Digital Communication Network) stating that it was the DNC'S fault and Democrats lost by a wide margin, when in fact it was one of the narrowest margins in US history, therefore creating a scandal without proof.

● Diversion: divert attention from real issues. As an example, Lakoff cites a tweet where Trump was shifting the focus from real issues to Maryl Streep's attack towards him at the Golden Globes.

● Deflection: attack messenger, change direction. In a tweet, Trump attacks the media in order to build distrust reframing the story as "fake news".

● Trial balloon: test public reaction, for example posing questions about nuclear arms to his followers (*ibid*.).

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[93] G. Lakoff, "A Taxonomy of Trump Tweets #protectthetruth", Twitter, 20 Feb. 2017, https://twitter.com/georgelakoff/status/833498095153344512?lang=de (accessed on 12th Jan. 2023)

One of the most striking strategies is deflection: even though the media often paint a negative picture of Trump, he is able to build distrust claiming that all allegations are 'fake news', or not true, dividing the world between those who trust him and those who rely on the supposedly dishonest media system. This subsection will investigate how Trump involves fake news, disinformation and hate speech in his communication strategy.

Donald Trump is well-known for using fake news as a communication strategy. Bakir and McStay use the term to indicate news that is "either wholly false or containing deliberately misleading elements incorporated within its content or context"[94]. When defining this concept, it is important to highlight the intent to mislead or to deceive, which differentiates fake news from news satire and parody, among others. In his previously mentioned book "Fake"[95], Christian Salmon focuses on this aspect, stating how the term 'fake news' would have become particularly popular and mostly associated with the political field starting from Trump's 2016 election campaign. According to the author, this would represent a weapon against the official media and a method for establishing a new post-political and post-democratic era. He states that web 2.0 has favoured the spread and multiplication of tales and supports the establishment of new behaviours, including disinformation, propaganda, and obfuscation tactics, among which the term 'fake news' is used to describe not just how misleading information spreads on social media, but also how distrust towards the media environment is spread. Furthermore, the linearity, sequence, plot, and tension of the narrative are abandoned in favour of dramatic, illogical shocks delivered through strong insults, fake news, etc., with the effect of polarising opinions and making communication volatile (*ibid.*, p.67). In fact, Trump's twisted syntax, his lies, his insults, his improvised speeches, his tweets, his digressions and so forth had the objective of confusing, intimidating and dividing: as Orwell says, "political chaos is connected to the decay of language"[96].

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[94]A.S. Ross - D. J. Rivers, " Discursive Deflection: Accusation of "Fake News" and the Spread of Mis- and Disinformation in the Tweets of President Trump" in *Social Media + Society*, 4:2 (2018), pp. 1-12 quoting V. Bakir - A. McStay, "Fake news and the economy of emotions, in Digital Journalism", 6 (2017), pp. 154–175
[95] C. Salmon, op. cit, pp. 48-49
[96] M. Kakutani, op. cit. , p.97 quoting G. Orwell, "Politics and the English Language", in *Horizon,* 13:76 (1945), pp. 252–265

According to Leonardo Torrini[97], Donald Trump's election as the 45th president of the United States of America is an intriguing example of how the diffusion of fake news has served political objectives. An emblematic example is the employment of Russian trolls whose work was to diffuse fake news, undermining the trust in the democratic system and widening the separation within Americans, again according to the logic of finding a scapegoat for their anger and thus a saviour in Trump's figure. A further strategy used by Trump's administration was to employ fake experts to contrast real experts' scientific statements and once again build distrust towards them; this tactic was employed in order to defend policies that were contradictory to the opinion of experts or national polls.[98] Leonardo Torrini then explains how, according to a Pew Research Center research, regardless of age, gender, level of education, or household income, almost 88% of voters said they were confused or very confused by the spread of political hoaxes, which was Trump's primary goal[99]. Social media, especially Facebook, served as the primary platform for the dissemination of false information. In fact, the data indicate that interactions with fake news increased more than those with legitimate news in the run-up to the elections. If just under 3 million people were exposed to fake news on the two candidates between February and April 2016, that figure tripled in the four months leading up to the election (*ibid*.). The most recent American elections, which opposed Donald Trump and Joe Biden, also produced a ton of compelling content from the perspective of propaganda based on fake or purposefully created information. The false statements would relate in particular to alleged vote fraud, the healthcare system and the coronavirus emergency. In fact, Alberto Pagani[100] points out that the Washington Post's fact-checkers estimate that since taking office at the beginning of 2021, Trump has made more than 16,000 false statements, or more than 300 on average every month. As a result, it cannot be stated that the Trump administration's response to fake news was a weakness but, on the contrary, it was a result of a well-planned communication strategy.

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[97] L. Torrini, *Fake news: analisi della disinformazione all'interno di un'infodemia sanitaria e politica*, Bachelor Thesis, Reggio Emilia, Università degli Studi di Modena e Reggio Emilia, 2020
[98] M. Kakutani, op. cit. , p.80
[99] S. Greenwood - A. Perrin - M. Duggan, "Social Media Update 2016", Pew Research Center, Washington D.C., 11 Nov. 2016
https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2016/11/11/social-media-update-2016/ (accessed on 12th Jan. 2023)
[100]A.Pagani, "Da Obama a Biden passando per Trump. Come cambiano comunicazione e politica nell'America di oggi" in *Europa Atlantica,* 1 Feb. 2021
https://europaatlantica.it/usa2020/2021/02/da-obama-a-biden-passando-per-trump-come-cambiano-comunicazione-e-politica-nellamerica-di-oggi/ (accessed on 12th Jan. 2023)

As concerns the audience, Trump's attempt might have been successful also because, according to the already mentioned study by the Pew Research Center (*Social Media Update 2016*) dating back to the year of Trump's first presidential campaign, most US American consumers think that the internet has replaced newspapers and radio news as a reliable source of political news. Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow provide in their work a number of potential explanations for why social media platforms may be particularly favourable for the proliferation of fake news:

> First, on social media, the fixed costs of entering the market and producing content are vanishingly small. This increases the relative profitability of the small-scale, short-term strategies often adopted by fake news producers, and reduces the relative importance of building a long-term reputation for quality. Second, the format of social media thin slices of information viewed on phones or news feed windows-can make it difficult to judge an article's veracity. Third, Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic (2015) show that Facebook friend networks are ideologically segregated -among friendships between people who report ideological affiliations in their profiles, the median share of friends with the opposite ideology is only 20 per cent for liberals and 18 per cent for conservatives and people are considerably more likely to read and share news articles that are aligned with their ideological positions. This suggests that people who get news from Facebook (or other social media) are less likely to receive evidence about the true state of the world that would counter an ideologically aligned but false story.[101]

To conclude the discussion about social media and fake news in Trump's communication strategy, it is interesting to mention the consequences of the assault on Capitol Hill on January 6th 2021, when a number of social media platforms blocked or deleted Trump's accounts claiming that he had incited his supporters to attack the US Congress while Biden's election as President was being verified. This action, initiated by Facebook and then undertaken by Twitter, Tik Tok, YouTube, Reddit, and Twitch is called deplatforming and was principally explained by the former president's violation of the laws against the dissemination of fake news and incitement to violence.

3.3 Trump's extremization of an already pop-politicised landscape

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[101] H. Allcott - M. Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election", in *Journal of Economic Perspectives,* 31:2 (2017), pp. 211-236
https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/jep.31.2.211

Donald Trump represents a perfect example of how spectacularized politics has become. He is a perfect product of politainment, a child of the transformation of modern politics into an emotional experience. As anticipated, Trump's candidacy and subsequent election were characterised by a heavy reliance on social media, celebrity endorsements, and a general disregard for traditional media. Additionally, his celebrity status as a reality television star brought entertainment and spectacle to the political arena. There is already some crossover between politics shown in TV shows and actual politics. In fact, Trump's popularity is undoubtedly due to a variety of other causes, many of which are related to the profound discontent felt by some segments of the American electorate, but the perception that Trump's supporters have of the leader might be influenced by factors such as the role he played in the show "The Apprentice". However, if many Americans have found him credible, it may partly be because so-called pop politics has long since taken over the public's imagination and in some ways laid the ground. In fact, the always less important role of rational discourse in politics did not emerge with Trump; instead, the already heavy dependence on infotainment is one of the factors that allowed Trump to be credible despite his irrationality.[102] In fact, as explained in the first section of this chapter, Trump has entered politics from the entertainment industry but he is certainly not the only example: he inserted himself into a political landscape that had already for some time been pervaded by the blending of politics and entertainment, even though he represents an extreme example. An article posted by Nick Bryant on the BBC website cites many examples of US Presidents that were to a variable extent familiar to the entertainment industry: Ronald Reagan, the first movie star president, Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy and Bill Clinton are only a few. The author then mentions Barack Obama as an example of a president that was not only familiar with the phenomenon but became a pop icon himself, making the border between the two worlds more and more invisible:

> Whereas many of his predecessors looked like they had walked onto the wrong set when they ventured into the world of entertainment, Obama made the transition seamlessly. Mimicking Al Green, dancing with Ellen DeGeneres, appearing on The View or driving around the White House grounds cracking jokes with Jerry Seinfeld for the show Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee became just as much a part of his presidency as more formal appearances. It was no longer a case of stepping between two different realms. There was no line of demarcation.

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[102] M. Kakutani, op. cit. , p.31

Increasingly, these pop culture moments were used to advance his agenda, as when he slammed-jammed the news with Jimmy Fallon and appeared on Between Two Ferns with Zach Galifianakis. Both promoted Obamacare, the success of which relied upon young healthy people signing up in vast numbers. That marked a key development. Most presidents merely courted popularity when they went on chat shows. Obama had specific policy goals in mind.[103]

Moreover, despite a high degree of professionalisation, even Hillary Clinton recognized the power of including pop cultural reference in her campaign and therefore embraced new strategies such as gamification: for instance, a week after the release of the location-based augmented reality game Pokemon Go, the Clinton campaign used it to invite people to register for voting.[104] Finally, when examining the most recent US elections, we can observe the presence of advertisements with endorsements from celebrities like the rapper Snoop Dogg and live communication of the candidates Biden and Harris. These strategies were created to direct voters to the IWillVote.com website, where they could learn how to vote and ask to cast a ballot remotely by registering on the electoral roll. Furthermore, they sponsored content on TikTok, Snapchat, and the videogame Fortnite to encourage younger citizens to vote and consequently demonstrate how to vote, and then incite them to cast their ballots.[105]

Returning to the main subject of this analysis, it is possible to provide many examples of the intersection of popular culture and politics in Donald Trump's communication. The first one can be found in the 2016 presidential campaign, when Trump used the previously mentioned catchphrase "You're fired!" from the reality TV show "The Apprentice" as a way to appeal to his supporters creating a sense of relatability and to project an image of strength and decisiveness. It was also functional in the construction of the continuity of his personal brand. He employed the phrase when addressing his opponents, who could be politicians, journalists, business leaders or other public figures

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[103] N. Bryant, "Donald Trump and the pop culture presidency", BBC Culture (18 Jan. 2018) https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20180117-donald-trump-and-the-pop-culture-presidency (accessed on 13th Jan. 2023)

[104] G. Enli, "Twitter as arena for the authentic outsider: Exploring the social media campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 US presidential election", in *European Journal of Communication*, 32 (2017), pp. 50–61

[105] A.Pagani, "Da Obama a Biden passando per Trump. Come cambiano comunicazione e politica nell'America di oggi" in *Europa Atlantica,* 1 Feb. 2021 https://europaatlantica.it/usa2020/2021/02/da-obama-a-biden-passando-per-trump-come-cambiano-comunicazione-e-politica-nellamerica-di-oggi/

in order to ironically express disagreement and the action he would take if he became President of the US. Among these, we can find Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Nancy Pelosi but also bureaucrats such as James Comey, the journalist and television host Megyn Kelly, and business leaders such as Mark Zuckerberg and Jeff Bezos. The catchphrase has then been used against him: it became the object of many Tweets and viral memes after the former President lost the 2020 elections against Biden. Furthermore, Nick Bryant (*ibid*.) notices how Trump's campaign was influenced by one of his favourite pop culture genres, particularly by the World Wrestling Federation: his hype, aggressivity, controversy, the style of the nicknames he adopted for his opponents, the merchandising and so forth would mirror the characteristics of this genre. To conclude, Trump's rallies, speeches and social media posts generally include numerous elements of entertainment such as music, interaction with the crowd, references to iconic quotes from movies and so forth. However, Gianpietro Mazzoleni[106] argues that when pop politics is used as a media strategy for increasing the popularity of the leader and making his political positions appear more acceptable, in particular when they are objectively anti-system, dangerous and offensive to minorities, it takes the form of "media populism" consequently becoming problematic for democracy.

Overall, Trump's communication was heavily influenced by pop culture, and his approach can be seen as an example of how pop cultural references can shape and influence politics in the modern era. However, this strategy does undoubtedly have certain drawbacks. It has been said that Trump's use of entertainment and popular culture in his political campaign trivialises significant problems and undermines the institutionality of the electoral process. Trump has also been accused of appealing to emotions over logic in his use of popular culture to interact with the public, which may be detrimental to rational decision-making. Additionally, the politicisation of entertainment and spectacle runs the risk of undermining democratic principles and delegitimizing political institutions. The next section will investigate a case where the choice of using pop culture elements in order to convey political messages is particularly interesting to observe due to the popularity it acquired at the point of being later proposed by some Italian political leaders.

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[106] G. Mazzoleni, "Trump e la politica pop", in *La rivista Il Mulino* (15 Nov. 2016) https://www.rivistailmulino.it/a/trump-e-la-politica-pop (accessed on 13th Jan. 2023)

3.4 "The Wall is coming": Trump and his inappropriate use of pop cultural references

This section will investigate the strategic choice of the 45th President of the United States to refer to a pop cultural element, in this case, the tv series Game of Thrones, in order to transmit political messages: adopting a very popular narrative icon, he facilitated the transmission of the intended message due to the immediacy of such association. This section will present three cases in which Trump intended to exploit the media resonance of the show as a propaganda tool in order to attract the attention of a large portion of the population.

The series Trump refers to is a hugely successful television show that has captivated the interest of millions of people worldwide. George R. R. Martin's book series called "A Song of Ice and Fire" served as inspiration for the television adaptation, which takes place in a world full of political intrigue, power rivalries, and epic wars. The show has received accolades for its complex plotting, captivating characters, and stunning production qualities. Donald Trump tapped into the show's enormous popularity and cultural significance when he alluded to "Game of Thrones" in his speech. He was able to convey his message to a broad and diversified audience by utilising visuals (font, background) and show-related catchphrases that have become iconic. Politicians seeking to engage people may use the show's themes of domination, control, and power struggles as a valuable source of cultural references since they are both universal and recognisable, as Trump did in this case. Anja Boato, who analysed this campaign from a transmedia perspective, affirms that although these strategies are already largely spread in business marketing, this campaign was particularly popular because it was unusual and innovative for the political sphere.[107]

The first tweet appeared on the former President's official account on November 2nd 2018 (Fig. 3.2). The figure, which has the characteristics of a meme, presents a solemn picture of himself on a grey and misty background that is easily associable with the style of the show's visuals; the text, written in the show's typical font, says "Sanctions are coming. November 5" and imitates the popular catchphrase "Winter is coming".

[107] A. Boato, "La comunicazione politica nell'era della transmedialità: tre esempi di intrecci tra politica e cultura popolare" in *Social media e politica: Esperienze, analisi e scenari della nuova comunicazione politica*, ed. by C. Riva, Torino, UTET Università, 2021, pp. 115-127

Trump posted this tweet after the announcement of the reintroduction of sanctions against Iran, removed by Obama in 2015 after the nuclear deal between the two countries; he successively printed it and kept it on his desk during a cabinet meeting. The tweet was widely criticised for using a pop cultural reference in a serious political context, trivialising the issue. Furthermore, the streaming platform HBO promptly responded expressing absolute discontent for the misuse of their products; later, a tweet appeared on their official account: "How do you say trademark misuse in Dothraki[108]?". Then, a considerable number of tweets and memes were posted by insiders of the show and by fans, who attacked the former President's move through show-related references, for example associating him to the villains of the show or using the popular phrase "Not today", as the actress Maeve Williams did. The author of the series on the other hand, took advantage of the situation to transmit a political message sharing a graphic (with the same font) encouraging people to go vote.

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[108] The fictional language spoken by the Dothraki, a nomadic people appearing on the show.

Fig. 3.2

Tweet posted by the former President on his account. Source: Donald Trump (@realdonaldtrump), Twitter, 2 Nov. 2018 https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1058388700617498625

Around a month later, Donald Trump replicated the pattern, referencing once again to the same catchphrase, "Winter is coming". This time, the image (Fig. 3.3) presents a close-up picture of the former President superimposed over a picture of a wall and with a similar background as the previous one. This time, the topic is the already mentioned leitmotif of his communication, which is the wall he intended to build on the border with Mexico. The reference played into the popular narrative of the show, in which the

walls of Westeros represent protection of the kingdom from the dangerous Wildlings, thus creating a problematic parallelism with the Mexican clandestine immigrants that the former President intended to keep outside the United States. The "meme" was first posted on the same day Nancy Pelosi was elected speaker of the House of Representatives, when she announced that, for the Democrats, the issue of the wall was a "non-starter". Finally, the fandom accused Trump of misusing the reference since the wall eventually falls during the last season of the series.

Fig. 3.3

Tweet posted by the former President on his account. Source: Donald Trump (@realdonaldtrump), Twitter, 6 Jan. 2019 https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1081735898679701505

The third and last example is constituted by a tweet published on April 18th 2019. The elements are the same: a picture of the former President, this time from behind, a grey and misty background and a text with the same font saying "Game Over". However, this time the slogan is introduced by another text (Fig. 3.4): on the left upper part of the image, he writes "No collusion. No obstruction. For the haters and the radical left

democrats". The textual reference to typical catchphrases of the show is in this case less explicit. The topic is the conclusion of the Russiagate, (or 'Mueller special counsel inquiry'), which focused on alleged obstruction of justice by Donald Trump and his associates as well as Russian influence in the 2016 American elections. By using this reference, Trump was trying to frame the conclusion of the investigation as his victory and his opponents' loss, suggesting that there was no evidence of what he has been accused of.

Fig. 3.4

Tweet posted by the former President on his account. Source: Donald Trump (@realdonaldtrump), Twitter, 18 Apr. 2019 https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1118876219381026818

To conclude, during an interview with the New York Times[109], George R.R. Martin confessed that his "A Song of Ice and Fire", including the element of the Wall, intended to be an allegory for the threat of climate change: while everyone in Westeros fights

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[109] J. Sims, "George R. R. Martin Answers Times Staffers' Burning Questions", in *New York Times*, (16 Oct. 2018)
https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/16/t-magazine/george-rr-martin-qanda-game-of-thrones.html
(accessed on 3rd Feb. 2023)

each other and is concerned about gaining power and wealth, they are avoiding the problem that is made explicit by the phrase "Winter is coming" and which indicates a threat that could harm the whole planet. Despite the trivialization caused by the misuse of pop cultural references for serious issues such as those indicated in the previous paragraphs, this brief analysis has served the objective of providing an insight into how the American political landscape is influenced by popular culture and in which ways Donald Trump has contributed to the extremization of this phenomenon.

3.4.1 "Not today": the Italian attempt to imitate Trump's formula

Donald Trump was not the only one to use Game of Thrones references to transmit political messages. Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Roberta Bracciale[110] have in fact briefly analysed the creation of memes based on references to the series by Italian politicians, who were probably inspired by Trump's behaviour, among which the now President and leader of Fratelli d'Italia Giorgia Meloni, the activist and leader of the party +Europa Emma Bonino, and Sergio Chiamparino, from Partito Democratico. The memes appeared in April 2019, around one month before the European elections to elect the Italian representatives at the European Parliament. Before discussing the examples, Mazzoleni and Bracciale state that the spontaneity behind humorous content shared by political leaders in an attempt to adapt to the new modalities of discussion of politics online would in reality be just apparent, because this content would represent a vehicle for advertising and, in many cases, a way to spread politically oriented hoax or misinformation, with the objective of spreading propaganda without being seen (*ibid.*, p. 97-99).

The first example is the meme posted by Giorgia Meloni in April 2019, which uses the catchphrase "Not today" from the show translated into Italian ("Non oggi"), the same font used for the visuals of the show and a picture of herself. On the upper right side of the image, there is the logo of her party, Fratelli d'Italia. The entire text says "Invaded by Wildlings? Not Today. Naval blockade immediately. Let's defend our borders". The core message is against immigration, therefore extremely conservative and oriented to the values typically supported by the right; it is in fact similar to the one Trump wants to

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[110] G. Mazzoleni - R. Bracciale, op. cit, pp. 99-103

transmit with his "The wall is coming". Mazzoleni and Bracciale (*ibid.*, p. 101) also note how the decision to translate the phrase "Not today" would further highlight the tendency of her party towards a strong nationalism. The post, shared on her Facebook account, features an invitation to vote for Fratelli d'Italia in order to "defend the borders" and does not present any further references to the show. Once again, the intended parallelism between Wildlings and immigrants and the trivialization of this issue is undoubtedly particularly problematic. Finally, the accusations of not having correctly interpreted the message behind the show were not long in coming on the web.

Fig. 3.5

Secondly, on 30th April 2019, Emma Bonino quotes the same catchphrase, although with some substantial differences on the level of content. First of all, the leader of +Europa, a liberal party with a strong orientation towards Europeanism, decides to not translate the original "Not today", highlighting her absolute detachment from the nationalistic approach of Giorgia Meloni. In fact, the text says "What are we responding to sovereignists? Not Today!". The logo of the party appears here on the bottom right side of the image. The leader is represented holding a European flag and with a dragon flying in the background. The post contains once again a propagandistic message with the intent of inviting citizens to vote against sovereignists and in favour of +Europa. In this case, Emma Bonino includes further hashtags related to the show, such as #Winteriscoming, #GoT and #Dracarys. Mazzoleni and Bracciale (ibid., p. 101) argue that while in the first example, Giorgia Meloni is using these references with the function of supporting her ideologies and her party, Emma Bonino has used them in an attempt to attack her opponents.

Fig. 3.6

Meme posted by Emma Bonino on Più Europa account. Source: Più Europa (Facebook account), 30 Apr. 2019

https://www.facebook.com/piueuropa/photos/a.133740873960254/314283909239282/?locale=it_IT

The third and last example has as protagonist the former mayor of Turin and former President of the region Piemonte, Sergio Chiamparino. The meme appeared on the same day as Emma Bonino's and presents the same function of attack to his opponents. In fact, the same catchphrase, not translated, is preceded by the phrase "What are we saying to the supporters of Lega?". The logo is on the upper right side of the image and

features a cross, in an attempt to represent the action to be made in order to vote for Chiamparino. The picture is in black and white and there is a smaller effort to recreate a background that could visually remind people of the visuals of the series as in the previous examples. The caption of the post directly addresses the democrats who watch the show, once again inviting them to vote for the leader in the upcoming elections.

Fig. 3.7

Meme posted by Sergio Chiamparino on Partito Democratico Piemonte account. Source: Partito Democratico Piemonte (Facebook account), 30 Apr. 2019

https://www.facebook.com/pdpiemonte/photos/a.388658041273813/1401094776696796?locale=it_IT

To conclude, all the examples above, despite having different functions and rhetorical purposes, represent cases of instant or real marketing (*ibid.*, p. 100), in which the objective of spreading a certain message (in this case political/propagandistic) beyond

the usual public is accomplished by including topics or events that interest a wider audience, including therefore pop cultural elements. However, the Italian case has not acquired as much popularity as Trump's campaign, probably because of the coherence in posting multiple memes referring to different catchphrases of the same show, because of the intervention of the authors of the series and because of the topics he referred to, which attracted many critiques and therefore media resonance.

After having discussed the role of pop culture in Trump's political communication in particular, the next chapter will discuss a case study relating to the Italian context with a focus on transmedia storytelling and the extent to which it demonstrates an increasing merging of entertainment into the world of politics.

4. Case study: V-day as an example of transmedia storytelling in politics

4.1 Beppe Grillo and the foundation of Movimento 5 Stelle

Giuseppe Piero Grillo, commonly known as Beppe Grillo, was the charismatic head of the Italian party "Movimento 5 Stelle" until 2017 and a former comedian and actor. He has been updating his critical and informational blog named "Il Blog di Beppe Grillo", designed and managed by Gianroberto Casaleggio, daily since 2005. Beppe first expressed his interest in social issues while working as a comedian. After being dismissed by the television broadcaster RAI in the middle of the 1980s, due to his "indiscrete" satire about the corruption of the socialists who were then in government with Bettino Craxi, Grillo started performing in theatres and sporting venues. There, he gradually redefined his connection with the audience by becoming more polemical and politicising his repertoire; throughout the 1990s, Grillo gradually modified his performances by introducing strong environmentalist and political critiques. Before the blog's launch in the new century, Grillo has addressed issues including globalised capitalism, biotechnology, information, citizens' rights, multinational businesses, and ecology through his theatre performances and articles[111]. As Corbetta and Gualmini[112] notice, Grillo began to build his rhetoric towards politics by focusing on the importance of the active role that citizens should play in politics and on harsh criticism of a political class that he would have described as 'dead' and incapable of understanding the changes and needs of ordinary citizens. He almost entirely concentrates its storytelling on anti-elitism, on the need to eradicate a corrupt and incapable political class and to return power to the sovereign people, confirming in fact that anti-political ideals that have animated his shows and that have strongly influenced the movement[113]. Initially, a strong theme of the blog was the criticism of precarious employment, to the extent that Grillo himself became the spokesman for the disappointments and hopes of numerous young people engaged in precarious and underpaid work. The war in Iraq was another important theme addressed on the site, with the comedian taking the side of pacifists, emphasising that the mission launched by the Italian government was not one of peace and should therefore be withdrawn. Finally and above all, the central theme was

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[111] R. Tanda, *La "cosa" di Grillo tra movimento e partito*, Bachelor Thesis, LUISS Carlo Guidi, Roma, 2013, p. 3

[112] P. Corbetta - E. Gualmini, *Il partito di Grillo*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2013, p. 35

[113] D. Mu, *L'antipolitica come arma retorica: una analisi comparata tra Beppe Grillo, Matteo Renzi e Matteo Salvini*, Bachelor Thesis, Università degli Studi di Firenze, Firenze, 2017, p. 114

criticism of the political caste, made explicit by the campaign "Parlamento Pulito" ("Clean Parliament") (*ibid.*).

Tanda (*La "cosa" di Grillo tra movimento e partito*, pp. 4-5) affirms that his political communication project emerged when the blog was launched, in 2005, in order to free the leader from journalistic mediation. The blog has rapidly gained a large audience and has become the first in the Italian language by number of visits and among the first in the world with two hundred thousand daily visits and over a thousand comments posted for each article. It was recognized as the best Italian website in the "news and information" category by "Il Sole 24 Ore" in December 2005. However, Corbetta and Gualmini (*Il partito di Grillo*, p.38) highlight how some critics believed that the blog did not fully utilise the tool's potential but rather used it in a one-way manner, with each post consisting of a single individual's expression of thought and the potential to receive thousands of comments, all of which would be impossible to read, leaving users with no relevant space and failing to spark a genuine political debate. Nevertheless, the blog gradually altered its relationship with institutional politics and representative democracy throughout the 15th legislature (2006–2008). As a matter of fact, when the "citizens' primaries" initiative was first introduced in January 2006, it was largely based on a consultation of the blog's frequent visitors on the major political issues, the selection of the most significant ones, and their delivery to Palazzo Chigi. At the time, the blog actually positioned itself as the voice of the people, collecting all the requests from citizens and delivering them later to the then Prime Minister, Prodi. However, the disregard towards the suggestions caused a drastic shift within the blog; many participants realised that they would need to commit themselves and stop delegating power if they desired a response from the conventional parties.

On June 26th 2007, he formalised the organisation of the V-Day at the European Parliament and a political plan to gather signatures for a popular initiative bill that was to be held on September 8th 2007 in 200 Italian squares. Beppe Grillo began the actual phase of direct political participation with civic lists concerning social issues and the common good about five months later. His political movement, officially introduced as the "Movimento nazionale a cinque stelle" on October 4th 2009, would only participate in the 2010 regional elections, altering its name to "Movimento 5 Stelle", or M5S. The name refers to a genuine grassroot and traditional movement in name of the common

interest, and the five stars represent the five public sphere issues the movement concentrates on: environment, sustainable transportation, public water, connectivity, and development. After the 2018 elections, which resulted in the election of the Conte I (1 June 2018 - 5 September 2019), the 65th executive of the Italian Republic, and later the Conte II (5 September 2019 - 21 January 2021) government, Luigi Di Maio was given the titles of Political Leader and Legal Representative, and the blog was disassociated from the party in favour of the official party blog named "Il Blog delle Stelle".

4.1.1 Anti-politics and populism

The Movimento 5 Stelle is defined as an anti-political movement. "Anti-politics" is a term used to describe a "reaction against or rejection of the practices or attitudes associated with traditional politics"[114]. In respect to the Italian context, the Tangentopoli[115] scandal is often designated, as by Giovanni Orsini[116], as the trigger for the Italian electorate's rage, which had been suppressed for years due to compromises and unfulfilled promises. The scandal allowed the citizens to direct their resentment towards the political elite. The people eventually found an occasion to identify a common enemy, namely the political elites, and pour all their hatred and discontent onto them. It follows that the explosion of public discontent inevitably led to the death of the political class. The animosity that the collapse of the majority of the parties during the First Republic caused would be at the root of the general discontent that characterised Italian politics in the years after Tangentopoli, apart from representing a crucial turning point in the political thought of the leader of the M5S (*ibid*.).

Due to the fact that Movimento 5 Stelle has often been defined as a populist movement, it is pertinent in this context to discuss populism by attempting to define it, but perhaps more importantly by examining the parallels and discrepancies between populist political parties and anti-political movements. The concept of populism is difficult to define; as a first attempt, it could be interpreted as a rejection of political mediation,

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[114] "Anti-politics", *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*.
https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anti-politics (accessed on 30th Nov. 2022)
[115] The term indicates a scandal concerning a bribery system active in Italy at the end of the 1980s and uncovered in the early 1990s, which involved the payment of bribes to politicians by entrepreneurs in exchange of contracts, which had as consequence the disappearance of the traditional post-World War II historical parties.
[116] G. Orsina, *La democrazia del narcisismo. Breve storia dell'antipolitica*, Marsilio, Padova, 2018, p. 142-143

which in turn leads to seeking an appeal to the citizens with the ultimate objective of regaining their lost sovereignty, as Antonio Masala[117] proposes. Three varieties of populism are distinguished by Mény and Surel in their article "Democracy and the Populist Challenge"[118]. The first type of populism is known as "inclusive populism", in which the general public assumes the role of protagonist in society (sovereign people), and no other group—aside from the political elites—is seen as the enemy. The development of the other two varieties of populism is based on the diametrical opposition of ideologies typical of the right and left: on one hand, left-wing populism does not seek to exclude any specific social or ethnic group but just the economic oligarchies, seen as the only beneficiaries of the capitalist economic system and as oppressors of the people, considered as the main actors in the socio-economic landscape. On the other hand, right-wing populism excludes political elites, economic elites and cultural, religious, and ethnic groups from their notion of "people". Thus, anti-politics and populism might appear to be comparable; in fact, both are actually motivated by a desire for vengeance against political, social, or ethnic organisations that have denied the people the rightful sovereignty that is a foundational principle of democracy. One could, however, make the error of equating populism with anti-politics; this association is by no means accurate.

The Italian political scientist Marco Tarchi[119] examines the key distinctions between populism and anti-political movements. He affirms that even though populists are driven by impatience and mistrust and portray politics as a place where laziness, corruption and parasitism reign, they do not refrain from confronting their competitors on the level of winning consensus and power. On the contrary, overthrowing the professional political class and replacing it with new figures forged through work and expertise, moved by real civic passion, would be their main objective. Therefore, an anti-political action expresses itself in the form of pure protest, but as soon as it enters the realm of institutionalised competition with other subjects, starting with participation in elections, it turns into political action, even though explicitly directed against the establishment. It appears evident, therefore, that while anti-politics is based and remains

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[117] A. Masala, "I populismi e la democrazia. È possibile un populismo democratico?", in *L'età dei populismi*, ed. by A. Masala - L. Viviani, Carocci Editore, Roma, 2020, pp. 56-79
[118] Y. Meny - Y. Surel, *Democracy and the Populist Challenge,* Palgrave MacMillan, London, 2002
[119] M. Tarchi, «Che cos'è il populismo», in *Anatomia del populismo*, ed. by M. Tarchi, Diana edizioni, Napoli, 2019, p. 27

exclusively in protest, populism, although it maintains a relationship of aversion to the elites, accepts dialogue, aimed at change; this can be seen in the evolutionary path taken by the movement from its birth to its institutionalisation.

4.2 A new way to communicate: from the blog to the web 2.0

Beppe Grillo is one of the leaders who is mostly exposed online and can be considered a specialist in online strategic mass communication based on the success he has been able to reach. Since the leader of Movimento 5 Stelle did not begin his career as a politician, he first exploited mass communication channels such as television in order to spread and amplify his message, making it possible for him to shift from running a simple blog to leading a government party for two consecutive executives. Movimento 5 Stelle can be thought of as a hybrid party because, despite becoming a party in its own right as a result of its expansion and gradual integration into the institutions, it has not renounced protesting in the streets as when it was only a movement, an action that Grillo has continued even after leaving the party. Secondly and most importantly in this context, the internet's limitless potential to streamline and expedite the dissemination of political messages has been exploited even after the institutionalisation of the movement. Although it has undergone significant modifications, such as the shift from the blog towards social media and the introduction of the Rousseau platform, the communication strategy of the M5S has nonetheless maintained its initial creative and non-traditionalist nature; this section will explore in further detail the evolution of their communication modes.

4.2.1 Television

Grillo has been a dominant presence on Italian television and an expert in this field, as he was a professional showman before he became a political figure and, in this regard, knows many techniques to capture attention and increase the audience. In fact, his frequent on-camera arguments with journalists, his vehement criticism towards the ruling class and his numerous sentimental speeches to his audience are recurrent, all of which are designed to elicit strong emotions that draw viewers' attention. In addition to being straightforward and clear, Grillo's vocabulary is defined by strong, occasionally vulgar phrases that are meant to stir up controversy and express his rage and strong

emotions — a register completely distant from that of the ideal politician. Grillo strives to communicate and highlight his emotions rather than focus on the issue. Finally, as concerns the image he intends to present when he appears on television, Grillo wears in almost every occasion informal and casual clothing.

Throughout the movement's political expansion, its communication approach went through a variety of adjustments. On the basis of the consensus that had grown over the years, Grillo made the definitive decision to abandon television and turn to a new medium of communication on January 26th 2005. The website www.beppegrillo.it was launched and quickly rose to prominence as one of Italy's most well-known blogs where political issues were discussed and initiatives were promoted. Grillo's initial strategy was to disparage the traditional media through a series of demonstrations, which resulted in the simultaneous avoidance of mass media to connect with citizens, a ban on its proponents to appear on TV talk shows, and a warning to expel any violators.[120] After the electoral boom of 2013, however, criticism of the media gradually disappeared, yet the M5s persisted in avoiding traditional forms of communication until May 2013. In fact, in the wake of the local elections, the unsatisfactory results led numerous activists and exponents to criticise Grillo's communication approach; it was then that the candidates started to appear in television programmes in order to reach all potential voters of the party in a broader manner. However, they had to limit their appearances to only one-on-one interviews with journalists as their only interlocutors and only in order to explain the Movement's actions. Later, however, previously to the 2014 European elections, the M5S made another step forward, specifically the Casaleggio Associati, which took part in Lucia Annunziata's talk show on Rai 3, and Grillo, who gave a video interview to Marco Travaglio for il Fatto Quotidiano before having himself interviewed by Enrico Mentana on La 7 and finally by Bruno Vespa on his talk show Porta a Porta on Rai 1, but always under his conditions, exposed in his blog. For example, Grillo demanded that the spokespersons of the movement would be framed in single mode, with no breaks on the other guests present or on other unimportant details, so that attention can rightly focus on the concepts they express.[121]

[120] L. Mosca - C. Vaccari, "La progressiva ibridazione dei repertori comunicativi del Movimento" in *M5S. Come cambia il Partito di Grillo*, ed. by P. Corbetta, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2017, pp. 196-197

[121] M. Giusti, "Grillo detta le regole d'ingaggio ai suoi per andare in Tv: "No a informazione di bassa lega" " in *La Stampa*, 20 Mar. 2021
https://www.lastampa.it/politica/2021/03/19/news/grillo-detta-le-regole-d-ingaggio-ai-suoi-per-andare-in-tv-no-a-informazione-di-bassa-lega-1.40046151/ (accessed on 2nd Dec. 2022)

The communication strategy of the M5s was thus transformed within a few years and adapted to that of the traditional parties; it did not eventually elude the phenomena of popularisation and spectacularization that were previously mentioned in this thesis, leading to an exponential increase in the media visibility of the Movement also confirmed by the numbers, which tripled between 2012 and 2016, with the increase from 8% to 23% (*ibid*., pp. 204-211).

Fig. 4.1
Grillo hosted by Bruno Vespa in his talk show "Porta a Porta" on Rai 1 in order to present his theater show "Adesso parlo io". Source: La Stampa, "Grillo detta le regole di ingaggio ai suoi per andare in tv",
20   Mar.   2021
https://www.lastampa.it/politica/2021/03/19/news/grillo-detta-le-regole-d-ingaggio-ai-suoi-per-andare-in-tv-no-a-informazione-di-bassa-lega-1.40046151/

4.2.2 The rallies

Grillo first gained support through rallies in public squares, where he promoted his ideals and by which he has continued to excite crowds and increase his visibility. His rallies are similar to shows, thanks in part to his previous ability to stand on a stage and attract the attention of the audience. His communication strategy is to identify a mutual enemy to whom he continually addresses shouts, insults, verbal attacks and characterised by elementary, informal and sometimes incorrect Italian in order to

engage the audience's enthusiasm and passion. As Tanda (*La "cosa" di Grillo tra movimento e partito*) highlights, the evolution from comedian to political leader was reflected in a modification of the forms and registers of communication: in the initial stage, theatre performances scheduled across the country were used to promote local groups' campaigns and activities; later, rallies held in support of the M5S lists were partially transformed into comedy shows. Thus, it is evident as of now that Grillo has communicated with voters frequently through election rallies across Italy. The candidates are seldom in focus, while Grillo exhibits all of his showman skills and immediately incites an emotional response from the crowd. Furthermore, the author affirms that Grillo seems to "play" politics like he previously used to play his shows. Thus, there would be a perfect overlap between politics and theatre (*ibid.*).

Giovanna Cosenza[122] highlights that the hypersemplification employed in his rallies would be enhanced not only by aggressive, direct and foul language, but also by the mockery of politicians, who are always attributed a nickname that emphasises some physical or behavioural aspects, a strategy that is typical of satire. Cosenza proposes some examples: Silvio Berlusconi becomes the Psiconano, a portmanteau of the terms 'psicopatico' (psychopath) and 'nano' (dwarf) and the former President of the Republic Mario Monti becomes Rigor Montis (for the rigour in public accounts and the coldness of his style); in addition, Grillo calls politicians in general 'corpses' or 'zombies', to highlight both their advanced age and the fact that their actions and words would be too old-fashioned and traditionalist (*ibid.*). Furthermore, the author stresses that, in order to show his intention to connect with the audience, his closeness to each citizen and the fact to be one of them, Grillo addresses the audience with the second singular pronoun 'tu', when possible, instead of the second plural pronoun 'voi'. Tarchi[123] affirms that it is also through this dichotomous use of pronouns that the anti-political scope of the discourse emerges. On the one hand, there is the inclusive 'us', referring to the citizens, militants and M5S candidates, all united in that organic whole that is the Movimento 5 Stelle; on the other hand, we can find 'them', the political class, parties and politicians, who would attempt to discredit the Movement. A further dichotomy that Grillo employs during his speeches would be the opposition between the present and future (the

[122] G. Cosenza, "Grillo: dal turpiloquio al linguaggio del corpo" in *Enciclopedia Treccani*, 15 Nov. 2012, https://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/speciali/elezioni_sinistre/Cosenza.html (accessed on 1st Dec./2022)
[123] M. Tarchi, *L'Italia populista: Dal qualunquismo a Beppe Grillo*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2015

movement) and the past (the ruling political class). Cosenza (*Grillo: dal turpiloquio al linguaggio del corpo*) also points out that his gestures and moves are intense and aimed at expressing strong emotions. In fact, Grillo yells until his voice gives out instead of simply speaking; he doesn't just stroll across the stage, he strides over it. When he addresses the audience, he also bends, stoops, and leans over the bars and towards the audience until he almost blends with it. His face is always extremely expressive and he is able to alter his expression at any moment, going from amusing to tragic or vice versa. He has also been the protagonist of spectacular events such as a trip across Sicily in October 2012 that started with Grillo swimming across the Mediterranean Sea and continued via camper van as well as on foot and finally on a Sicilian cart. Cosenza terminates with a critique: even though he makes criticism of the parties and the 'caste' a cornerstone of his success, he pushes to the utmost certain mediatized and spectacularized political techniques, ranging from profanity to extreme body gestures to the flaunted equality between the leader and the citizens (*ibid*.).

Fig. 4.2

An example of Grillo's theatrical gestures: here, he is surfing the crowd on a dinghy during a rally in Bologna in 2010. Source: L'Eco dello Jonio, "Dal V-day di Grillo al V-day di Conte: dovevamo diventare immuni dal virus della politica e, invece, non resta che difenderci dal virus della paura", 28 Dec. 2020 https://ecodellojonio.it/articoli/il-corsivo/2020/12/dal-v-day-di-grillo-al-v-day-di-conte-dovevamo-diventare-immuni-dal-virus-della-politica-e-invece-non-resta-che-difenderci-dal-virus-della-paura

4.2.3 The blog

Grillo mostly uses, especially in more recent times, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for his communications, but unlike his opponents, who limit their communication to these 'mainstream' platforms, he also maintains, as anticipated above, a more traditional blog named "Il Blog di Beppe Grillo", which consists of an electronic information diary that can be seen as a political project in itself. In fact, blogs were described by Johnson and Kaye[124] as diary-style websites that typically offer opinions and news and allow readers to post comments, share recommendation links, and/or trackbacks. Creating his blog, Grillo highlighted the delegitimization of the political class, emphasising that his blog represented a new effective way of doing politics, geared towards a 'direct democracy'.

Specifically because it is a platform targeted at the citizens, the blog is characterised by a choice of themes and registers that are easily understandable and captivating for the target audience. His objective is to reach a high rate of participation and adherence by the largest segment of the Italian population. The blog was created with the intention of emphasising his political thought and giving visibility to his own popular movement. Themes range from the political arena through the social realm to scientific and cultural topics, with extensive allusions to the leader's political philosophy and to the movement's political ambitions. The impactful information topics are generally chosen and covered based on how close they are to the target audience. The site frequently uses generalisations from Grillo's speeches, including the terms "old", "corrupt", or dichotomies such as "good and evil", "clean and dishonest", "right and wrong" to refer to his political opponents, also called "enemies". Inevitably, this communication strategy has contributed to Grillo's rapid rise as a successful politician. The establishment of Meetup groups was the first event that outlined the active engagement of the blog's followers. The initiative was announced on 16 July 2005 in a blog post in which it was outlined as an opportunity for those who followed the blog to meet, discuss and take action. The platform Meetup, promoted not only through his blog but also in his shows, permitted the organisation of national meetings, the first of which was

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[124] T. J. Johnson - B. K. Kaye, "Wag the blog: How reliance on traditional media and the internet influence credibility perceptions of weblogs among blog users" in J*ournalism and Mass Communications Quarterly*, 81:3, 2004, pp. 622-642

held in Turin on 17 December 2005, in conjunction with a demonstration against the Tav. During the meeting, Grillo explained that the aim of the Meetup was to report issues that would be later amplified by the leader himself in order to acquire more visibility. However, numerous meetings were held later in various Italian cities, such as Naples, where the rubbish issue was discussed. This allowed the hierarchy scale to be maintained to a minimum: all participants, aside from the group coordinator, are put on the same level and are entitled to equal participation in the conversation. The tool is also perfect for maintaining transparency and making it simple to schedule live meetings among participants. Biorcio and Natale[125] affirm that the organisation of Meetups combines practices typical of traditional activism and the development of innovative mediation activities through the web. This has been the distinctive and most original character of the movement, which often presents itself as a link between the virtual and real dimensions, creating non-institutionalised places for the exchange of information and ideas between citizens.

As Daniele Mu (*L'antipolitica come arma retorica: una analisi comparata tra Beppe Grillo, Matteo Renzi e Matteo Salvini*, p.57-58) points out, the Movimento 5 Stelle was officially presented on October 4th 2009 in Milan, together with a 122-point programme. To distinguish itself from conventional parties, the M5S was organised under what is known as a Non-statute, in which it is defined as a "non-association" (Article 4 then states that it is neither a political party nor is it intended to become one in the future). The Non-statute indicates the blog's web address as headquarters, and its name and logo are registered in the name of Beppe Grillo, the organisation's sole owner of the rights to use them. The Non-statute was modified on September 27th 2016, as a result of an online referendum. For instance, the revised version stipulated that the location must now correspond with the movement's website (www.movimento5stelle.it) rather than the blog. In addition, the name and logo were no longer Grillo's property but were now registered under the association's name. The blog also played a crucial role in 2013, on the occasion of national elections, when the readers of the blog were able to vote for the candidates who were going to be part of the electoral list. The author also highlights how the blog presented some posts written by intellectuals, in order to take

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[125] R. Tanda, *La "cosa" di Grillo tra movimento e partito*, Tesi di Laurea, LUISS Carlo Guidi, Roma, 2013, p. 9 quoting R. Biorcio - P. Natale, *Politica a 5 stelle*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2013, p. 84

advantage of their expertise to validate and confer more credibility to the movement's ideologies (*ibid.*, p.89).

Fig. 4.3
The blog entry through which Grillo solicited the readers of the blog to use the online platform Meetup to organise meetings and promised to meet the groups during his tours across Italy. Source: Il Blog di Beppe Grillo, "Incontriamoci: Meetup", 16 Jul. 2005 https://beppegrillo.it/incontriamoci-meetup/

4.2.4 The Rousseau platform

A further interesting tool that the party has employed from 2016 until 2021 is represented by the Rousseau Platform, a development of Grillo's blog launched by the Rousseau Association, which was founded in 2016 and whose fathers are the now deceased co-founder of the M5S Gianroberto Casaleggio and his son Davide, who acts as the association's president and is responsible for the management of the Rousseau Platform. As stated by Grilli[126], the Rousseau Association's Statute affirms that the

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[126] L. Grilli, *Le piattaforme deliberative online: un possibile strumento per le democrazie del futuro. Una comparazione tra i principali sistemi operativi del mondo con particolare attenzione al caso italiano, la Piattaforma Rousseau*, Bachelor Thesis, LUISS Carlo Guidi, Roma, 2018, p.13 quoting Statuto dell' "Associazione Rousseau", https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/associazionerousseau/documenti/statuto_associazione_rousseau.pdf , p. 1

organisation is coordinated through the website www.rousseau.world, with Milan serving as its administrative centre. The same statute would emphasise the concept of direct democracy once more, stating in Article 4, paragraph 1, that the Association's purpose is to promote the development of digital democracy and to assist the M5S and its exponents in the organisation, promotion, and coordination of the activities and services necessary and useful for the exercise of political and cultural activities and the pursuit of its objectives. The platform takes its name from the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose philosophy is centred around the concept that "a state can be legitimate only if it is guided by the "general will" of its members"[127]. Furthermore, Grilli[128] explains that the platform enables the management of M5S candidates in the elections, whether they are municipal, regional, national, or European. Additionally, it enables members to actively and directly participate in the Movement's tasks. The Rousseau Platform is not an open source system and joining requires an identification process, due to the platform's geolocalization system as well as to ensure that the person behind a profile is actually a voter or a supporter of the Movement. In order to ensure that each subscriber receives the news or ideas that are most pertinent to their location, the algorithm develops a personalised homepage for each user. For example, if a star appears after having accessed the website, it can mean that a proposal that is being discussed might affect that neighbourhood or community (*ibid*.).

The launch of the platform constituted a crucial phase in the organisation of the M5S since it gave the movement's supporters a chance to directly engage with the elected officials at the local, national, and European levels while also voting on candidates and taking part in the issues submitted to the activists. However, the platform's actual effects were rather limited because to start, it only permitted the exchange of interactions between activists and representatives rather than between the activists themselves, resulting in a vertical rather than a horizontal political exchange, and it did not permit users to engage in an in-depth discussion of issues.

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[127] C. Bertram, "Jean Jacques Rousseau" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* , E. N. Zalta (ed.), 2020, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rousseau/ (accessed on 28th Nov. 2022)

[128] L. Grilli, *Le piattaforme deliberative online: un possibile strumento per le democrazie del futuro. Una comparazione tra i principali sistemi operativi del mondo con particolare attenzione al caso italiano, la Piattaforma Rousseau*, Bachelor Thesis, LUISS Carlo Guidi, Roma, 2018, p.13

Fig. 4.4

Login page of the now closed Rousseau platform. Source: Open, "Voto Rousseau, che cosa succede se gli iscritti M5S bocciano l'accordo di governo con il Pd: gli scenari" (3rd Sep. 2019)

https://www.open.online/2019/09/03/voto-rousseau-cosa-succede-se-gli-iscritti-m5s-bocciano-laccordo-di-governo-con-il-pd/

4.2.5 Social media

The use of the Web and more in particular of his blog and Meet-up platforms allowed Grillo to communicate with and gather his audience in a virtual environment before entering the political arena as a party leader, but above all, it was web 2.0 that allowed a real process of disintermediation, a direct relationship between politics and citizens, a personalisation that shortened the distance between leader and followers, making communication increasingly horizontal, and sped up the communication compared to traditional media.[129] As Giuseppe Paternostro and Roberto Sottile[130] highlight, the most accomplished expression of this apparent disintermediation of political communication can be found in the practice of streaming, which is the live transmission via social media of institutional political events or events concerning the party. Beppe Grillo's social media use is characterised by his propensity to share and comment on other

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[129] F. Chiapponi, *Democrazia, populismo, leadership: il Movimento 5 Stelle*, Epokè, Novi Ligure, 2017
[130] G. Paternostro - R. Sottile, "«In alto i cuori / L'Italia cambia verso». Discorso politico e interazione nei social network" in *L'italiano della politica e la politica per l'italiano*, XI Congresso Internazionale ASLI, Associazione per la Storia della Lingua Italiana, Napoli, 2014, pp. 661-675

people's posts rather than posting original content himself. The authors study specifically Grillo's use of Twitter during the electoral campaign of 2013 and they find that there are three typologies of posts in which this can be noticed: the first type consists of posts published on other platforms, mostly documents from Grillo's blog. Instead, the second type consists of retweets, and the authors propose a case where Grillo retweeted a critique of a user, which is not usual for the leader. The third and last typology is represented by the so-called live tweeting, which consists of tweeting real-time updates and comments on events and appointments on the agenda, often accompanied by links to other social media, most of the time Facebook, that contain photos or videos related to the event. They conclude that Grillo would use Twitter as an amplifier for the main instrument of his political activity, which is his blog, in which he devises strategies and plans the political line of the movement. Furthermore, numerous videos have appeared on his social media accounts in which the leader records himself addressing his audience directly, criticising his rivals, and seeking to sensitise the audience to support him in his "war against the enemy". Until 2017, his communication has not been limited to his personal pages and blog but he has often been active on the social pages of the movement, presenting himself mainly as a charismatic leader, as he delegated the political representation to other figures. Finally, Grillo never intervenes to directly reply to users' interventions and thus never interacts in one-to-one exchanges. (*ibid.*)

Grillo's strategy is to emphasise emotions, especially negative ones. He wagers on the audience's fear and frustration, and for these, he presents himself as the "saviour" who will dispel the anger and resentment that the citizens have towards the ruling class, which is, according to him, particularly guilty of preventing voters from participating in politics. He is, of course, followed by astute strategists and spin doctors, just like the great majority of the other communicators and leaders of the Italian and international political scene. Strong phrases and categories, such as the one listed in the previous paragraph, are used in the communication language to convey this repressed rage. As in the blog, the register is informal, straightforward, simple to understand and it does not lack foul language. However, transparency is the quality that best describes his communication. Paternostro and Sottile have also created a list presenting the most common characteristics of Grillo's language on social media, after stating that he tends

to use linguistic forms that are perfectly consistent with "the language of the media" (*ibid*.). Among these characteristics, the authors cite:

-capitalised characters to mimic his 'shouting' style;

- telegraphic style achieved through the use of a full stop instead of a comma;

- poor hypotaxis and preference for parataxis;

- the exclamation mark, which goes against the economy of space and favours linguistic expressiveness;

- the numerous words taken from foreign languages, English in particular;

- the technical-specialist terminology of IT and the Internet;

- the use of Internet slang;

- the use of dialect, sign of a departure from the formality characterising the speeches of 'old' politics;

- the abundance of dysphemisms aimed at producing a language that destroys the hypocrisy that according to him denotes the political class (*ibid.*, p.670-671).

To conclude, Manin[131] highlights that the M5S's effective use of the internet is frequently compared with Berlusconi's use of mainstream television when he debuted in Italian politics back in 1994. Both of these examples would demonstrate how it was possible to amplify the broad criticism of common citizens by using an essential communication channel in order to question the authority of parties and their conventional methods of engaging voters. The nature of the chosen communication medium, however, is where the most significant variances are found. Television has assisted the shift from 'party democracy' to a new system that many political scientists refer to as 'public democracy' or 'post-democracy,' by allowing unidirectional contact between those in power and the viewers, who are essentially passive. On the other hand, according to Biorcio and Natale[132], the web would enable constant communication between individuals who send and receive messages, provide forums for debate, and encourage user participation. The type of political subject built and the idea of democracy proposed to differ depending on the chosen media for communication: Berlusconi built a personal-patrimonial party as a tool for gaining power, seeking to transform Italian democracy into a plebiscitary democracy, while Grillo created a

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[131] R. Tanda, *La "cosa" di Grillo tra movimento e partito*, Bachelor Thesis, LUISS Carlo Guidi, Roma, 2013, p. 6 quoting B. Manin, *Principi del governo rappresentativo*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2010

[132] R. Tanda, *La "cosa" di Grillo tra movimento e partito*, Bachelor Thesis, LUISS Carlo Guidi, Roma, 2013, p. 6 quoting R. Biorcio - P. Natale, *Politica a 5 stelle*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2013

movement that seeks to use the internet to promote all feasible forms of direct democracy.

Fig. 4.5

Tweet posted by Beppe Grillo on his account. He addresses his political opponent Matteo Renzi with the nickname 'Renzie' (with a reference to the co-protagonist of the sitcom Happy Days, Fonzie). It can also be noticed that he uses this tweet as an amplifier since he shares a link to his blog. Source: Beppe Grillo (@beppe_grillo), Twitter status of 13th Jun. 2013 https://twitter.com/beppe_grillo/status/345195026483122176

Fig. 4.6

Tweet posted by Beppe Grillo on his account. The use of Caps lock for the reproduction of his 'shouted' style can here be noticed. Even years later than the previous Tweet, he still uses Twitter as an amplifier for his blog. Source: Beppe Grillo (@beppe_grillo), Twitter status of 24th Jul. 2018 https://twitter.com/beppe_grillo/status/1021731190741639168

4.3 The V-day

Non-fiction transmedia storytelling is strongly understudied. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how the strategies of transmedia storytelling, which have mainly been studied and applied to products of the entertainment industry, can be examined also in relation to political and propagandistic campaigns. In fact, the case study here proposed is the V-day, which can be observed as a merged event: its aim is mainly political and propagandistic, but it presents characteristics that are typical of entertainment products, due to Grillo's past career as a showman and comedian. In fact, this discussion will be also functional to support the previous statements regarding a gradually increasing approximation of politics and entertainment.

On June 14th 2007, Beppe Grillo announced on his blog the organisation of an event that would sanction his definitive estrangement from the left: the V-Day, which would take place on September 8th 2007. The figure below (4.7) represents Grillo's announcement, overflowing with explicit allusions and critiques towards what he defines as the 'old' politics. He starts by referring to the missed opportunity to transform the political landscape after the end of the First Republic (1992) and continues citing some of the issues caused by the political caste across the years, which range from the sphere of social rights to politicians enacting laws for personal gain. He finally announces the name and the date of the event, stating that nothing changed from the state of affairs of 8th September 1943[133], admitting the symbolism behind the chosen date: "Yesterday the fleeing king and the nation in disarray, today politicians armoured in palaces and immersed in cultural problems"[134]. As written in the article and how Ceri and Veltri[135] further explain, the initiative's denomination had multiple meanings: the 'V' symbolised Winston Churchill's victory sign, but also the V of vengeance from Alan More and David Lloyd's comic book dealing with a clandestine war against the dictatorship born in a dystopian and authoritarian Britain, where the protagonist acts as spokesman for the need for justice and rebellion affecting an entire people, a megaphone for a community in revolt. Furthermore, there is an explicit reference to the D-day of the Normandy invasion, a clear allusion to an attack that ended in a successful liberation from the oppressor. However, it represents above all an insulting expression towards the ruling class. Thus, we can notice that the references for the name of a political event range from comic books to real historical events; for this reason, the presence of a transmedia approach can already be observed at this stage.

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[133] With the treaty of 8th September 1943, by which the Kingdom of Italy surrendered to the Allies, Italy was supposed to have exited World War II, but from that date an even more tragic second phase of the conflict started. Immediately after the armistice was proclaimed, King Vittorio Emanuele III fled to Brindisi to get away from Rome and the German troops, leaving the country unguided.
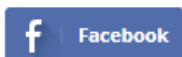
[134] B. Grillo, "Vaffanculo-Day", in *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, 14 Jun. 2007 (my translation) https://beppegrillo.it/vaffanculo-day/ (accessed on 1st Dec. 2022)

[135] P. Ceri - F. Veltri, *Il Movimento nella rete. Storia e struttura del movimento 5 Stelle*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino, 2017, p. 71-72

Vaffanculo-Day

Giugno 14, 2007

≡ ◀)) Ascolta   ▶

C□è un□atmosfera da **otto settembre**. La politica sente l□odore del tornado che sta arrivando. Si sta preparando. L□Italia ha avuto la sua occasione per **cambiare nel 1992**. L□ha fallita. Hanno vinto le lobby, le cosche, le mafie. La **seconda repubblica** è morta in culla. Dopo le stragi mafiose in tutta Italia e la morte di Falcone e Borsellino è finito tutto. Il 61 a 0 dei seggi di Forza Italia in Sicilia è ineguagliabile, neppure Ceaucescu in Romania c□era riuscito. Pax mafiosa, pax da inciucio, **pax piduista**, pax confindustriale, pax sindacale.

Craxi latitante e **il suo protetto presidente del consiglio**. La sinistra che lo applaude durante il suo congresso. La svendita dei beni dello Stato, dalla telefonia, alle autostrade, all□acqua. L□annullamento dei diritti dei lavoratori. Pregiudicati al vertice delle grandi aziende. Pregiudicati in Parlamento.

Il tornado gira, gira. Il suo odore è quello del **legno marcio**, della corda, di grandine e di pioggia densa. L□Italia è una pentola a pressione, se salta questa volta si porta dietro tutti. Forse anche lo Stato nazionale.

E i nostri dipendenti? Giocano a nascondino. Cercano sempre di non farsi beccare. Una legge via l□altra, come le ciliege, per non farsi condannare, per non farsi intercettare, per non farsi pubblicare le intercettazioni, per farsi prescrivere, per indultarsi. Più che politica sembra **guardie e ladri**.

Un venticello, diciamo una premonizione, mi dice che altre intercettazioni sono alla porta. L□estate sarà molto calda. Poi verrà settembre e il **Vaffanculo day**, o V-Day. Una via di mezzo tra il D-Day dello sbarco in Normandia e V come Vendetta. Si terrà **sabato otto settembre** nelle piazze d□Italia, per ricordare che dal 1943 non è cambiato niente. Ieri **il re in fuga e la Nazione allo sbando**, oggi politici blindati nei palazzi immersi in problemi □culturali□. Il V-Day sarà un giorno di informazione e di partecipazione popolare. Per esserci rimanete sintonizzati sul blog.

Fig. 4.7

The announcement of the V-day on the blog. Source: Il Blog di Beppe Grillo, "Vaffanculo day", 14th Jun. 2007 https://beppegrillo.it/vaffanculo-day/

Cert and Veltri (*ibid*.) highlight that the primary V-Day's goal was to transform into a physical event the previously mentioned campaign "Parlamento Pulito", which had the aim of raising awareness among Italian citizens about the presence in the Italian

Parliament of more than twenty definitively sentenced politicians and which originated on the blog in 2005. Signature-gathering demonstrations were taking place on September 8th 2007 concurrently in 179 cities, while the main event was held in Bologna with the presence of Grillo and at least 50,000 spectators. The signatures were being gathered to vote for a popular initiative that comprised three main objectives:

a) ban anybody convicted for non-culpable offences with penalties of more than 10 months and 20 days from standing for office;

b) limit MPs mandates to two terms;

c) implement preferential voting into electoral law.

Despite receiving little coverage from the mainstream media, the event was successful and attended by numerous people, thanks to the various Meetup groups in different regions and to the blog (*ibid.*). During the day, thousands of "Vs" resembling the red logo of the event appeared on t–shirts, flags, and banners held across the crowd, thereby contributing to the transmedial nature that the event acquired and that will soon be discussed in further detail. As a result, it appears that the movement was finally exporting the success that was gained through the network to the square, aiming at concrete political objectives.

The enormous popularity of V-Day provoked a variety of responses from the media and political forces, including attempts to discredit it and comments of concern over its supposed anti-democratic nature, but there were also several positive sentiments toward the event. As Lanzone[136] highlights, Grillo took the decision to organise a second V-day, this time targeting the journalists and selecting a new, symbolic date: April 25th 2008, when Italians celebrate the liberation from the fascist dictatorship. With the intention of proposing three abrogative referendums - one to repeal the order of journalists, one to abolish public funding for publishers and one to abolish the Gasparri law on the television system - the demonstration took place in several Italian squares along with another collection of signatures. It was thanks to the success of this events that Grillo realised the importance of concentrating locally in order to first take root in the municipalities creating '5-star' civic lists in order to act and put an end to the dissatisfaction of Italians entering politics with an anti-political movement and thus substituting the 'old' political class with a new one.

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[136] M.E. Lanzone, *Il Movimento 5 Stelle: Il popolo di grillo dal web al Parlamento*, Epokè, Novi Ligure, 2015, p.45

Alberto Pepe and Corinna di Gennaro[137] have observed the promotion and public perception of the event, thus focussing on the comparison between the role of the blogosphere and the traditional media outlets in promoting it, gathering and analysing a corpus relative to the period from the announcement of V–day (14th of June) to a week after the event (15th of September). Considering their findings, the authors state as follows:

> The success of V–day can be attributed to the coverage of bloggers and small–scale local news outlets only, suggesting a strong grassroots component in the organization of the rally. We also find a dissonant thematic relationship between content published by blogs and mainstream media: while the majority of blogs analyzed promote V–day, major mainstream media sources critique the methods of information production and dissemination employed by Grillo. [...] The online organization and the subsequent offline mobilization of such a large–scale public demonstration took place largely without the promotion, influence, support or criticism by the mass media, which is an unprecedented event in contemporary Italian history. As we will demonstrate throughout this article, in spite of its popularity in the streets, the event was largely ignored by the mainstream media, before, during and after it took place. This fact alone makes V–day an interesting case study to understand the relationship between mainstream media, represented by traditional news sources, and social media, in the form of blogs and similar user–generated content platforms on the Internet, in bringing about political action (*ibid.*).

The authors conclude by highlighting how V-day was Italy's first attempt at organising and carrying out political action through social media on the Internet. The public uprising seen at the V-Day event not only demonstrates the power of the Internet as a tool for political organisation. Additionally, it emphasises the significance of taking into account the environment and media ecology in which these unique forms of grassroots activism develop. The mobilisation of a large number of individuals via online social media, dedicated online video channels, photo archives, other web-based user-generated media and the blogosphere, in particular, had never been observed before in Italy, a nation with a strong and dominant television culture at the time (*ibid.*).

4.4 Applying a transmedia analytical framework to a political campaign

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[137] A. Pepe - C. Di Gennaro, "Political protest Italian-style: The blogosphere and mainstream media in the promotion and coverage of Beppe Grillo's V-day", in *First Monday*, 14:12 (2009) https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2740/2406 (accessed on 9th Dec. 2022)

As stated previously in this work, transmediality has generally been studied in relation to products of the entertainment industry. However, in the previous chapter multiple cases of studies about transmediality applied to political campaigns have been mentioned as examples of an emerging interest towards this field. Furthermore, the methodological frameworks that have been developed in order to support the design and analysis of transmedia projects include a variety of approaches from various disciplines (narratology, sociology, marketing, and branding are only some examples) and can combine quantitative and qualitative analysis and can be based on a variety of research techniques (interviews, comparative studies, narrative analyses and documentary research)[138]. However, the analytical framework that will here be employed has been developed by Renira Rampazzo Gambarato in 2013 (*ibid.*) in order to assist the analytical necessities of transmedia designers and of the applied research in favour of media studies, and takes into account the key elements of the design process behind transmedia initiatives. The author specifies that the questions can be answered by employing qualitative and quantitative methods depending on the nature of the topic and the data available. The ten categories of questions proposed concern the following topics: premise and purpose; narrative; worldbuilding; characters; extensions; media platforms and genres; audience and market; engagement; structure; aesthetics.

In order to ascertain the scope of the transmedia campaign, it is essential to first analyse its premise and purpose. The project under examination, the V-day event, is a political campaign that was announced online and took place in numerous Italian squares, therefore non-fictional, whose fundamental purpose is to gather signatures to vote for a popular initiative and give voice to the citizens' discontent towards the political caste.

As concerns the narrative, it is possible to analyse the storyline that Grillo constructed. The leader constructed a narrative according to which he represents a megaphone for discontent; this can be noticed also in the symbolism of the name of the event, which is in part inspired by the protagonist of the comic book V for Vengeance. He promises revenge, an actual rebellion against a political class that has pursued only its own interests and the establishment of a new politics in opposition to the 'old' and corrupt one. Grillo presents the 8th of September as the chance to break the spell of politics

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[138] R. Rampazzo Gambarato, "Transmedia Project Design: Theoretical and Analytical Considerations" in *Baltic Screen Media Review*, 1:1 (2013), pp. 81-100

invented by the media, stating that nothing would be left if newspapers and televisions would be taken away from the politicians. The enraged audience would finally have a chance to be heard and would have the role of supporting Grillo and being part of this mission. As concerns the timeframe, he announced the event on June 14th 2007, which took place on September 8th of the same year. However, the discussions about the event continued for a long time until a second V-day took place in April 2008. A further question contained in the paper by Rampazzo Gambarato (*ibid.*) concerns gaming; in this case, the project did not utilise this kind of approach. However, one might argue that the project involves winning or losing (or, in this case, success or unsuccess) that could be measured by the rate of participation and the number of votes gathered. Grillo's main strategy for expanding the narrative is mainly that of gaining consent by exploiting his visibility through his blog and sharing posts creating a climax that would finally culminate in the in-person event. In fact, each post on his blog integrates information about V-day, details about the points proposed in the popular initiative, extracts of Grillo's speeches or mentions new names of political figures or journalists that would embody the values that the V-day event is fighting against. In this regard, a further question investigates whether negative capability and migratory cues are included in the strategy. Geoffrey A. Long explains the former stating that "negative capability is the art of building strategic gaps into a narrative to evoke a delicious sense of 'uncertainty, mystery, or doubt' in the audience"[139]. In order to present the latter, Long mentions Ruppel, according to whom migratory cues are "the means through which various narrative paths are marked by an author and located by a user through activation patterns"[140]. Long summarises the two concepts as follows:

> A storyteller looking to craft a potential transmedia narrative should carefully craft the world in which that story exists, and then make passing references to elements in that world during the course of the narrative to simultaneously spark audience imaginations through negative capability and provide potential openings for future migratory cues. (*ibid.*, p. 60)

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[139] G. A. Long, *Transmedia Storytelling: Business, Aesthetics and Production at the Jim Henson Company*, Bachelor Thesis, Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2007, p.53
[140] G. A. Long, *Transmedia Storytelling: Business, Aesthetics and Production at the Jim Henson Company*, Bachelor Thesis, Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2007, p.42 quoting M. Ruppel, *Learning to Speak Braille: Convergence, Divergence and Cross-Sited Narratives*, Slide presentation for oral examinations, University of Maryland College Park, 2005
http://www.glue.umd.edu/~mruppel/oralex-presentation_2.4.pdf

At this point, it can be argued that Grillo positively embodies the kind of storyteller described above; he is able to include gaps and provide hints in the narration, especially through his blog posts prior to the event, that will spark the curiosity of the audience and open possibilities for future insights.

A transmedia project needs to be set in an universe or story world, endowed with laws, specific characteristics, characters and stories. Mikael Askander, Anna Gutowska and Péter Kristóf Makai affirm that "a transmedia story world emphasises the shared elements of a universe that exists across a range of different media. [...] transmedial storyworld can also apply to non-fictitious phenomena"[141]. The story world that Grillo creates, as stated above, is not a fictional one and is set in contemporary Italy; it is one characterised by criminality and corruption of the political caste, no freedom of choice and information, with a Parliament where the 'old' politics reigns and that citizens have the opportunity to usurp and 'disinfest'[142] if they choose Grillo as their guide towards revolution and liberation. In this world, there is a clear distinction between 'good' and 'bad'. The challenges that are inherent to this world are related to the fact that this revolutionary event needs to be promoted in a context in which television and newspapers are strongly politicised; therefore, the blog is the most suitable substitute to give visibility to the event and a central element in this world. The worldbuilding process can occur via expansion, when a platform is used to present new content amplifying the story world.[143] The blog appears to be not only a platform used to expand the story but the one on which the entire world is built.

A categorization of the characters would indeed see Grillo as the protagonist of the story. However, the audience is also central to the development of the narrative. Furthermore, the means by which Grillo intends to convey the message (the blog) could be considered as a primary character as well, having a fundamental role in the development of the story. As concerns secondary characters, they can be identified with the political class against whom the revolutionary event is organised. The paper also

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[141]M. Askander - A. Gutowska - P. K. Makai, "Transmedial storyworlds" in *Intermedial Studies: An introduction to Meaning across Media*, ed. by J. Bruhn - B. Schirrmacher, London, Routledge, 2021, pp. 255-281

[142] Grillo uses this term in a post on his blog, comparing politicians sitting at the Parliament with undesired guests. See: https://beppegrillo.it/disinfestiamo-il-parlamento/

[143] S. Leonzi - F. Ciammella - E. Trinca, "Transmedia is coming. Il caso FantaGot e la storyworld interactivation", in *Mediascapes journal*, 13 (2019), pp. 56-71

contains a question about spin-offs; having to adapt this question to the analysis of a political campaign, it might be argued that the article shared by Grillo on his blog, which focuses on specific events and figures that would embody the values that the event fights against (Fig. 3.8), constitute an example of a spin-off. In fact, the story told is not central but aims to focus and give deeper insight into a specific feature or event of the story.

Fig. 4.8
Blog article in which Grillo talks about the journalist Emilio Fede and how the specific event of blocking the website of a citizen expressing discontent was problematic and emblematic of the issues the V-day wants to fight against. Source: Il Blog di Beppe Grillo, "V come Emilio Fede", 11th Jul. 2007 https://beppegrillo.it/v-come-emilio-fede/

Carlos Alberto Scolari expresses in his paper the centrality of extensions (or expansions) for a project to be considered transmedial. He states as follows:

TS is a particular narrative structure that expands through both different languages (verbal, iconic, etc.) and media (cinema, comics, television, video games, etc.). TS is not just an adaptation from one media to another. The story that the comics tell is not the same as that told on television or in cinema; the different media and languages participate and contribute to the construction of the transmedia narrative world. This textual dispersion is one of the most important sources of complexity in contemporary popular culture.[144]

It is evident by now that the story is introduced through the personal blog of Beppe Grillo and is later expanded to the in-person live event that simultaneously took place in 179 Italian squares. These events taking place at the same time can be defined, according to Scolari's (*ibid.*) categorization (Fig. 4.9), as parallel stories unfolding at the same time as the macro story. From the day Grillo announces the event to the day the event takes place, Grillo uses his blog to give his audience new information and motivation to participate in the V-day, posting for example stories about figures that would represent what the leader intends to fight against. Strategies of expansion can also be identified in the march that Grillo organises and in the hymn of the event that he shares and that can be downloaded. On his blog, he also anticipates the participation of public figures from the world of entertainment such as Luciano Ligabue, Gianna Nannini, Gino Strada among others, who would either be there in order to support the cause, give a speech or sing at the event. Before and after the event, the leader continues sharing videos, articles or extracts of newspapers and of his speeches, leaflets and maps, for example about the rate of participation and voter turnout, creating in this way interstitial microstories that continuously enrich the story (*ibid.*). Furthermore, the second V-day, which took place in April 2008, can indeed be classified as an expansion, as a second 'season' of the same event maintaining the original characteristics of the world. Finally, user-generated content such as numerous posts on blogs in support of the event, which have an essential role in giving visibility to the event, live streamings or the production of gadgets depicting the red 'V', which is the logo of the event, are considered extensions.

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[144] C. A. Scolari, "Transmedia Storytelling: Implicit Consumers, Narrative Worlds, and Branding in Contemporary Media Production", in *International Journal of Communication*, University of Vic, Spain, 3 (2009), pp. 586-606
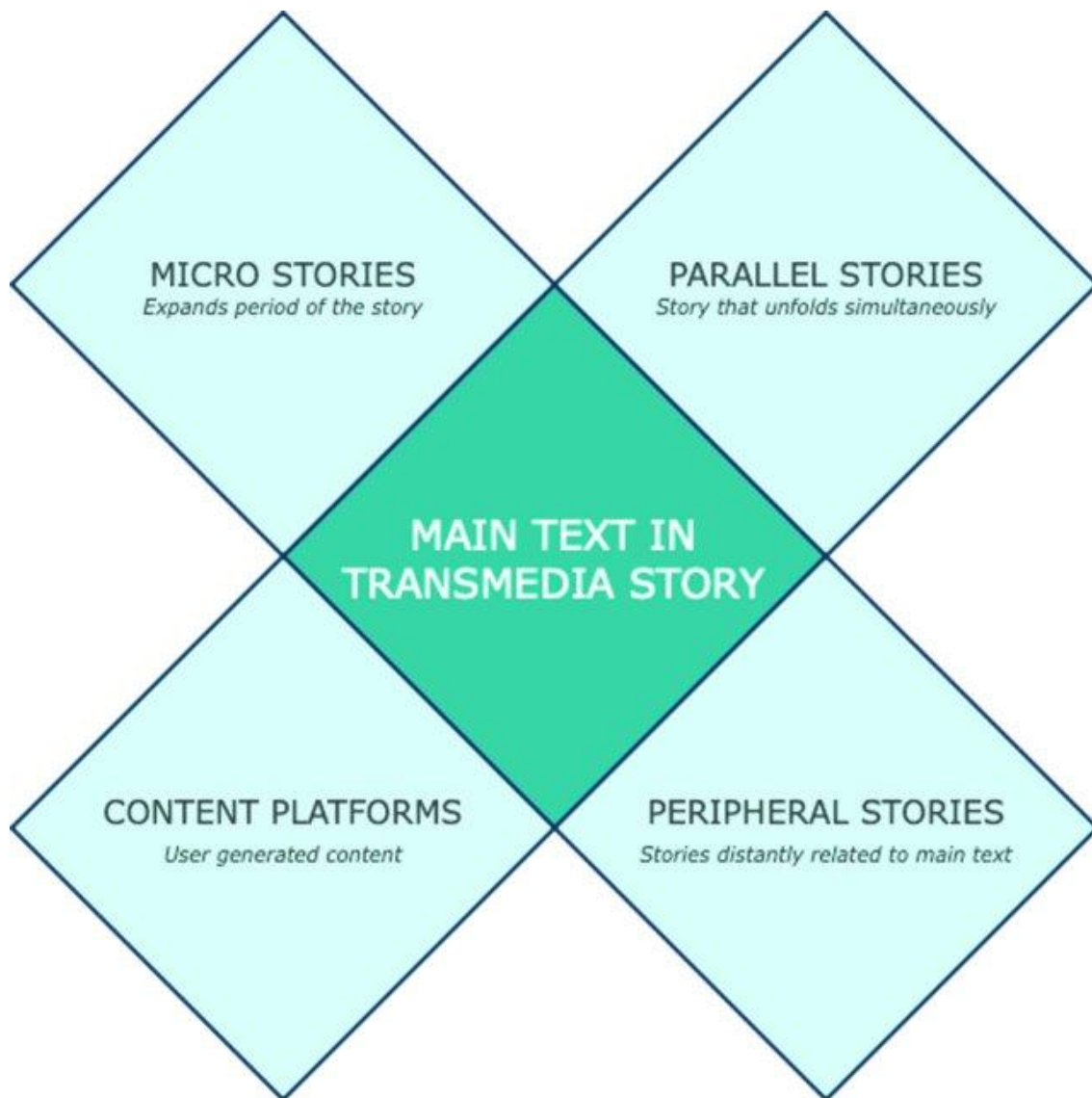
Fig. 4.9

Transmedia narrative extension strategies according to Scolari (2009). Source: S. de Nooijer, "Transmedia educational narrative design for craftsmanship: How to apply transmedia storytelling in senior secondary vocational education curricula" (2019) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334442286_Transmedia_educational_narrative_design_for_craftsmanship_How_to_apply_transmedia_storytelling_in_senior_secondary_vocational_education_curricula/figures?lo=1

The sixth category of questions regards media platforms and genres involved in the project. Renira Rampazzo Gambarato argues that "selecting the platforms that will be part of a transmedia project is the art of matching the right content to the right audience throughout the most appropriate way, which includes platforms and devices that are

suitable to the challenge"[145]. In fact, the choice is strategic: for the first time, a future political leader coming from the world of entertainment manages to gather his audience for the live event through his blog and with the support of other people's blogs, avoiding the intermediation of television or newspaper in a strongly politicised media landscape. It can be argued that the chosen medium becomes the message itself, according to the theory developed by the Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan[146]. Apart from the blog, Grillo involves in this project: rallies, videos, songs (the hymn), and leaflets, which require a computer, a tablet, a mobile phone or any other device which has an internet connection. Each medium is relevant to the project, starting from the blog, whose essential purpose is to announce, spread information about the event and gather an audience. Then, the rally is fundamental; it is the core of the project, where the audience is finally gathered and can express its discontent through their signatures. Finally, the other media platforms function as enriching expansions of the story, as explained in the previous paragraph. As concerns the genre, the event could fall into the category of infotainment, a merging of information and entertainment that intends to result in more credibility than traditional journalism, which would be politically influenced. In fact, its aim is political and propagandistic but it nonetheless has the characteristics of a show; in fact, Grillo hosts singers and other public figures and does not limit the event to political discussion.

To provide an effective transmedia experience, targeting the audience is essential since engagement and participation in the project are always required to a variable extent. In the paper by Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, the author adopts the term VUP to indicate the audience, according to the definition proposed by Stephen Dinehart[147], who identifies a more complex emerging audience, which would be at the same time viewer (V), user (U) and player (P). The target audience of this project is the discontented citizens who already followed Beppe Grillo and his blog and who would potentially be attracted by his proposal to take concrete action against the ruling old and corrupt political class if they participate in the event with the leader acting as a megaphone for their requests. This project appeals to them because the protesting community is in this

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[145] R. Rampazzo Gambarato, "Transmedia Project Design: Theoretical and Analytical Considerations" in *Baltic Screen Media Review*, 1:1 (2013), p.92

[146] M. McCluhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1964

[147] R. Rampazzo Gambarato, "Transmedia Project Design: Theoretical and Analytical Considerations" in *Baltic Screen Media Review*, 1:1 (2013), p.92 quoting S. E. Dinehart, *Transmedial Play: Cognitive and Cross-Platform Narrative*, 2012

case an essential protagonist of the story; their involvement and participation are the key to the pursuit of the project. When the discussion shifts to the market and business field, the author quotes Pratten, stating that "Transmedia projects can instead be low-cost and grassroots audience builders. Different business models, such as free, premium, freemium and crowdfunding can be applied in the context of TS".[148] At the bottom of one blog article dedicated to the upcoming V-day, Grillo posts his IBAN in order to invite the audience to financially contribute and support the organisation of the live event; therefore, the event's business plan consists of an informal donation-based crowdfunding.

While transmedia projects with a closed system require participation but not interaction, projects with an open system such as the case under examination permit participation in addition to interaction, meaning that the audience may affect and alter the story (*ibid*., p.87). Among the questions regarding the audience's engagement, the paper proposes one about the point of view through which the audience experiences the story, which can be first-person, second-person or third-person. In this case, the audience has the feeling to be part of the story and is therefore involved in the story from a second-person point of view, which could represent a strong emotional appeal for the VUP (*ibid*.), which would result in a stronger engagement. Grillo uses another strategy to keep the audience engaged: in each blog article in which he shares new information with his readers, he appeals to them and addresses them directly, he exploits the power of emotional language expressing the importance of their participation for the success of the 'revolt', for example when he writes: "Non perdete questa occasione per ripulire il Parlamento"[149] ("Do not miss this chance to clean the Parliament"). The idea of organising multiple Meetups has indeed been powerful since the leader does not restrict the event to one city and does not exclude people from participating; instead, he gives the opportunity to the majority of his virtual community to engage and join the live event, showing all the cities in which the V-day would take place in a map posted on his blog. Further strategies consist in announcing a virtual march, posting the hymn of the event to download and creating a toolbar to insert on the desktop in order to constantly

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[148] R. Rampazzo Gambarato, "Transmedia Project Design: Theoretical and Analytical Considerations" in *Baltic Screen Media Review*, 1:1 (2013), p.93 quoting R. Pratten, *Getting Started in Transmedia Storytelling: A Practical Guide for Beginners*, Seattle, CreateSpace, 2011
[149] B. Grillo, "Parlamento Pulito in Cassazione" in *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, 12 Jul. 2007 https://beppegrillo.it/parlamento-pulito-in-cassazione/ (accessed on 17th Dec. 2022)

have access to updates about the event, posting the 'instructions' in form of a list to facilitate the participation, leaflets and similar elements that can be incorporated into everyday life. Additionally, after the event Grillo shares a map indicating the gathered signatures, thanks the participants and dedicates the same post to some of the letters that he has received by people who attended the event. With respect to user generated content, fan communities have emerged along with gadgets, videos of the event, live streamings, and songs dedicated to the event and shared on Youtube. As concerns the goal the VUP is trying to accomplish, it is that proposed by their guide, Beppe Grillo; they need to become co-protagonist of the story and sign a petition to unseat the corrupt political class, which, in Grillo's opinion, includes parties, several government institutions, and the media. What adds tension to the experience is going against the ruling political class and accusing the media of being highly politicised; therefore, the risk lies in the power of these two subjects. In fact, the event could easily be ignored or instrumentalized. Another question investigates whether the project works as a cultural attractor and/or activator or not. As Jenkins explains, cultural attractors are initiatives that are able to engage people with matching interests, allowing them to start sharing information; cultural activators are initiatives that provide the audience with a task and an opportunity for meaningful engagement[150]. Without any doubt, this project gathers people with similar interests and assigns them a purposeful role in the story, working both as a cultural attractor and cultural activator. It could be argued that this is the core essence of the project, which Grillo stresses quoting the songwriter Giorgio Gaber on his blog, stating that "Freedom is participation"[151].

The author dedicates a further set of questions to the organisation of the transmedia project. First of all, the paper proposes a question that takes into account the timing of a transmedia project, when a transmedia story world's development process first begins, according to the distinction between proactive and retroactive projects proposed by Drew Davidson[152] to distinguish between stories that are intended to be transmedia from

[150] R. Rampazzo Gambarato, "Transmedia Project Design: Theoretical and Analytical Considerations" in *Baltic Screen Media Review*, 1:1 (2013), p.94 quoting H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide,* New York, New York University Press, 2006, p. 95, 283

[151] B. Grillo, "V-Generation" in *Il Blog di Beppe Grillo*, 12 Sep. 2007 https://beppegrillo.it/v-generation/ (accessed on 18th Dec. 2022)

[152] R. Rampazzo Gambarato, "Transmedia Project Design: Theoretical and Analytical Considerations" in *Baltic Screen Media Review*, 1:1 (2013), p.87 quoting D. Davidson et al., *Cross-Media Communications: An Introduction to the Art of Creating Integrated Media Experiences*, Pittsburgh, ETC Press, 2010, p. 17

the start and those that evolved into it. Pro-active transmedia initiatives are characterised by a strong presence of tie-ins that are planned from the start. Contrarily, retroactive transmedia projects begin to be developed after the event, typically based on a successful prior initiative. An already published book, which is later expanded to create a transmedia experience, represents a clear example. In the case of the V-day event, we can argue that Grillo's intention to develop a transmedia initiative can be observed from the beginning (the announcement of the event via blog) and the project can therefore be described as proactive. Furthermore, it is evident that the major units of organisation consist of the announcement of the event via the blog and later the live event. As regards the type of transmedia storytelling here employed, this project mostly presents the characteristics of a portmanteau transmedia project: it is fragmented across multiple platforms in order to contribute to a single experience. The following question concerns entry points and in particular whether each extension can work as an independent entry point or not. This is particularly relevant since Jenkins defines transmedia as a type of storytelling that "immerses an audience in a story's universe through a number of dispersed entry points, providing a comprehensive and coordinated experience of a complex story."[153] Therefore, the answer is positive, since each expansion of the story world constructed around the V-day can be a door to access the whole narration. Fragmented entry points combine to create an elaborate and complex universe; from the beginning, multiple channels are carefully preplanned and integrated in such a manner to engage the viewer.

The last category of questions scrutinises the overall aesthetic of the project. According to Renira Rampazzo Gambarato (*Transmedia Project Design: Theoretical and Analytical Considerations*, p.95):

> Design components, such as interfaces, color palettes, graphics, fonts, shapes, textures, sounds, and so forth characterize a transmedia story world and are powerful tools to attract and maintain audience engagement. The design elements do not function as mere illustrations of the content. Actually, they are part of the story themselves.

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[153]H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide,* New York, New York
University Press, 2006

As concerns the visuals employed, videos (among which we can find live streamings, extracts of interviews and so forth) are very popular, followed by contents such as leaflets and maps that are able to enrich the story. Regarding audio elements, it is worth mentioning that live music frames the in-person event, assigning it the characteristics of an entertainment show. To conclude, the fact that the project under examination is non-fictional is reflected in the realistic aesthetic of the environment.

In conclusion, the analysis of the case study discussed in this chapter has eventually demonstrated that a) the political project of the V-day can be considered transmedial; b) analytical frameworks that are originally developed for products of the entertainment industry can be applied to non-fictional projects such as political campaigns; c) the political project under examination presents to some extent typical characteristics of entertainment products, demonstrating a gradually increasing merging of entertainment into the world of political communication.

Conclusion

The objective of this thesis was to provide an overview of the ongoing changes in the dynamics of political communication, in particular as a result of the increasing importance of the inclusion of social media in politicians' communication strategies. In addition, two phenomena that are strictly related to the relationship between political communication and social media have been discussed and later investigated through the analysis of two case studies: pop politics and transmedia storytelling. What these two phenomena have in common is that they demonstrate a gradual increasing merging of entertainment and politics: a further objective of this thesis was in fact to highlight this process.

As concerns the phenomenon of the popularisation of politics, this thesis has investigated the extent to which Donald Trump has contributed to its extremization in the Northamerican political context, which was however already familiar with the phenomenon. Based on the assumption that humorous content such as memes is currently one of the main means to discuss politics on social media, three memes with explicit references to the famous tv series "Game of Thrones", shared by Donald Trump on his Twitter account between November 2018 and April 2019, have been examined. The topics discussed and the messages transmitted regarded the sanctions against Iran, the desire to build a wall on the border with Mexico to avoid clandestine immigrants entering the United States, and the Russiagate. The observation of the employment of these references was functional to demonstrating the immediacy of the connections that such references are capable of activating and, in the case of Trump, the fact that a whole community (cast, authors and fandom of the show) felt compelled to intervene to stress and complain about the misuse of such product for propagandistic and political purposes, or even to respond with ironic memes or phrases, thus activating knowledge shared by that community. It was precisely the media resonance resulting from all these factors that made this campaign popular.

The phenomenon of transmedia storytelling, applied to political campaigns, has been the second main focus of this thesis. Despite a gap in the literature, this thesis has demonstrated the possibility of adopting a transmedia narrative for political projects. In fact, the existing literature about transmedia storytelling mainly focuses on products of

the entertainment industry and analytical frameworks have been developed based on such products. The case study under examination was Beppe Grillo's V-day event, which represents a particular merging of political and propagandistic purposes and entertainment features. In order to analyse it from a transmedia perspective, the analytical framework developed by Renira Rampazzo Gambarato in her paper "Transmedia Project Design: Theoretical and Analytical Considerations"[154] has been applied. Although it is clear that the framework has been developed in order to analyse the transmediality of products of the entertainment industry, such as movies, books, tv series and so forth, it has been possible to apply it to our case study. However, there is a minor limitation in this study: when analysing some aspects, for example the creation of the story world, it has been necessary to some extent to infer the actual intentions of the author, due in the first place to the lack of supporting literature and then to the uncertainty about the degree of intentionality behind some elements that are part of a political project that however, as a whole, we can unquestionably affirm to be transmedial, which was the main objective of this analysis.

To conclude, this thesis has firstly achieved the objective of providing an overview of the current relationship between the new media and politics and its effect on political communication strategies; in addition, it has been functional to demonstrate a gradually increasing merging of entertainment into the field of political communication.

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[154] R. Rampazzo Gambarato, "Transmedia Project Design: Theoretical and Analytical Considerations" in *Baltic Screen Media Review*, 1:1 (2013)

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L'obiettivo della presente tesi magistrale è quello di indagare il progressivo affermarsi dei social media come uno strumento potente e capace di modificare profondamente le dinamiche della comunicazione politica. Essendo fondamentale per aggregare e modellare il comportamento politico e sociale delle persone, lo studio della comunicazione politica e degli elementi che favoriscono la sua evoluzione è fondamentale per comprendere lo sviluppo della società politica. Nello specifico, questa tesi si focalizza su due fenomeni: quello della politica pop e quello del transmedia storytelling, indagati con il supporto di casi di studio relativi al contesto politico italiano e nordamericano, al fine di esemplificare il loro ruolo nell'influenzare l'opinione pubblica e di dimostrare una progressiva e crescente convergenza di caratteristiche del mondo dell'intrattenimento in quello della politica.

Al fine di introdurre l'argomento principale, questa tesi fornisce innanzitutto un approfondimento teorico sul concetto generale di comunicazione politica; essendo quest'ultimo non univoco e dunque difficile da definire, questa tesi prende in considerazione le definizioni proposte da Mazzoleni[155], Sorice[156], McNair[157] e Lilleker[158]. Secondo Sorice, dai principali studi emergono due filoni interpretativi: il primo definisce la comunicazione politica come tutte le forme di comunicazione, compresa la comunicazione interpersonale con contenuto politico, mentre il secondo si concentra sull'intenzione del comunicatore includendo solo le forme di comunicazione volte a influenzare l'opinione politica del pubblico. Ciò che emerge dalle ulteriori definizioni è che i tre attori principali coinvolti nella comunicazione politica sono i politici, il pubblico, e i media. Successivamente, il primo capitolo introduce il concetto di mediatizzazione della politica, ovvero il processo di adattamento della comunicazione politica alle logiche commerciali, come viene descritto in "La politica pop online: I meme e le nuove sfide della comunicazione politica" di Mazzoleni e Bracciale[159]. Nello stesso testo, gli autori analizzano come la transizione dalla vecchia

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[155] G. Mazzoleni, *La comunicazione politica*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1998
[156] M. Sorice, "Comunicazione e politica", in *Dizionario della comunicazione*, a cura di D. E. Viganò, Roma, Carocci, 2009
[157] B. McNair, *An Introduction to Political Communication,* London, Routledge, 1995
[158] D. G. Lilleker, *Key Concepts in Political Communication,* New York, SAGE Publications, 2006
[159] G. Mazzoleni - R. Bracciale, *La politica pop online: I meme e le nuove sfide della comunicazione politica,* Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019

politica alla neo-politica sia stata influenzata dall'ambiente mediatico dominante e illustra quindi il passaggio da una maggiore influenza dei mass media a una forte tendenza all'uso dei social media e gli effetti di tale processo sulla comunicazione stessa. A questo proposito, i fenomeni dell' agenda setting e del framing sono oggetto di particolare attenzione; è importante infatti sottolineare la presenza di un certo grado di influenza esercitato dai media sulla percezione delle questioni socio-politiche da parte del pubblico. In seguito, viene presentata la figura dello spin-doctor, termine che si riferisce ai professionisti che scelgono, coordinano e progettano le strategie di comunicazione dei governi e dei politici, la cui influenza è aumentata progressivamente negli ultimi decenni, soprattutto in seguito ai fenomeni di mediatizzazione. Lo scopo degli spin doctor è quello di creare la narrazione ideale per i media e di usarla per trasmettere una storia che possa plasmare l'identità narrativa del candidato, con la quale i cittadini dovrebbero essere in grado di relazionarsi. La sezione seguente è poi dedicata all'arte dello storytelling come strumento di persuasione politica, tenendo conto delle teorie sviluppate da Christian Salmon nel suo testo "Storytelling: la fabbrica delle storie"[160] e nel successivo "Fake"[161]. Con il termine 'storytelling' ci si riferisce alla pratica di costruire il messaggio come una narrazione, in politica, dove si ritiene che sia in grado di influenzare il processo decisionale degli elettori, come in molti altri campi. Salmon esprime anche le sue preoccupazioni; egli sostiene che lo storytelling abbia creato una nuova struttura narrativa con l'intento di manipolare il pubblico e promuovere la propaganda politica ed economica. Ventura[162] definisce la narrazione continua che i politici fanno di se stessi come "ongoing storytelling"; i leader eseguono questo tipo di narrazione intersecando discorsi pubblici, post sui social network, libri autobiografici, interviste, e così via. Il discorso si sposta dunque sul digital storytelling, ovvero lo storytelling affermatosi parallelamente all'affermarsi dei media digitali. Il principio principale del digital storytelling è che grazie ai costi contenuti, alla facilità d'uso, alla versatilità e alla facilità di modifica dei contenuti, la tecnologia digitale ha reso possibile l'immediata circolazione del messaggio politico in tutto il mondo e ha permesso nuovi tipi di azione collettiva. Infine, viene brevemente discusso il ruolo delle

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[160] C. Salmon, *Storytelling: La fabbrica delle storie*, Roma, Fazi, 2008, traduzione it. di G. Gasparri (I. ed. *Storytelling: La machine à fabriquer des histoires et à formater les esprits*, Paris, Éditions La Découverte, 2008)
[161] C. Salmon, *Fake: Come la politica mondiale ha divorato sé stessa*, Bari, Laterza, 2020, p.97, traduzione it. di L. Falaschi (I ed. *L'Ère du clash*, Paris, Fayard, 2019)
[162] G. Mazzoleni - R. Bracciale, *La politica pop online: I meme e le nuove sfide della comunicazione politica,* Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019, p.41, quoting S. Ventura, *I leader e le loro storie. Narrazione, comunicazione politica e crisi della democrazia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019, p. 75

immagini nella comunicazione politica online, sui social media in particolare, che dimostrerebbe una sempre crescente attenzione all'immagine che il politico trasmette rispetto all'ideologia, oltre all'emergere di fenomeni come la personalizzazione della politica, l'intimate politics e la celebrity politics.

Il secondo capitolo approfondisce i due argomenti centrali di questa tesi: il fenomeno della politica pop e quello del transmedia storytelling. La politica pop indica "la trasformazione del sistema politico e della comunicazione politica verso forme di spettacolarizzazione e personalizzazione, in cui i media sono il motore ma i politici sono attori entusiasti", come la definisce Ilvo Diamanti[163]. Van Zoonen[164] richiama l'attenzione sul fatto che può manifestarsi in due modalità: 1) la rappresentazione pop della politica, delle storie politiche e dei loro protagonisti nei prodotti mediatici e 2) l'impiego di codici pop da parte degli attori politici sui media. Gianpietro Mazzoleni, con Anna Sfardini[165] prima e con Roberta Bracciale[166] poi ha ampiamente contribuito all'analisi di questo fenomeno e ha creato neologismi per spiegare nuovi concetti come infotainment, soft news e politainment, emblematici della crescente popolarizzazione della politica. Il termine 'infotainment' viene utilizzato sia per la trasmissione di informazioni politiche in chiave ricreativa, sia per programmi di intrattenimento che affrontano temi politici e parlano di oppure ospitano leader politici. Il termine 'soft news' viene usato per indicare la trasmissione di news in chiave sensazionalistica. Infine, il concetto di 'politainment' ha una principale differenza dal primo: è svolto dall'attore politico e non dai media, che appare nei vari prodotti della cultura popolare, come film, soap opera, riviste di gossip, talk show, ecc (*ibid.*). Vengono quindi presentati brevemente i tre attori (leader politici, media e cittadini/utenti) coinvolti in questo processo di popolarizzazione, prima di discutere il ruolo dei contenuti umoristici e nello specifico dei meme nel dibattito pubblico politico, presentando degli esempi relativi al contesto italiano. Secondo Highfield[167], i contenuti umoristici come i meme

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[163] I. Diamanti, "Prefazione", in , *Politica Pop. Da «Porta a Porta» «all'isola dei famosi»*, ed. by G. Mazzoleni - A. Sfardini, Bologna, il Mulino, 2009, p. 7

[164] G. Mazzoleni - A. Sfardini, *Politica pop. Da "Porta a Porta" a "L'Isola dei famosi"*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2009 citano E. Van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge,* Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2005

[165] G. Mazzoleni - A. Sfardini, *Politica pop. Da "Porta a Porta" a "L'Isola dei famosi"*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2009

[166] G. Mazzoleni - R. Bracciale, *La politica pop online: I meme e le nuove sfide della comunicazione politica,* Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019

[167] G. Mazzoleni - R. Bracciale, *La politica pop online: I meme e le nuove sfide della comunicazione politica,* Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019, p.89 citano T. Highfield, "Tweeted Joke Life Spans and Appropriated

politici sono attualmente uno dei metodi più popolari tra gli utenti per analizzare e discutere di politica sui social media, rendendoli una delle principali forme di politica pop online che può aumentare le opportunità di coinvolgimento nel discorso politico. L'uso strategico che i leader politici fanno di questo tipo di comunicazione è stato definito "propaganda partecipativa"[168]; questa definizione include il tentativo di influenzare le percezioni e i comportamenti degli elettori. A questo punto l'attenzione si sposta sul transmedia storytelling, anticipato da una breve discussione sulla cultura convergente, che indica "il flusso di contenuti su più piattaforme mediatiche, la cooperazione tra più industrie mediatiche e il comportamento migratorio del pubblico dei media che si reca quasi ovunque alla ricerca del tipo di esperienze di intrattenimento che desidera"[169]. Secondo il padre teorico del concetto, Henry Jenkins[170], questo tipo di narrazione è la distribuzione di materiale su diverse piattaforme mediali, una tecnica in cui gli elementi chiave di un racconto vengono metodicamente distribuiti su una serie di piattaforme per fornire un'esperienza di intrattenimento coesa e ben coordinata. Vengono quindi illustrate le principali tipologie di transmedia storytelling (franchise, portmanteau e complex transmedia experience) e i sette principi che caratterizzano un progetto transmediale valido (spalmabilità vs. penetrabilità, continuità vs. molteplicità, immersione vs. estraibilità, costruzione di mondi, serialità, soggettività e performance). Dopo aver offerto un approfondimento teorico, vengono forniti vari esempi di transmedia storytelling nelle campagne politiche, come il caso della retorica di Donald Trump supportata da strategie transmediali analizzato da Zac Gershberg[171] e le strategie transmediali impiegate dal candidato Alexey Navalny durante le elezioni comunali di Mosca nel 2013 studiate da Renira Rampazzo Gambarato e Sergei Andreevich Medvedev[172]. La sottosezione finale di questo capitolo tratta tre esempi di attivismo

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Punch Lines: Practices around Tropical Humor on Social Media", in *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 2014, pp. 2713-2734

[168] G. Mazzoleni - R. Bracciale, *La politica pop online: I meme e le nuove sfide della comunicazione politica,* Bologna, Il Mulino, 2019, p.99 citano A. Wanless - M. Berk, "Participatory Propaganda: The Engagement of Audiences in the Spread of Persuasive Communications", in *Proceedings of the Social Media & Social Order*, Oslo, Culture Conflict 2.0 Conference, 2017

[169] H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide,* New York, New York University Press, 2006, p.2 (traduzione propria)

[170] H. Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling: Moving Characters from Books to Films to Video Games Can Make Them Stronger and More Compelling" in *MIT Technology Review,* (2003)

[171] Z. Gershberg, "Rhetoric in a Transmedia Storytelling Campaign: How Trump Deployed the Paranoid Style in 2016" in *The Presidency and Social Media: Discourse, Disruption, and Digital Democracy in the 2016 Presidential Election* a cura di D. Schill, J. Allen Hendricks, T. E. Patterson, New York, Routledge, 2017

[172] R. Rampazzo Gambarato - A. S. Medvedev, "Grassroots Political Campaign in Russia: Alexey Navalny and Transmedia Strategies for Democratic Development" in *Promoting Social Change and*

transmediale, al fine di mostrare la vasta possibilità di impiego delle strategie transmediali; il primo si concentra su come l'ampia diffusione dell'hashtag #Renziscappa, riferito all'ex segretario del Partito Democratico Matteo Renzi, abbia contribuito a creare un ponte tra attività politiche offline e online[173]. Un altro esempio è fornito da Daný van Dam e Sara Polak[174], che esaminano come il romanzo distopico di Margaret Atwood "The Handmaid's Tale", pubblicato nel 1985 e diventato una serie televisiva nel 2017, sia stato adattato a molteplici piattaforme, dando vita a un franchise mediatico e soprattutto diventando un simbolo popolare nell'attivismo femminista di tutto il mondo. Infine, Fabio Ciammella[175] illustra un caso di attivismo transmediale dal basso: il soggetto è la Casa delle donne Lucha Y Siesta, una casa di accoglienza per donne in difficoltà gestita da un collettivo fondato a Roma, che ha lanciato una campagna di comunicazione dopo la notifica di ATAC dello sgombero dell'edificio. L'autore conclude che l'attivismo transmediale sarebbe in grado di coordinare narrazioni partecipative disperse su vari media, favorendo la partecipazione civica e politica.

Il terzo capitolo di questa tesi si concentra sulla presenza della politica pop nella comunicazione di Donald Trump. Il capitolo analizza innanzitutto come la carriera dell'ex presidente sia sempre stata caratterizzata da una tendenza al mondo dello spettacolo, e la ripercorre a partire dalla partecipazione allo show "The Apprentice" fino alla candidatura per la presidenza degli Stati Uniti. La funzione di questa breve analisi è dimostrare l'influenza che la sua tendenza verso l'intrattenimento ha indubbiamente avuto sul suo stile comunicativo e sul suo successo al debutto in politica, dal momento che si inserisce in una sfera pubblica fortemente mediatizzata comprendendo l'interconnessione tra media, business e politica[176]. Viene in seguito presentata la sua strategia di comunicazione politica, ponendo particolare attenzione sulla sua capacità di connessione con i suoi seguaci. Per quanto riguarda il suo rapporto contrastato con i media, viene evidenziato il conseguente utilizzo dei social media, Twitter in particolare, per evitare qualsiasi tipo di intermediazione giornalistica. L'uso che Trump fa della

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Democracy through Information Technology a cura di V. Kumar - J. Svensson, Hershey, IGI Global, 2007, pp. 165-192
[173] P. Saporito, "#Renziscappa: The Transmedia Story of a Hashtag between Online and Offline Activism" in *Italian Culture,* 39:1 (2021), pp. 73-92
[174] D. van Dam - S. Polak, "Owning Gilead: franchising feminism through Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and The Testaments" in *European Journal of English Studies*, 25:2 (2021), pp. 172-189
[175] F. Ciammella, "Transmedia activism e co-creazione di narrazioni grassroots: teorie, modelli e pratiche" in *Scientific Journal on Digital Culture*s, 6:1 (2021), pp. 51-62
[176] S. Graziosi, *Apocalypse Trump*, Milano, Edizioni Ares, 2018

piattaforma non è professionale ma amatoriale, come afferma Enli[177]: al contrario, l'ex Presidente disprezza il professionalismo politico e lo dimostra anche in questo. Infatti, il successo di Trump viene anche imputato al fatto che il *framing* che egli propone di sé stesso è quello di una figura antipolitica. Ciò che caratterizza la sua strategia comunicativa è inoltre l'uso di slogan (ad esempio "Make America great again"), solitamente rivolti alla classe medio-alta americana; l'individuazione di capri espiatori (come ad esempio gli immigrati clandestini) per i problemi socio-economici degli Stati Uniti; un rifiuto esplicito di retoriche *politically correct*, la critica, anche ironica (ad esempio attraverso soprannomi) ai suoi avversari politici, e così via. Particolare importanza viene data all'utilizzo delle fake news, secondo la strategia denominata 'deflection' da George Lakoff[178], la quale prevede l'attacco ai media per creare sfiducia verso di essi, definendo determinate storie fake news. Secondo una ricerca del Pew Research Center[179], durante le presidenziali del 2016, quasi l'88% degli elettori, indipendentemente dall'età, dal sesso, dal livello di istruzione o dal reddito, si è detto confuso o molto confuso dalla diffusione di fake news e bufale, che era l'obiettivo principale di Trump. La sezione seguente discute dell'influenza di Donald Trump, il quale rappresenta un'estremizzazione del fenomeno della politica pop, nel panorama politico nordamericano, già fortemente pop-politicizzato. Infatti egli si è inserito in un panorama politico già da tempo pervaso dalla commistione tra politica e spettacolo: soltanto alcuni esempi ne sono Ronald Reagan, il primo presidente proveniente dal cinema, Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Bill Clinton, o ancora Barack Obama, diventato egli stesso un'icona pop. Segue l'analisi di tre meme postati dall'ex Presidente che utilizzano riferimenti alla serie Game of Thrones come mezzo per trasmettere messaggi politici e propagandistici; adottando un'icona narrativa molto popolare, Trump ha facilitato la trasmissione del messaggio grazie all'immediatezza di tale associazione. Egli è stato in grado di trasmettere il suo messaggio a un pubblico ampio e diversificato, combinando elementi visivi (font, sfondo) e frasi iconiche legate allo show (ad esempio

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[177] A.S. Ross - D. J. Rivers, " Discursive Deflection: Accusation of "Fake News" and the Spread of Mis- and Disinformation in the Tweets of President Trump" in *Social Media + Society*, 4:2 (2018), pp. 1-12 citano G. Enli, "Twitter as arena for the authentic outsider: Exploring the social media campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 US presidential election", in *European Journal of Communication*, 32 (2017), pp. 50–61

[178] G. Lakoff, "A Taxonomy of Trump Tweets #protectthetruth", Twitter, 20 Feb. 2017, https://twitter.com/georgelakoff/status/833498095153344512?lang=de

[179] S. Greenwood - A. Perrin - M. Duggan, "Social Media Update 2016", Pew Research Center, Washington D.C., 11 Nov. 2016 https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2016/11/11/social-media-update-2016/

"Winter is coming"). Tutti i post, condivisi nel lasso di tempo tra il 2 novembre 2018 e il 18 aprile 2019, infatti, presentano un testo ispirato a tali frasi ("Sanctions are coming"; "The Wall is coming" e "Game Over") e si riferiscono ad argomenti o eventi particolarmente delicati, come le sanzioni verso l'Iran, la costruzione di un muro a confine del Messico per evitare l'ingresso di immigrati clandestini, e il Russiagate. L'ex Presidente è stato infatti accusato di banalizzare in questo modo tali questioni ed è stato in più occasioni ripreso dagli autori della serie che hanno chiesto di evitare l'uso improprio del loro prodotto. Tale campagna ha tuttavia ottenuto ampia risonanza mediatica; la strategia di Donald Trump era probabilmente quella di sfruttare la visibilità acquisita grazie alla spirale di critiche che è riuscito a provocare. Il capitolo si conclude con l'analisi di alcuni tentativi di imitazione dei meme di Donald Trump da parte di alcuni esponenti politici italiani. Protagonisti sono l'attuale Presidente del Consiglio Giorgia Meloni, la leader del partito +Europa Emma Bonino e l'ex Presidente della regione Piemonte Sergio Chiamparino. La parte visuale è costruita in maniera simile, con il font tipico della serie, un'immagine raffigurante il politico e uno sfondo contenente degli elementi della serie. In tutti e tre i casi, la frase di riferimento è "Not today", che solo nel caso di Giorgia Meloni viene tradotto in "Non oggi", dimostrando la sua impronta nazionalista[180]. Anche il suo messaggio è simile a quello di Trump e si rivolge a quelle che definisce 'masse di estranei', creando dunque un problematico parallelismo tra immigrati clandestini e il popolo degli Estranei presente nella serie tv. Negli ulteriori due casi invece, la funzione è quella di attacco all'avversario politico e più specificamente ai 'sovranisti' e ai 'leghisti'. Il caso italiano ha ottenuto una risonanza molto minore rispetto a quello americano. Il capitolo intende dimostrare l'influenza dei riferimenti pop-culturali sul discorso politico.

Il capitolo finale analizza l'applicazione del transmedia storytelling, che è stato generalmente studiato in relazione ai prodotti dell'industria dell'intrattenimento, alle campagne politiche. Generalmente, sono stati sviluppati framework analitici sulla base delle caratteristiche di questo tipo di contenuti; la letteratura presente raramente si concentra sullo sviluppo o sull'applicazione di specifici framework a campagne politiche. Tuttavia, questo capitolo si concentra su un caso di studio, ovvero l'evento del

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[180] A. Boato, "La comunicazione politica nell'era della transmedialità: tre esempi di intrecci tra politica e cultura popolare" in *Social media e politica: Esperienze, analisi e scenari della nuova comunicazione politica*, a cura di C. Riva, Torino, UTET Università, 2021, pp. 115-127

V-day di Beppe Grillo, al fine di mostrare l'applicabilità di tali framework alle campagne politiche transmediali e allo stesso tempo servirà a dimostrare la presenza di caratteristiche del mondo dell'intrattenimento nella politica contemporanea. Il capitolo presenta innanzitutto il protagonista, Beppe Grillo, e delinea brevemente il suo percorso, a partire dalla sua carriera di comico fino alla fondazione del Movimento 5 Stelle. Dopo essere stato allontanato dalla RAI a metà degli anni Ottanta, a causa della sua satira "indiscreta", Grillo inizia a esibirsi in teatri e luoghi sportivi, dove rende i suoi spettacoli sempre più politici. Grillo si concentra sull'importanza del ruolo attivo che i cittadini dovrebbero svolgere in politica e sulla necessità di sradicare una classe politica corrotta, confermando quegli ideali anti-politici che hanno successivamente influenzato il movimento. È inoltre fondamentale sottolineare il suo progetto di comunicazione politica, la creazione del suo blog "Il Blog di Beppe Grillo" al fine di evitare qualsiasi intermediario giornalistico e che ha acquisito grande popolarità. Viene poi spiegato il concetto di antipolitica, largamente associato a Grillo e al movimento, e ciò che lo differenzia dal concetto di populismo. L'antipolitica e il populismo potrebbero sembrare simili dal momento che entrambi sono motivati dal desiderio di vendetta nei confronti di organizzazioni politiche, sociali o etniche che hanno negato al popolo la giusta sovranità, principio fondante della democrazia. Il politologo italiano Marco Tarchi[181] afferma che, mentre l'antipolitica si basa e rimane esclusivamente sulla protesta, il populismo, pur mantenendo un rapporto di avversione nei confronti delle élite, accetta il dialogo, finalizzato al cambiamento; ciò si evince dal percorso evolutivo compiuto dal movimento dalla sua nascita alla sua istituzionalizzazione. Un'ulteriore sezione è dedicata al rapporto tra Grillo e i vari media che utilizza nella sua strategia comunicativa, come la televisione, i comizi, il blog, la piattaforma Rousseau e i social media, analizzando come il suo comportamento e il suo linguaggio variano e si adattano a ciascuno di essi. Grillo ha infatti inizialmente sfruttato i canali di comunicazione di massa come la televisione per diffondere e amplificare il suo messaggio, e ha in seguito compreso il potenziale di strumenti online come ad esempio il blog, il quale ha reso possibile l'ottenimento di ampi consensi, in modo da poter poi dar vita ad un movimento che si è successivamente affermato come partito di governo. Il Movimento 5 Stelle può essere considerato un partito ibrido perché, pur essendo diventato un partito a tutti gli effetti ed avendo adattato la sua comunicazione ai nuovi media, non ha

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181 M. Tarchi, «Che cos'è il populismo», in *Anatomia del populismo*, a cura di M. Tarchi, Diana edizioni, Napoli, 2019

rinunciato ad azioni collettive, come ad esempio le proteste in piazza. La strategia di comunicazione del movimento ha dunque mantenuto la sua natura iniziale creativa e non tradizionalista. In seguito viene presentato in dettaglio l'evento del V-day, la cui particolarità consiste nel fatto che costituisce il primo caso in Italia in cui un evento con un riscontro così positivo in termini di partecipazione è stato organizzato e promosso attraverso un blog personale. Grillo infatti ha annunciato l'evento sul blog ed ha condiviso numerosi post informativi nei mesi antecedenti, presentando sia informazioni sullo svolgimento dell'evento, sia le motivazioni che lo hanno spinto ad organizzarlo. La denominazione ha molteplici significati: oltre a rappresentare l'iniziale di un'espressione offensiva nei confronti della classe politica, la "V" simboleggia il segno della vittoria di Winston Churchill, la "V" di vendetta del fumetto di Alan More e David Lloyd, dove il protagonista si fa portavoce del bisogno di giustizia e di ribellione di un intero popolo e infine c'è un riferimento esplicito al D-day dell'invasione della Normandia, un attacco che si è concluso con la liberazione dall'oppressore[182]. Ceri e Veltri (*ibid.*) evidenziano che l'obiettivo primario del V-Day è stato quello di trasformare in evento fisico la campagna "Parlamento Pulito", nata sul blog nel 2005 e che aveva lo scopo di sensibilizzare i cittadini italiani sulla presenza nel Parlamento italiano di oltre venti politici condannati in via definitiva. L'8 settembre 2007 si sono svolte raccolte firme per votare un'iniziativa popolare in 179 città, mentre l'evento principale si è tenuto a Bologna con la presenza di Grillo e di almeno 50.000 spettatori. Nonostante la scarsa copertura da parte dei media tradizionali, l'evento ha avuto successo e ha visto la partecipazione di numerose persone, grazie ai vari gruppi Meetup nelle diverse regioni e al blog. L'enorme partecipazione dimostra il potenziale di Internet come strumento di organizzazione politica: la mobilitazione di un gran numero di individui attraverso i social media online, i canali video online, la blogosfera, non era mai stata osservata prima in Italia[183]. Lo scopo è dunque principalmente politico e propagandistico, ma presenta caratteristiche tipiche dei prodotti dell'industria dell'intrattenimento: l'evento si presenta infatti come un vero e proprio show che vede la partecipazione di varie celebrità ed è caratterizzato da una commistione di musica ed interventi a sfondo politico. In seguito viene applicato il framework analitico sviluppato da Renira Rampazzo Gambarato nel suo testo "Transmedia Project Design: Theoretical

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[182] P. Ceri - F. Veltri, *Il Movimento nella rete. Storia e struttura del movimento 5 Stelle*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino, p. 71-72
[183] A. Pepe - C. Di Gennaro, "Political protest Italian-style: The blogosphere and mainstream media in the promotion and coverage of Beppe Grillo's V-day", in *First Monday*, 14:12 (2009)

and Analytical Considerations"[184], nato in primis per rispondere alle necessità analitiche dei designer di progetti transmediali. L'autrice propone dieci categorie di domande, i cui macro temi riguardano premessa e scopo; narrazione; costruzione di mondi; personaggi; estensioni; piattaforme e generi mediali; pubblico e mercato; coinvolgimento; struttura; estetica. L'analisi dimostrerà che a) il progetto può essere considerato transmediale; b) i quadri analitici originariamente sviluppati per i prodotti dell'industria dell'intrattenimento possono essere applicati a progetti non-fiction come le campagne politiche; c) questo progetto presenta in qualche misura caratteristiche tipiche dei prodotti di intrattenimento e dimostra una graduale convergenza di caratteristiche del mondo dell'intrattenimento in quello della comunicazione politica.

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[184] R. Rampazzo Gambarato, "Transmedia Project Design: Theoretical and Analytical Considerations" in *Baltic Screen Media Review*, 1:1 (2013)