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# “An American Story of Hope”

## A Visual-verbal Analysis of President Biden’s Social Network Representations of his Inaugural Promises

### Abstract

*In his 2021 Inaugural Address, President Biden proclaimed a new beginning for the US. “The world is watching,” he said, as global attention was on Washington D.C. after the Capitol Hill riots; he then called for “a new day for democracy” and promised to “write an American story of hope.”*

*The power of narrative in political discourse (Björninen, Hatavara and Mäkelä 2020; Gabriel 2015; Polletta 2008) merges with storytelling, that is peculiarly ingrained in American oral cultures, reaching a new ‘storywriting’ level which, in today’s mobile culture, is entrenched in social networks and thus turned into ‘storyvisualising.’*

*Building on previous research on American political discourse (Ariszi 2019; 2017a; 2017b; 2013; 2012), this paper offers quantitative and qualitative analyses of Biden’s narrative of hope, decency and healing based on a sample of his posts from two of his official social network accounts: President Joe Biden@POTUS on Facebook and Potus President Joe Biden on Instagram.*

*Grounding the investigation on the idea of remediation (Prior and Hengst 2010; Bolter and Grusin 1999) and reflecting on the interplay of semiotic choices (Kress 2010; Baldry and Thibault 2006; Kress and van Leeuwen 2001) that instantiate specific political and ideological meanings, the paper explores how Biden’s Inaugural Address has been repurposed in social networks and how his new narrative for the US is verbally and visually negotiated, defined and presented.*

*As a contribution to the debate on the development of political discourse in mobile culture, the paper reflects on the recontextualised idea of the US as a beacon of democracy, a land of hope and dreams.*

**Keywords:** *Presidential Discourse, Inaugural Addresses, remediation, social networks, mobile political culture*

### 1. Introduction: American political discourse and social networks

The election of a new American president inevitably conveys a shift in the country’s narrative, especially when, besides the transition of power between two presidents, a

different set of values and visions of the world is at stake. The transition between the 45th and 46th Presidents was particularly dramatic, and the nefarious Capitol Hill riots on January 6, 2021, which marked the climax in the political tension, attracted worldwide attention to what was seen as an unprecedented domestic attack on American democracy.

In this turbulent atmosphere, the new president had to reassure Americans and the entire world that the storm had passed and that the US was once again ready to set out on its path towards liberty, hope and democracy. Although, as a genre, Inaugural Addresses (hereafter IAs) are by definition unifying speeches after divisive presidential campaigns (Arizzi 2017a), in the wake of the Capitol Hill events, the need to heal divisions was even more pressing. The Inauguration ceremony on January 20, 2021, was thus an excellent opportunity for Biden to soothe both the entire nation and those watching the streaming event from abroad, a chance, in fact, to set out his commitment to uniting the country by transcending the general mood of negativity looming over the US, and instilling a new vision of unity and hope for the future.

In taking its cue from some of the key passages of Biden’s compelling and, at times, poetic IA, the main focus of this paper is to see what came *after* this first public announcement of the new President’s vision for the country by showing how his ideals and values re-emerge in his Facebook (FB) and Instagram (IG) accounts as mini-narratives of hope and healing. Thus, after a brief analysis of the IA itself (Section 2) the paper dwells on how the nature and affordances of social networks have helped Biden shape his narrative of the US and how he has used their meaning-making resources to achieve his goals. A six-month time span is considered, with the corpus consisting of Biden’s FB and IG posts in the first ten days of each month from August 2021 to January 2022. Next, posts are categorised in terms of the relationship between semiotic resources and issues raised with the data that emerges being compared to establish underlying patterns (Section 3). Finally, Sections 4 (Discussion) and 5 (Conclusions) reflect on how the remediation process contributes to highlighting specific values in specific contexts and specific communities within the US and the overall grassroots storytelling approach that Biden adopts.

## **2. The inauguration of a new narrative for the US**

Biden’s inaugural promise to devotedly commit to the mission of prompting a new beginning for the US was set forth in his admission that there was “much to repair. Much to restore. Much to heal. Much to build. And much to gain.” Biden used just 16 words and 5 phrases, each made up of three words (except the last, which includes the word “and”) to construct the basis for his vision. The *crescendo* in this passage focuses on “repair” and “restore” and echoes the traditional rhetoric of the American dream, whereby honest hard work will be rewarded (Boyd 2013; Bayley

and Miller 1993). In a subsequent passage, Biden committed to changing the narrative for the US.

[.]together, we shall write an American story of hope, not fear.  
 Of unity, not division.  
 Of light, not darkness.  
 An American story of decency and dignity.  
 Of love and of healing.  
 Of greatness and of goodness.  
 May this be the story that guides us.  
 The story that inspires us.  
 The story that tells ages yet to come that we answered the call of history.<sup>1</sup>

As always, social agency is meaningful in political discourse, with the use of personal pronouns representing both individual and corporate identity and responsibility. Politicians use “we” in a way that could refer to the speaker alone, to their own political party, or any group they want to speak for, even the nation or the whole world (Charteris-Black 2014, 103). In the passage quoted above, vagueness is immediately dissolved by the use of “together,” which highlights inclusivity and brings together politicians and the American people in a common effort. In general, the pronoun “we” generates a profound *pathos* in American political discourse, being connected to fundamental and cherished documents of American democracy. The incipit of the Declaration of Independence reads: “we hold these truths to be self-evident” and concludes with “we the representatives of the United States;” the Constitution of the United States, too, begins with “we, the people,” and even the protest song that became an anthem for the Civil Rights protest movement proclaims: “We shall overcome,” which closely recalls Biden’s expression: “we shall write.” However, in Biden’s IA, the personal pronoun “we” is used much more inclusively than it is in its antecedents, which refer to the signatories of a document, self-appointed “representatives,” or members of an ethnic group. In this case, the collective “we” includes both “we, the representatives,” but also you, the represented. The pronoun establishes a sense of oneness, of togetherness as a people, reinforced by the word “unity” in the following sentence. While unity is a major theme of just about all IAs, Biden’s ‘take’ on this theme is nevertheless distinctive. Significantly, Biden conveys the idea of unity through a series of oppositions. These expressions, or binomials, that contrast “two or more words or phrases belonging to the same grammatical category, having some semantic relationship and joined by some syntactic device”

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr>. All websites last visited on 01/04/2022.

(Bhatia 1994, 143) are frequent in political discourse but not perhaps to the extent with which Biden uses them. The two parts of the binomial are often connected in his discourse, for instance, through alliteration and stress, e.g., “decency and dignity;” while when they consist of three-syllable words, they also contribute to giving a text an elegant, almost majestic rhythm, as is the case here. A similar binomial pattern is repeated in the following sentence, with “greatness and goodness,” again united through consonance and rhythm. Oppositions and binomials underscore the key word in the passage, the word “story” being repeated five times. Indeed, Biden longs for, and promotes, a story of the US with which all Americans may identify, that serves as a guide and inspiration, as a *summa* of American ideals and values, a story that can pass as evidence of the good intentions of today’s Americans in response to the challenges of history.

Biden talks of his political commitment in terms of narrative. Storytelling in anthropological studies has been interpreted as a political act (Jackson 2013) but, equally, political discourse can be seen in terms of storytelling. All politicians know that telling a good story is key to being successful. The power of narrative in political discourse has been widely explored (Björninen, Hatavara and Mäkelä 2020; Gabriel 2015; Polletta 2008) both as a way of supporting persuasion by presenting an ideological selection of events (Schubert 2010), and of creating consensus as storytelling, with its mismatch between reality and narrative, shapes the way people see and interpret reality (Shenhav 2006).

Moreover, storytelling is ingrained in American oral traditions, which migrated from the specifically oral cultures—such as those of Native Americans (Einhorn 2000) or African Americans (Hamlet 2011), where stories repeated from generation to generation helped to transmit and internalise values and myths—to American popular culture. Rather shrewdly, Biden turned storytelling into “storywriting,” and then remediated it as storyvisualising. Though not a pioneer in this field, Biden stretches the boundaries of political visual narrative to the point where it becomes his favourite way of sharing his political agenda with Americans. To understand where he stands with respect to others on this issue of representation of ideals and values in IAs and their subsequent re-representation in other contexts, we need briefly to recall key moments in the power of IAs to influence the US as a nation.

### **3. Remediation of political discourse in Biden’s FB and IG accounts**

The election of George Washington as President of the US generated a series of firsts, including the first Presidential Oath, the first Inaugural ceremony and the first IA on April 30, 1789. More than two and a half centuries later, ceremonies around the Presidential Inauguration have

inevitably undergone some degree of change, but the fundamentals remain the same. The ceremony has been held in several places, at first temporarily in New York (Washington’s first inauguration in 1789) and Philadelphia (Washington’s second inauguration in 1793; John Adam’s inauguration in 1797), before moving to Washington in 1801 for Thomas Jefferson’s inauguration. In addition, the location has moved from various parts of the White House to the US Capitol West Front, now the customary location for inaugurations since George H.W. Bush’s in 1989—in itself not without a stabilising effect on the IA genre and certainly allowing changes in the ceremony to stand out more sharply.

As Table 1 shows, insofar as IAs are meant to be heard and celebrated by the entire nation as an act of unity and harmony, the history of IAs has been one of meeting the challenge of improving dissemination. Some innovations such as the illumination of the Dome<sup>2</sup> have impacted on the aesthetics of the inaugurations contributing to the pomp and ceremony of a ritual that reinforces democracy as a value. Most innovations have, however, impacted on the dissemination of the message. For instance, in 1921 the introduction of loudspeakers transformed the inauguration from a restricted event accessible only to those in the close vicinity of the President into an event audible to a much larger audience. Clinton was the first to have his inauguration disseminated on the Internet but with far less benefit than the last three presidents according to the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies (JCCIC), responsible since 1901 for the organisation of Presidential Inaugurations. Obama’s first swearing-in ceremony in 2009 had the highest viewership on the Internet; Trump for the first time had his Inaugural Ceremony tweeted live (the largest ever livestream on Twitter), reaching 6.8 million viewers; Biden had the first congressionally-produced inaugural livestream, reaching the largest web-based livestream viewership of an inaugural ceremony with over 75 million viewers.

Table 1 suggests that over time advances in technology have allowed bigger audiences to hear and view IAs in ways that are increasingly holistic: just as a photograph allows us to see who was on the stage as the President delivered his IA, only a video allows us to see how they reacted with laughter, applause, and so on. However, Table 1 does not show, but merely hints at, the potential for their remediation i.e., “the diverse ways that semiotic performances are re-represented and reused across modes, media, and chains of activity” (Prior and Hengst 2010, 2).

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<sup>2</sup> The Dome was illuminated for the first time in 1909 for William F. Taft’s inauguration with temporary searchlights, which were replaced in 1917 by floodlights at Woodrow Wilson’s inauguration. The Dome’s illumination is symbolic as it conveys the metaphorical idea of the power of wisdom that defeats darkness, guiding and facilitating the development of Americans for the better.

Because of the development and integration of different technologies, IAs are increasingly subject to these processes of remediation which allow the original event to be *repurposed*, with each re-enactment highlighting a different stance on the original event (Bolter and Grusin 1999).

Inauguration year	President	Technological innovation impacting on communication: first time...
1997	William J. Clinton	The ceremony was broadcast live on the Internet
1985	Ronald W. Reagan	A camera was placed inside the presidential limousine from the Capitol to the White House
1961	John F. Kennedy	The parade was televised in colour (NBC)
1949	Harry S. Truman	An IA was televised
1929	Herbert C. Hoover	An IA was recorded by a talking newsreel
1925	Calvin Coolidge	An IA was broadcast nationally by radio
1921	Warren G. Harding	Loudspeakers at an IA
1905	Theodore Roosevelt	Telephones were installed on the Capitol Grounds for an IA
1897	William McKinley	An IA was recorded by movie camera
1857	James Buchanan	An IA is known to have been photographed
1845	James K. Polk	An IA was covered by telegraph and first known newspaper illustration of an IA ( <i>The Illustrated London News</i> ).
1801	Thomas Jefferson	A supplement in a newspaper reproducing an IA, printed by the <i>National Intelligencer</i>

**Tab. 1:** The introduction of new communication technologies in Inaugural Ceremonies

Typically, remediation is accompanied by editing processes that add or delete. As a former actor, Reagan, who was well aware of the importance of video as a medium for telling an appealing story, had a camera embedded in his limo, thus creating a sort of pre- and post-inauguration reality show. All the innovations impacting the inaugurals are, of course, charged with political meanings, including for instance changes in dress code, that far from simply reflecting the current fashion, instantiate a specific political disposition. One such instance is when in 1825 John Q. Adams broke with traditional colonial-style breeches and stockings and instead wore long trousers, highlighting how by abandoning the old lifestyle and adopting new, practical and modern attitudes, IAs mirror social and cultural changes in the country.<sup>3</sup> In much the same vein, when the young Kennedy chose the elderly Robert Frost, an iconic poet, and when the

<sup>3</sup> See <https://guides.loc.gov/presidential-inaugurations/1789-1825#s-lg-box-wrapper-30915114>.

elderly Biden chose the young Amanda Gordon to recite “The hill we climb” on the Capitol Hill platform, they were both identifying with the nation’s changing mood but were also, like tight-rope walkers, performing a delicate political act of checks and balances.<sup>4</sup>

With the advent of smartphones, Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden have taken advantage of social networks to promote their image and ideas. Social networks take the process of simplification and popularisation to an even higher level than that introduced by the advent of television, which favoured a change in political narrative that reached out to ordinary people at home, simplifying and reshaping political messages through genres such as TV adverts (Arizzi 2012). Indeed, social networks have a unique power in political discourse. In a top-down communicative dimension, politicians use them mostly to disseminate ideas, create consensus, bond with supporters, and attack political opponents. In particular, during political campaigns (Arizzi 2017b; 2013) social networks function as multipliers of adverts and propaganda. Likewise, in a bottom-up communicative dimension, they play a role in activating political engagement (Gonzàles-Bailòn 2014) and grass-roots expressions of political participation (Arizzi 2019). Indeed, they have contributed to the online organisation of political protests by extremist political movements such as the Capitol Hill assault straight after a speech by President Trump in which he famously urged his supporters to march on the Congress, which cost Trump a ban from social networks<sup>5</sup> and fuelled the debate about the possibility that part of the information they disseminate exacerbates polarisation and incites extremist violence through self-nourishing echo-chambers (Barbera 2020) that trap unwitting users in an ecosystem leading them to join groups formed around a shared narrative. Certainly, information dissemination through social networks is affected by several factors, including platform algorithms that memorise users’ interests and preferences, thus reinforcing bias and compromising diversity of opinion. Echo-chambers may be viewed as environments in which the opinion, political leaning and beliefs of users about a topic are reinforced due to repeated interactions with peers or sources with similar tendencies and attitudes (Cinelli et al. 2021), all of which make the challenge of correcting misinformation and unmasking bias and fake news very complex. They function as a connection between social networks and populism. Populist politicians tend to

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<sup>4</sup> Similar observations can be made about the parade which precedes the swearing-in ceremony with the admission of African Americans in 1865 for the first time at Abraham Lincoln’s second inauguration, following the Civil War. Women first participated in an inaugural parade in 1917 at Woodrow Wilson’s second inauguration probably as a form of recognition of women’s contribution during the first World War.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/06/07/technology/trump-social-media-ban.html?msclkid=b9f2f0b0ba4511ec84651f79703c9fc3>.

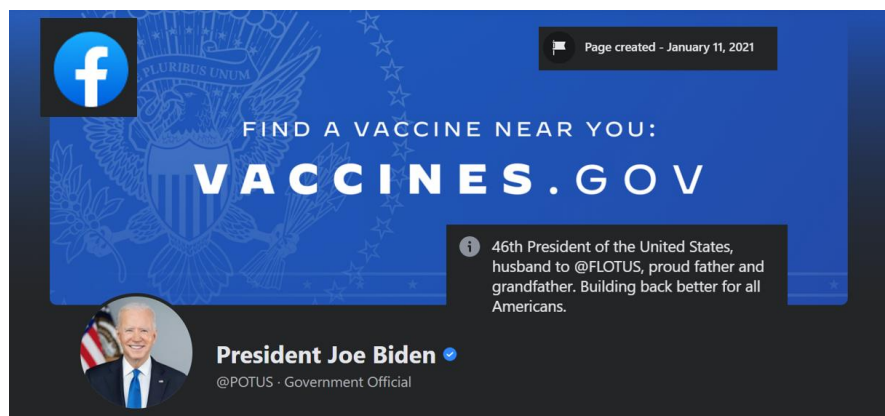
prefer social networks to traditional mass media, as the lack of mediation between politicians and people prevents the potential traditional mass media softening of messages that have to comply with mass media logic (Herkman 2015). Moreover, journalists are perceived as paladins of the elites and may remodulate populist messages in their articles or TV broadcasts (Mazzoleni 2008; 2003). Thus, populist politicians use social media to circumvent media institutions and journalistic gatekeepers so as to be free to disseminate messages that are frequently personal and sensationalist in nature (Engesser Fawzi and Larsson 2017). Social networks' power to influence public opinion is thus generally acknowledged and in today's digital, or rather mobile, culture it would be awkward, or even impossible, for a politician not to engage in this unfiltered type of communication that has proved to be very effective for self-promotion.

Biden, in particular, wants his IA and his posts on FB and IG to convey a renovated feeling of optimism. The question is whether he has so far succeeded.

### ***3.1 Biden's FB and IG accounts and their quantitative analysis***

Facebook was created in 2004 implementing interpersonal interactions between people with a focus on immediacy. Over time, its power as a marketing tool has been extended *inter alia* to political power. The first president to have an official FB and IG account was Obama, a tradition his successors continued, with these official accounts being archived after the presidential term ends. Trump started the tradition of running two FB accounts at the same time, a personal and an official one, even though he particularly favoured Twitter (Wignell et al. 2021). Besides his personal FB account created in 2011, Biden's second FB account was created just before his inauguration, as an informal but institutional means of communication professionally managed by social media consultants in a way that seemed to come directly from the President himself. Figure 1 shows what President Biden's official FB account looked like in the first four months of 2022 and suggests how the account balances official and informal aspects, mixing different roles. At the same time as his family role as husband is mentioned, his wife is referred to in her official role as #FLOTUS, whereas the picture chosen for the upper part shows a silhouette in white of the Heraldic Eagle bearing the ribbon with the motto “E pluribus unum,” a simplified reproduction of the Great Seal of the United States on a blue background. The central background, a privileged position, hosts an invitation to be vaccinated followed by an informative government link on the Covid-19 vaccination campaign testifying to how vital the mission to persuade people to get vaccinated is for Biden's presidency.





**Fig. 1:** Biden’s FB account in April 2022

Launched in 2010, IG is a social network based on photo and video sharing that gained wider diffusion when acquired by FB. Over time, IG’s specific affordances have led to a privileged position with younger generations as it is based far more on visuals than FB. Narratives posted on IG need to tread carefully as regards the quality of visuals and the semiotic resources used to keep the story going. IG boosts users’ visual creativity, allowing them to capture, edit and share photos and videos. Thus, unlike FB, IG posts focus predominantly on the visual component, which can also be accompanied by a verbal, and almost exclusively written, description below. In general, the FB and IG reading trajectories follow a top-down path foregrounding the verbal part in FB and the visual part in IG.

Even so, Biden’s IG account has the same user photo as in FB and a similar description, the only difference being the replacement of “proud father and grandfather” with “proud dad and pop” in tune with IG’s informal style. The username at the top of the page is simply “potus,” without capitalisation, while Biden’s name and title are shifted to the description section (Figure 2).

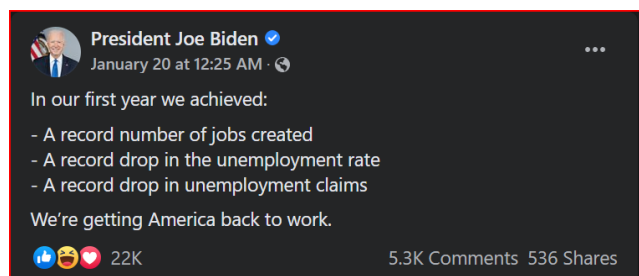
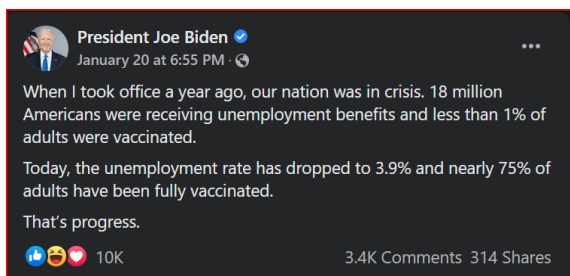


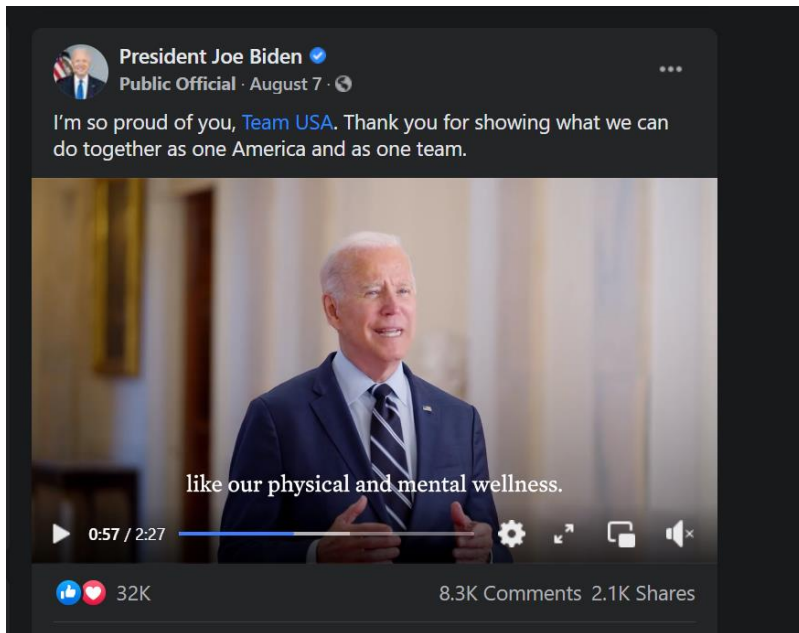
**Fig. 2:** Biden’s IG account in April 2022

For a politician, and even more for a president, using IG is more challenging than FB as it means engaging with a different section of the public and undertaking a narrative based on

different criteria. In this case, Biden’s narrative of a new day of hope and democracy has to be repurposed almost exclusively by visual means; indeed, just three types of posts are used: *photo-with-verbal*; *video-with-verbal* and *infographics-with-verbal*. IG also allows users to share posts from FB, something that Biden rarely does. Biden’s FB posts fall into four categories (Figure 3): *verbal-only*, *verbal-with-video*, *verbal-with-photo*, *verbal-with-infographic*.

Whether in FB or IG, these different types of post are often used as points of extension for the ideals and values expressed in Biden’s IA. In his IA, Biden stated: “This is a time of testing. We face an attack on democracy and on truth. A raging virus. Growing inequity. The sting of systemic racism. A climate in crisis. America’s role in the world.” Taking a cue from this passage, Biden’s accounts can be explored to see how he handled these challenges and to what extent he remained faithful to his promise to change the narrative by writing “a new chapter in the American history” with his storytelling in FB and IG posts.





**Fig. 3:** Examples of post types on President Biden’s FB account

A total sample of 361 FB posts and 130 IG posts were analysed, in the time span under consideration (August 2021-January 2022). Each monthly time block in FB averages 60.16 posts, with a peak in December and two lows in October and January, while each IG monthly time block averages 21.6 with a similar pattern of stability in the first two blocks, followed by ups and downs, with a similar peak in December and a decrease in January. What are these stories about? Reading Biden’s posts allowed the following macro categories, each encompassing related sub-topics, to be identified and quantified *per* category (with posts dealing with more than one of the subjects categorised under the dominant one).

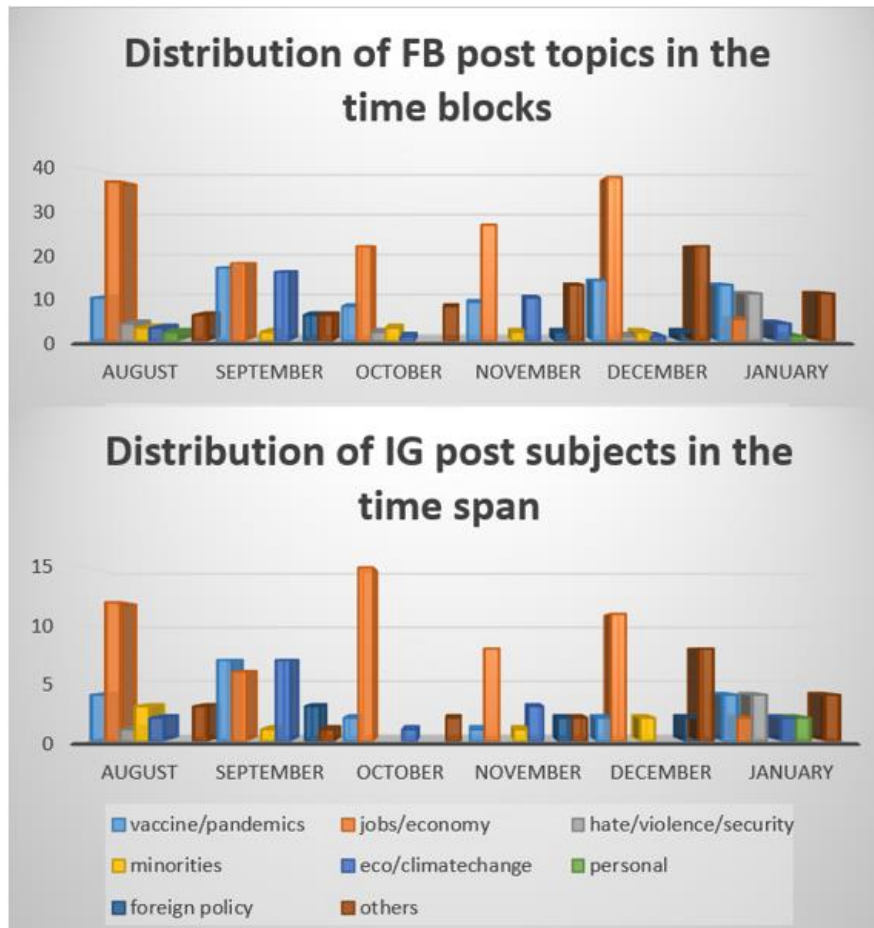
- Vaccines/pandemics: posts dealing with government plans to fight Covid-19, appeals for vaccination, statistics etc.;
- Jobs/economy: including the presentation of plans to improve the economy, statistics on employment, and other topics that have an impact on the welfare state;
- Hate/violence/security: posts on condemning domestic violence and attacks on democracy, and supporting the police and military;
- Minorities: posts addressing topics relating to ethnic minorities, disability and gender differences;
- Ecology/climate crisis: posts concerned with the environment, gas emissions and international conferences and meetings addressing this topic;

- Personal: posts referring directly to Biden and his family with, ostensibly, no purpose other than showing a private aspect of his life;
- Foreign policy: includes international situations, meetings with international leaders, international co-operation;
- Other: posts not falling into any of the previous categories.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of the subjects discussed in FB and IG posts *per* month. Jobs/economy is the most discussed category in both social networks and is dominant on FB. Even so, there is a big difference in the number of posts addressing this subject in months such as August and December (37 and 38 posts respectively) when compared to September or January (18 and 5 respectively). The months in which the economy was discussed the most are followed by the months in which it was discussed the least. The reason for this trend lies in a correlation with political events or circumstances in the US that Biden commented, and promoted, on FB. For instance, the large number of posts dealing with the implementation of Biden’s economic plans began to disappear once the Congress passed the relative bills and the *Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal* was concluded. Once the heat of the moment had faded away, the subject was set aside in favour of others. The number of posts on the economy is reflected in the total number of posts *per* month, as can be seen for instance in January, when there were very few posts about the economy while the number of posts about other categories remained more or less constant, the overall drop in the number of posts being, in its turn, influenced by the lack of posts on the economy. IG is less focused on economy, probably considered too “technical” for the target audience. In fact, IG shows a more balanced distribution of subjects and avoids multiple posts on the same subject in a limited time span. What emerges from this analysis is the self-promotional nature of the posts, with events that are in keeping with the IA’s ideals being ‘played up’ and those that are not being omitted or curtailed.

As regards those themes that are played up, an innovative aspect of Biden’s presidential campaign and IA was his focus on ecology and climate crisis and, once he became president, he devoted at least one post to this subject *per* time block. “A cry for survival comes from the planet itself. A cry that can’t be any more desperate or any more clear,” Biden said during his IA. The number of IG posts on this subject is constant, with a peak in September. Compared to the overall number of posts in the same time block, the corresponding peak in FB posts in September is more striking. The reason for this variation is again the contingent situation, as in September the US was stricken by Hurricane Ida, followed by floods and wildfires, which were intensely narrated and documented as natural disasters that confirmed Biden’s commitment to protecting

the environment. The FB November peak, instead, relates to the *UN Climate Change Conference COP26* held in Glasgow, UK, where Biden changed US policy on this matter aligning it with the international community’s overall policy stance and commitments. The Eco/Climate crisis category is presented mostly through photos and videos as the disaster due to the extreme conditions that hit the US, such as hurricanes, floods and wildfires, required dramatic visual resources to be represented.



**Fig. 4:** FB (on top) and IG (at bottom) post types per time block

In his IA, Biden warned that the world was watching, and that the US had to restore its “leading force for good in the world.” However, foreign policy is not particularly common in Biden’s posts. Only six FB posts and three IG posts concerning foreign policy can be found in September, following the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan. The decision to put an end to a long military mission intended to shine the light of democracy throughout the world might well have found more space on social networks, had it not been for the mixed feelings over the withdrawal of troops, which led Biden to devote the bare minimum to this far from prestigious story. Only

in November and December was foreign policy dealt with again, on the occasion of a trip to Rome and the Vatican City, and on the occasion of the first Summit for Democracy and Biden’s meeting with the new German Chancellor.

The number of posts about hate, violence and security underwent a sharp increase in January, following the anniversary of the Capitol Hill assault the previous year. Eleven FB posts and four IG posts were devoted to this, more than the overall number of posts (seven) on this subject in the other months in FB while on IG the subject was almost absent. This anniversary provided Biden with the chance to change the US narrative, revealing a strong interest in the protection of American institutions and those who courageously defended the sacred places of democracy from the rioters. The posts that do not fit any of the categories mentioned above were grouped under the label “Other” and cover a variety of different subjects, including sports, such as congratulating the 2021 NBA Champions Milwaukee Bucks, or commemorations, e.g., on National Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day etc.

Clearly, Biden intended to foreground the pillars of his political agenda using social networks. He succeeded in doing so on IG with its markedly visual orientation and younger audience. FB, instead, intended as a more generalist social network, seems to keep on trapping Biden into a compulsion to discuss contingent situations and, probably because of the more mature audience, his message is sometimes too verbal, repetitive and redundant—all matters further explored in the next section.

### ***3.2 Distribution of semiotic resources in relation to the subjects***

This subsection deals with how semiotic resources combine to provide Biden’s new US narrative.

<b>Semiotic resources</b>	<b>FB</b>	<b>IG</b>
Verbal	48%	NA
Verbal+photo	15%	40%
Verbal+video	30%	40%
Verbal+infographic	5%	16%
Share	2%	4%

**Tab. 2:** FB and IG distribution of verbal and non-verbal semiotic resources in the time span

Table 2 summarises the use of visual/verbal resources (Kress 2010; Baldry and Thibault 2006; Kress and van Leeuwen 2001) in the overall set of posts in the time span under consideration.



On FB, Biden draws on language as his favourite semiotic resource. All his posts, in fact, include a verbal component. Language is used as the only semiotic resource in almost half the FB posts, whereas elsewhere it is used in combination with visual resources. FB *verbal+video* posts are used twice as frequently as *verbal+photo*, indirectly strengthening the dominance of language over other resources. In fact, the videos that Biden embeds in his posts are parts of speeches or press conferences, or even short messages intentionally shot for FB, in which language plays a major role. On IG, instead, the incidence of the most frequent post types, *photos+verbal* and *videos+verbal*, remains the same. Thus, while *verbal+videos* are more complex from a semiotic perspective, Biden, and/or his social network consultants, probably considered them to be more appropriate when reaching out to the FB public. Biden's use of visual/verbal resources, in fact, seems to be based on the idea that the visual and audio components assist comprehension when guided by language. In *verbal+photo* posts, the visual component embedded in the written discourse requires considerable interpretative effort, as it provides a less direct yet highly effective complementation for the verbal message. *Verbal+infographic* is used even less than *verbal+photos*, which at first glance might seem strange, as infographics are a digital genre that ought to be a perfect match for social networks' affordances. However, the complexity of infographics, which combine various semiotic resources, e.g., numbers, colours, language, symbols, etc., would appear to play against their use in the clear and simple communication to the general public that Biden aims to provide on FB. Although higher than on FB, the frequency of infographics on IG remains comparatively low. The Minorities category uses *verbal-only* posts or *verbal+photos*, but no videos or infographics. In these posts, dealing with very delicate and possibly controversial subjects, the choice of semiotic resources probably tends towards simplicity, to avoid confusion or misunderstanding. Even though social networks allow posts to be shared and implicitly repurposed among different users, this affordance is very rarely used by Biden, and it is not hard to imagine why. He wants to be the authority from whom the communication originates so as to disseminate his own ideas rather than sharing others', thus risking assigning to another person higher authority than his own. In fact, the very few shared posts on his FB account refer to the White House website and Obama's FB account, i.e., his administration's online interface and that of a past president for whom Biden was deputy. The only IG shared posts are self-quotations from FB with the involvement of another account on just one occasion, namely when Big Bird, from Sesame Street, reports its vaccination experience. All this underscores the self-promotional function of Biden's posts.

#### 4. Discussion. What kind of narrative?

One of the ways of interpreting an IA is as a set of values that anticipate problems that lie ahead. Typically, these values are expressed as moral truths (Lakoff 1996), for example: “We have learned again that democracy is precious. Democracy is fragile. And at this hour, my friends, democracy has prevailed.”

The FB and IG posts about the attack on democracy were classified within the hate/violence/security category which, as expected, was one of the least represented in the posts despite the prominence given to it in Biden’s IA. However, the quantitative analysis given above provides us with a very precise idea of when/how Biden plays such a value card in the day-to-day business of politics that otherwise tends to exclude them. For example, on August 6th, 2021, Biden committed to protecting the Right to vote:

- (1) Fifty-six years ago today, our nation passed the Voting Rights Act and took a big step forward in our pursuit of a more perfect union. But half a century later, voting rights are under attack. We’ve got to pass federal legislation to protect the sacred right to vote.

This post was intended to raise public awareness on potential backtracking on the right to vote. By mentioning the Voting Rights Act of 1965,<sup>6</sup> Biden tried to highlight how these difficult conquests of democracy and civility achieved after long struggles were at risk and indirectly how the US, instead of developing for the better, was collapsing into political entropy. Biden was covertly attacking some states which, after the contested presidential election in 2020, started to pass laws restricting voting access.<sup>7</sup> Thus, voting rights’ legislation unexpectedly became an essential point in Biden’s political agenda. With his incipit “Fifty-six years ago today,” Biden is stylistically and functionally extending the expression of timeless values and ideals found in IAs and other formal speeches to the time-bound needs of the moment.

Using a public FB post as an extension to the principles formulated in his IA represents a different way of defending democracy in the face of threats compared with Trump who mostly used his private FB account with a similar function but different result. In the same sentence, Biden mentioned the 1965 Voting Rights Act that banned racial discrimination in voting practices and the longed-for fulfilment of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation of 1863.<sup>8</sup> In the following phrase, “pursuit of a more perfect union,” Biden unifies in six words the two fundamental documents of American democracy. “Pursuit” is an intertextual reference to one of

<sup>6</sup> See <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/299909>

<sup>7</sup> See <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/07/22/politics/voting-restrictions-state-laws/index.html>.

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured-documents/emancipation-proclamation>.



the three unalienable rights mentioned in the Declaration of Independence (1776): “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” while “A more perfect union” is a direct quote from the preamble to the US Constitution.<sup>9</sup>

Biden’s post ends by mentioning the need “to protect the sacred right to vote,” a reference to the end of the Declaration of independence: “we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”

As the Declaration inspires this post in Biden’s FB account, as well as inspiring American political discourse in general, the word “sacred” has to be interpreted in a non-divisive light. The idea of a new day for democracy is grounded in the cultural heritage of liberty and democracy. In his IA, Biden also talked about the importance of defending the truth against the lies told for power and for profit insisting on the need to overcome the atmosphere of extreme division of the previous years which culminated in the Capitol Hill riots. On the first anniversary of the riots, Biden abandoned his calm tone and, with new determination, attacked those who fuelled the turmoil the previous year. Below is a list of the written components of the eight FB posts he devoted to this anniversary on January 6, 2022.

- (2) One year ago today, democracy was attacked. The will of the people was under assault. And our constitution faced the gravest of threats. I’m heading to the Capitol this morning to speak about the day of insurrection, the state of American Democracy, and where we go from here.
- (3) Last year for the first time in our history, a president who just lost an election tried to prevent the peaceful transfer of power as a violent mob breached the Capitol. But they failed. And on this day of remembrance we must make sure that such an attack never happens again.
- (4) Here is the truth: The former president of the United States has created and spread a web of lies about the 2020 election. He’s done so because he values power over principle. Because his bruised ego matters more to him than our democracy or Constitution.
- (5) You can’t love your country only when you win. You can’t obey the law only when it’s convenient. You can’t be patriotic when you embrace or enable lies.
- (6) I have said it many times, and it is no more true or real than when we think about the events of January 6: We are in a battle for the soul of America. A battle that by the grace of God, and by the goodness and greatness of this nation, we will win.

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<sup>9</sup> See <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/>.

- (7) Despite what the former president says, there is simply zero proof that the 2020 election results were inaccurate.
- (8) We must never forget the officers we lost on January 6 or in the aftermath that followed. They made the ultimate sacrifice in defense of our democracy.
- (9) One year ago, our democracy was attacked and our Constitution faced the gravest of threats. But We the People prevailed. Now it's up to us to choose what kind of nation we're going to be.

In line with the general distribution of types of posts, half of them are *verbal-only*, 3 embed videos and one embeds a photo of Biden delivering a speech at Capitol Hill. Four of the eight posts about the anniversary of the Capitol Hill riots severely criticise Trump without mentioning his name. The most interesting case is Post (5), made up of a tricolon (Partington and Taylor 2010, 71) in which the pronoun “you” is used three times, evidently alluding to Trump. “You” is a generic personal pronoun meaning “one person” or “any person,” and if the post were read on its own, isolated from the others that precede and follow it, it could be interpreted in this way. However, the generic expression “a president who just lost an election” is chosen in Post (3), and in this case, too, even though Trump is not mentioned directly, he can be identified thanks to the temporal expression “last year” and the connection with the accusation of preventing “a peaceful transfer of power.”

Posts (4) and (7) more explicitly cite “the former President,” thus introducing a never mentioned Trump in his institutional role, reminding us that his actions were infused with institutional relevance and that he was holding the highest office in the US while “spread[ing] a web of lies” about the election results. Post (4) begins with a peremptory statement: “Here is the truth,” placing Biden in the position of a person who knows the truth and denounces those who tell lies about the will of the people. Biden then directly attacks Trump offering a definitive evaluation of his actions, beliefs and psychology. Again, Trump is not mentioned by name, but referred to through an anaphoric “he:” “He’s done so because he values power over principle. Because his bruised ego matters more to him than our democracy or Constitution.” The contrast created by the closeness of two antonyms, “truth” and “lies,” seems to suggest an iconoclastic opposition between good and evil, that can be found one beside the other even in the highest institutions, which should in theory be characterised by ethical purity and honesty.

The posts, taken together, form a narrative based on sharp contrasts, with explicit evaluations, made simple for people to understand, in part through the intense use of rhetorical devices that facilitate comprehension and emotional participation. The metaphor of war is used frequently,

e.g., “democracy was attacked,” “the will of the people was under assault,” “battle for the soul of America,” the latter quotes also including a personification of the US. Only twice did Biden employ “I.” Instead, he used “we” nine times, “us” once, and “our” six times; additionally, one of the nine occurrences of “we” was a significant quotation from the incipit of the American Constitution, “We the People” in Post (9), which even reproduced the capitalisation of the original document to show that the intertextual reference was intentional. The sounds are also used with care, with many alliterations that make reading cohesive and unconsciously more pleasant, e.g., “A battle that by the grace of God, and by the goodness and greatness of this nation, we will win” in Post (6).

#### ***4.1 An American story of decency and dignity on IG***

Biden’s narrative of a new America of hope, decency and dignity is grounded in visuals such as the photo in Figure 5, where he is talking to an African American worker. This post enacts multiple political messages. It reminds us of the dignity of American workers who struggle to earn an honest living and whose sacrifices make the country thrive. The written description accompanying the photo champions the role of the Unions in support of the middle class, the core of American society. This example shows that while the written component suggests that the person with the President may be a union member, the photo provides more specific information about the worker, a woman belonging to a minority. The photo, reflecting American multiethnicity, conveys the President’s ease at dealing with diversity. From this perspective, this photo could be considered a stereotyped representation of a progressive politician in search of easy consent. However, despite the fact that President and the worker are wearing face masks and maintaining proper social distance, the eye contact between the two is evident and, from a proxemic perspective (Yang et al. 2012), the two bodies reach out to each other and converge towards the centre, in a show of mutual interest. There is another hidden political meaning in Figure 5, as Biden is putting into practice those anti-Covid-19 prevention measures he very often invites Americans to follow. Therefore, this post tells a story of an attentive President who recognises the value of work, sympathises with workers and cares about the general health of the country.



**Fig. 5:** An IG photo narrative of decency

A similar narrative is presented in Figure 6 about Hurricane Ida. This post is made up of four photos telling an overall story accompanied by a written component in which Biden promises help for all those hit by the hurricane and invites them to keep their faith. In the first photo, Biden is with some of the people affected by the hurricane and invites them to keep their faith. He is wearing a face mask, unlike all the others, and is shaking hands with a little local girl. This shows the president’s human side, displaying his caring, even if this implies breaking norms about social distance. Moreover, he shows a particular concern for the children affected by the hurricane, who could be deprived of their normal life and might lose the opportunities they deserve. The distressing circumstances and the heat, suggested by baseball caps and sweaty T-shirts, set formality aside. They all seem happy to meet the President, and even take pictures, and the little girl seems very proud of the attention she is receiving. Biden is at ease and perfectly in tune with the circumstance. The other photos show Biden at work in meetings, walking around with local people grasping the extent of damage caused by Hurricane Ida. In the last photo, Biden is smiling reassuringly at a meeting. This multiple post tells a story about compassion and the support that a great country has towards its people, and about a President expressing solidarity to those in need. No blatant gestures are visible but simple acts of humanity. The American flag in the last photo is not very evident, but nevertheless visible in the distance, to remind everyone that the US is always watching over its citizens and ready to intervene, when necessary, without fuss. This is a story of decency and dignity, coming not just from the people but the President, too.



**Fig. 6:** An IG photo narrative of healing

Although Biden uses FB much more than IG, there is a certain amount of cross-posting, i.e., posting the same post on both social networks. However, this does not mean that IG is a simplified version of FB. The mere selection of what to cross-post highlights the awareness of the different nature of the two social networks. Figure 7 shows an example of cross-posting with a difference in the semiotic resources used. The hard news is the same; on FB it is expressed as a *verbal-only* post, while on IG the same verbal component is integrated with a visual element evidently not considered important for FB.

Among other differences, an IG reel, i.e., an edited video, shared by Biden on December 4, shows the President approaching a Christmas tree with a model train running on a truck around the Christmas tree's trunk. “Biden express” can be read on the model train, which, while showing the Christmas atmosphere at the White House and a joyful, almost childish, aspect of the President, recalls his commitment to the Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal. In conclusion, the narrative presented though IG mixes the political message of hope and a new beginning in a more entertaining way. All the posts are captivating and attract our visual attention. The number of purely political posts is lower than on FB, where there is some redundancy as sometimes several posts on the same day are devoted to the same subject. By reducing this political aspect and balancing it with the personal post type and including some extra photos,

IG seems more alluring for younger generations attracted by visuals rather than language.<sup>10</sup>



**Fig. 7:** Example of FB-IG cross-posting with different semiotic resources

## 5. Conclusions

The acknowledgement of the enormous power of the media in influencing large areas of social, political and cultural life has led politicians to engage in the mediatisation of politics (Manucci 2017), a process which is different from, but heavily reliant on, mediation, i.e., the plain transmission of a message through media, and on remediation, where the traditional functions of political discourse are recast and repurposed through new and different media. Set in the macro frame of a politician's social network accounts, the corpus of his/her posts constitutes the politician's vision of the country and, in Biden's case, a recontextualisation and remediation of the points made in his IA.

IAs can be considered as declarations of intent, where the new president relies on shared American values, expresses the underlying ideals of his/her vision and political party and states

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.webmarketingpros.com/study-shows-why-teens-and-young-adults-love-instagram/>



what his/her mission is. They belong to a stable genre that is in continuous evolution, as is the culture that expresses them. Biden’s task as a President is to restore confidence and start a new narrative for America. Even though the social networks he uses require a reinvention of the idea of political storytelling, transforming it into a complex multisemiotic narrative, the verbal component is still rooted in the tradition of American political discourse. The image of the US negotiated through both FB and IG networks is still one of hope and self-reliance. Both the verbal and the visual components convey the idea of togetherness and community; however, with its different mood, IG offers a fresher approach to politics that is more alluring for younger generations. As photos and videos are the main focus on IG, they are carefully selected and artistically interesting; in Biden’s case, the number of IG posts is limited, so that the narrative based on visuals sticks to what is fundamental and is thus more appealing.

The exploration of how the ideas expressed in a speech are conveyed through social networks, necessarily starts from considering what sort of transformation a complex written-to-be-spoken text undergoes when disseminated through a different channel.

Tracking the principles that inspire Biden’s IA in his social networks, this research has shown that posts can be read and interpreted individually as inspiring mini-narratives of today’s America. However, despite having a meaning of their own, they can often be better understood when accompanied by co-texts or co-contextualised in a sequence of posts that functions as a macro-narrative. The recursive addressing of the same issue over time creates a comprehensive and ongoing narrative that expresses the application of American and Party values mentioned in the IA to current national/world events such as the attention given to ecology and climate crisis, an issue reintroduced by Biden into the presidential agenda after Trump’s withdrawal from the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change mitigation.

Narrative through social networks is dynamic, controversial and/or inspirational. It is multisemiotic, with varied balancing of semiotic resources according to the nature and affordances of the social networks. While IG’s narrative, based on visuals, follows predetermined semiotic patterns, FB mainly relies on the written component of the posts, which makes the narrative more traditional, verbose and apparently less restrained. The careful selection of the IG posts, instead, makes this social network more effective in conveying messages often creating a longer lasting emotional impact.

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