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Performing Authenticity on a Digital Political Stage

Politainment as Interactive Practice and (Populist?) Performance

Abstract

This article investigates the way politicians use social networking sites as effective communication platforms to discursively enhance authenticity, sincerity and (self-)connection to what can be defined as the "People" (followers/lurkers/net-users). Within the framework of Social Media Critical Discourse Studies, and using tools coming from Multimodal Discourse Analysis, the paper analyses the multi-semiotic elements used by different political leaders (i.e. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Matteo Salvini), *to connect with the "People," and discusses the politainment product as a personalised way to skip the institutional mediation channels of politics.*

Keywords: *live stream*, *multimodal analysis, politics, populism, style, video*

Spontaneity, authenticity and unfiltered communication (or a pretence of all this) with online followers are now established communicative characteristics in social network exchanges. Populists, in particular, benefit from the digital social environment to give "the impression of spontaneity and matter-of-factness" (Demata 2018, 73), to promote new types of interactions (Sorensen 2018), and to reach new paradigms of visibility (Veum and Moland Undrum 2018). Live video feeds on social media, in particular, offer new communicative ways to politicians, who use streamed videos to turn overlooked moments in their day into (memorable) campaign talks. They exploit algorithmic prioritisation, especially while they are live (Rossetti 2018), a sense of spontaneity and authenticity, as well as the possibility to talk to the "People" (intended as the Facebook followers/lurkers/users). As media texts, such videos mirror the digital culture and social practices and elicit various emotional responses in the audience. As multimodal texts, videos use multiple modes to create meanings that need to be studied as a relation of different semiotic resources (Van Leeuwen 2008). Using the social media

critical discourse framework (KhosraviNik, 2018a), and tools from multimodal analysis (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006; Norris 2004; Van Leeuwen 2008), this paper critically explores the peculiar use selected political actors make of live streaming videos (LSVs) as an effective communication strategy to boost authenticity interactively and (self-)connection with the "People" and discusses the multimodal elements of a dataset of Facebook LSVs. Owing to space limitations, the communicative affordances provided by social media (SM) cannot be thoroughly explored, and self-videos are only considered as a way to perform authenticity in interaction. The aim is attempting to understand the link between contemporary politics and computer-mediated political communication. Analysis of LSVs shared on social networks represents a gap in previous research in political communication**.** The analysis suggests that self-videos help in achieving some meaning-effects, which serve the purpose of being close to the followers while constructing a "politainment genre." This paper first presents the main debate on the notion of populism before introducing current research in political communication in digital social settings. It then outlines data and the theoretical framework, followed by the analysis of four case studies. Finally, it discusses how politicians of different backgrounds use social networking sites as a digital political stage, to enhance authenticity and (self-)connection to their followers, the "People," by employing different semiotic resources.

1. The challenge of defining populism

A long-lasting academic controversy has not yet produced a clear definition of populism, which is still debated as being an ideology (Mudde 2004, Ernst et al. 2017) and/or a political rhetorical style (Moffitt 2016; Aalberg et al. 2017; Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson 2017). The main issues concerning the definition are to be attributed to the tendency of studying it as peculiar to a definite time, geographical area, or expressed through movements since populism has occurred in various guises adapting to a wide variety of contexts and expressing a chameleon-like quality (Taggart 2000) that overcomes the usual dichotomy between right and left values. However, some characteristics seem to be recurrent, namely the appeal to the People as the virtuous and legitimate order, and the opposition to party and state bureaucracies that are voiced by charismatic leaders, who have mystical influence for their out-of-the-ordinary qualities (Wiles 1969).

As an ideology, populism is based on two principles, namely the will of the People upon every institutional authority, and the direct relationship between the leader and the People (Mudde 2004). In Mudde's oft-quoted contribution, populism is addressed as a thin-centered ideology, where society is separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups (i.e. the pure People

versus the corrupt elite), and politics "should be an expression of the general will of the People" (Mudde 2004, 543), who are the only legitimate source of political authority (Mudde 2007). The nature and composition of the People changes according to the chosen ideology, but it always equates the People with "the good" and the Others with "the evil." The People may be the expression of cultural values in nationalistic views (native-born citizens as opposed to immigrants in right-wing populism) or views defined on a class basis (the People as opposed to elites, or capitalism in left-wing populism) but always addressed as a (homogeneous) group. Nativism is particularly relevant in right-wing populism, and much critical literature has revolved around the binary oppositions between the People and different typologies of Others that involve discursive constructions emphasising nationalism or racist sentiment (e.g. Wodak 2015). Left-wing populism, instead, focuses on the defence against capitalism, especially in Latin America, where socio-economic conditions favoured forms of populism that first revolved around neoliberalism (e.g. in Argentina), and more recently against neoliberal policies (e.g. in Venezuela). On both sides, however, the political debate is always on the interpretation of opposing representations of right and wrong, honest and corrupt, where the positive self and the negative other representations are discursive constructions (Wodak 2015).

As a political style, on the other hand, populism displays rhetorical elements related to the construction of the People as a unique entity (overcoming distinctions of any kind) and as having high moral values, often in contraposition to a (menacing) Other entity. Populism is consequently expressed through three dimensions: (1) Appealing to "the People;" (2) Attacking the elite; and (3) Ostracising the Others (Aalberg et al. 2017; Engesser, Fawzi and Larsson 2017). This communication style can be adapted to any political context and/or actor who appeals to popular sovereignty opposing the virtuous commoner and the bureaucratic, power-led establishment. It is also a *performative* style (Ekstrom, Patrona and Thornborrow 2018), based on a speaking and behaving repertoire, whose stances and stereotypical identities are to be situated within the socio-cultural and communicative contexts. Although the rhetorical style includes flattery and promises, populism is not to be paired with demagogy as the two are not synonyms, nor does it refer to equivalent rhetorical constructions (Liogier 2013).

Finally, populism is understood as a political logic (Laclau 2005) that sets up a conflict between a power and a weaker party, with no colours or pre-determined contents, so that the weaker parties can be represented by, for example, native citizens, or either the working or middle class, and power can be represented by any elite or hegemonic power in society.

For the sake of clarity, in this paper populism is understood as both political discourse and performance of stances and identities but also considers Laclau's position, which sees populism

as one component of Politics (2005). It is argued that in the context of digital media, claims to be one of the people (together with a certain appeal to the people) are central in the style of different political actors.

1.1 Political communication on social media

De Vreese, Esser and Aalberg define populism as a communication phenomenon, where political parties (addressing populist themes), citizens (responding to these themes), and the media operate (2018). Indeed, SM, which started as networks among people, have now become platforms of interaction in which the public engage in debates of a different nature, aiming at information. In the case of political communication, this involves political participation of both activists and the public at large (Gerbaudo 2014). Mobilisation or sharing content is allowed by SM affordances that let people create, edit or link texts of different nature. Visibility (Sorensen 2018) and interactivity (KhosraviNik 2018b) are of great importance in political contexts since contents can be shared among users within and outside the networks and stimulate online exchanges, i.e. participation. As such, social media have become of great importance in political communication, particularly since they provide semiotic resources and new communicative forms, e.g. "mass-self communication" (Castells 2007, 246). In Castells' words, media express such new form of socialised communication that "reaches potentially a global audience through the networks and Internet connection […], [it] is multimodal, as the digitisation of content [...] allows the reformatting of almost any content in almost any form [...]. And it is self-generated in content, self-directed in emission and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many" (Castells 2007, 248). The dissemination of messages and the increase in visibility of certain political actors, has made the media "powerful mobilisation tools for populist causes" (Mazzoleni 2008, 50), widening the populist potential of spreading demagoguery and fake news (Colic-Peisker and Flitney 2018). Mediated representations need to satisfy the criteria of visibility, authenticity, and efficacy (Coleman 2011) and create a representation of reality whose truth is not necessarily linked to objective belief in the message, but to emotions (KhosraviNik 2018a). As such, messages may convey facts that are wrong, fake, or simply propaganda and yet are constructed and perceived as facts, eventually presenting a relativisation of truth as well as the sender's power over their audience (the possibility of changing the audience's version of reality).

Besides, SM increase the perception of the leader as a charismatic, yet one-among-us, leader, whose consensus is expressed through likes and shares, within a "regime of popularity building" (KhosraviNik 2018a, 9). Politicians use social networks to talk directly to their people without

the filters imposed by traditional media, and research has led to significant discussions (and criticisms) about such SM usage. For example, as pointed out by Demata (2018), politicians attribute their own leadership in their country to SM (e.g. Trump and Twitter), because of the implications of enhanced visibility (inducing growth in popularity). Thompson states that visibility is emphasised, e.g. by search engine algorithms that, triggered by shares, comments or likes, determine what users are exposed to. However, he claims, the media may also expose the fragility issues of one's image in uncontrollable ways, which make actors vulnerable to scrutiny and possibly criticism (2005).

Even the relationship with the audience is different in that the modality of communication has an interactional nature: the audience must be considered as active interlocutors and be engaged. In light of this, SM are thought to have a distinct power as means of communication and persuasion, particularly because the (supposedly unmediated) exchange between politicians and citizens overturns the traditional top-down model into a popular and participatory communication highly praised in populist rhetoric (Waisbord and Amado 2017).

1.2 Performed authenticity on the digital stage

Political actors resort to social media as vehicles of less-institutionalised, direct communication (Nixon, Mercea and Rawal 2015; Sorensen 2016), where politicians are perceived as more "honest" than in other media contexts (Enli and Rosemberg 2018). The content of the messages is perceived as authentic and trustworthy because of the sender-receiver symmetry and of the media context performance (Enli and Rosemberg 2018), which favour spontaneity, directness, and credibility (Enli 2015). Enli employs the term *performed authenticity* as an expression describing how an authentic politician is not (necessarily) the one speaking the truth and being honest, but the one who gives a good performance (2015). Thompson interprets it as authenticism, i.e. authenticity conveyed by simple language as an expression of honesty of emotion, and the (possible) willingness to have a dialogue with any member of the community, the lowliest ones included (2016). Authenticity is also a strategy for success, especially in populist rhetoric, since it increases political and personal consensus and can be employed to reach electoral success as if the actor were an object to be consumed by others (Gaden and Dumitrica 2015). Thus, authenticity changes from the moral ideal of staying true to oneself to a "performance" (Enli 2015, 2017; as in Sorensen 2018). Politicians represent themselves in daily activities that surprise audiences in the pretence of closeness and vicinity, with unfiltered (often bombastic) expressions (responding to the ordinariness and bad-manners binomial in Moffit 2016, 44-45) as markers of authenticity. In addition, within the ultimate affordances

provided by social networks, viewers can react to LSVs in real-time, and ask questions or comment as the broadcast is happening, which creates a more intimate and authentic experience (Sorensen 2018) and adds to trust and closeness, which is the most valuable currency in the (political) context. It is therefore essential that, within these new paradigms of visibility, where everything can be over-scrutinised, politicians employ multimodal strategies to be viewed as authentic (Van Leeuwen 2001; Dumitrica 2014; Shane 2018).

The starting point from which to explore authenticity is Goffmann's (1956) notions of front stage (public arena) and backstage (where the performer steps out of character), in which authenticity is discussed in opposition to sincerity (Trilling 1972), and to truth (Montgomery 2017). Recently, an interesting concept has been advanced by Salisbury and Pooley, the "#nofilter self," where authenticity is *constructed* in any expressive apparatus through a set of features and conveyed by spontaneity, consistency, amateurism, and replica (2017). Performed authenticity is defined as a practice in which actors craft authentic *personae* in "the raw aesthetic of an amateur […] by relying on the performance ecology of appropriate platforms" (Abidin 2017, 7). The strategies involve the self-presentation in routine or casual acts, to foster relatability between the politician and the viewer, consistency with political commitment, and replica of day to day life activities. There are numerous choices in visual texts (e.g. staging expedients or camera angles, Sorensen 2018) that convey the idea of authenticity, understood as linked to informality. For example, the setting can be a familiar one (at home, at the beach or in the mountains with the family) or showing the "backstage" of some event, matched with casual clothing (emphasising political "transparency").

Considering that voters are affected by how politicians perform in mediated contexts, this paper studies how selected politicians (i.e. the leader of the British *Labour Party*, Jeremy Corbyn, the former leader of *UKIP*, Nigel Farage, the American, Democratic politician, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and the Leader of Italy's *Lega*, Matteo Salvini), construct their authentic political *persona* online using LSVs shared on social networks. It examines specifically what combination of nonverbal and audiovisual elements constructs authenticity, concluding by discussing these LSVs as a new process of mediatisation of politics.

2. Methodological perspectives

Videos, and live streaming, in particular, offer the possibility to talk to the Facebook follower without being mediated by official media, in other words, directly to "the People." Consequently, they are important data to be analysed when considering political communication. This study analyses LSVs shared on and taken from the official pages of political actors and understood as

to include linguistic and visual modes that channel the construction of authenticity. The goal is to critically explore the conversational dimension some political actors employ in LSVs as an effective communication strategy to boost authenticity and (self-)connection to the "People." LSVs were collected as case studies, and analysed first with descriptive synopsis and then by focusing on the multimodal analysis of video episodes that were considered most relevant for interactive style, using the ELAN software to study movements in combination/relation with the semiotic and visual resources (Van Leeuwen 2008).

As in Salisbury and Pooley, this paper frames authenticity by 1) spontaneity (appearance is offered without perceived effort and/or without editing techniques), 2) consistency (with actor's profile), 3) amateurism (as a signal of realness) and 4) replica (where what the audience sees is seemingly a match with actor's real life) (2017), that are conveyed in interaction discursively and visually (Gumperz 1992). A microanalytic approach to LSVs identified the linguistic choices (e.g. emotive language, evaluative expressions, values, parallel structures, quantifiers, discourse markers, fillers, engagement markers, interactional expressions, self-mention) and then multimodal elements (visual analysis as well as actors' nonverbal cues, e.g. prosodic stress, gaze, gestures) as authenticity cues that are conveyed through interaction. The interpretative process must be understood within the context of situation, thus relying on Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS). SM-CDS define social media by the communicative affordances they provide and considers their platforms as new spaces of power construction that shape and influence social and political spheres (KhosraviNik 2018b). In fact, although discourse is to be understood as independent of the medium, "the magnitude, penetrability, and formal aspects of its realized forms may be heavily influenced by the medium" (KhosraviNik 2018b, 585). Thus, SM are more than data sources and are to be studied as a paradigm of communication between mass and interpersonal communication (i.e. participation and interaction). SM-CDS integrates different disciplines (linguistics, political science, media communication) to analyse texts and thus relies both on verbal and visual critical analysis. Approaches to CDA differ in theoretical foundation and methodology (socio-discursive approach, Fairclough 1995; socio-cognitive approach, Van Dijk 1997; discourse-historical approach, Wodak 1989) but all have the same goal of exposing the manipulative nature of discursive practices. In this paper, semiotic choices are thought to have been designed to encode and produce authenticity; therefore, a multimodal approach to CDA is deemed more appropriate. Many multimodal analysis approaches are derived from Halliday's (1994) systemic functional grammar and address the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions reinterpreting them as representational (representing the experiences in the world as well as establishing the logico-semantic and interdependency

relations between clauses), interactive (enacting social relations), and compositional (making the messages in the text into a cohesive and coherent whole) metafunctions. As multimodal texts, videos (e.g. LS) use multiple modes derived by a set of choices to create meanings (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006; Van Leeuwen 2008) and represent people or objects "interacting" with viewers. The analysis of interactive meanings of visual resources in LSVs focuses on aspects of contact, social distance, attitude, and modality. "Contact" is the virtual relationship between the represented participants and viewers, often expressed by the gaze (e.g. a direct gaze to the camera is interactional in that it addresses a virtual "you" and establishes an imaginary relationship with the viewers). Social relations may be suggested by different sizes (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006) or the distance between the represented participants and the viewers. In this case, the analysis will focus on the choice of close, medium, and long shots that generate different social distance. Attitude is also linked to how videos portray horizontal (i.e. frontal and oblique angles respectively indicating involvement and detachment) and vertical angles (indicating a power relationship realised by eye level for equal relationship, and high and low angles respectively indicating more and less power). Finally, modality is realised by the interplay of the visual constituent of the video (e.g. range of colours, high/low degree of details, illumination, brightness). Owing to space limitations, only contact and attitude will be analysed, also taking into account Van Leeuwen's social distance, social relation and social interaction analytical framework (2008), and the multimodal interaction analysis of paralinguistic means e.g. posture and gaze, gestures [Norris 2004]), while texts are analysed following Van Dijk's approach to interaction (1998).

The visual elements of LSVs have been classified into themes (what the narrative is about, i.e. casual comments, news comments, wishes), participants (i.e. representative participants are the politicians, occasional people in the background, and the viewers), and circumstances (i.e. the setting: the city streets, the pub, the garden).

Multimodal analysis involves repeated viewing of the data that inevitably must be considered as rich data. In order to accurately study such an amount of data, LSVs were repeatedly visualised (with both sound on – e.g. vocals and/or music – and image, or with sound off to focus on body posture/gaze) to address customary acts, patterns of gesture, and routines across the time and space of the interaction.

2.1 Data

Two LSVs for each political actor were studied for the qualitative analysis as sample selection. The analysis considers Jeremy Corbyn, who at the time of this study was the leader of the

British *Labour Party* (Figures 1-2); Nigel Farage who, despite his collateral role, was still quite representative of *UKIP* (Figures 3-4); Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who has been viewed as the rising star of the American Democratic area (Figures 5-6); and Matteo Salvini, who was the Leader of Italian *Lega* and, at that time, Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister (Figures7-8).

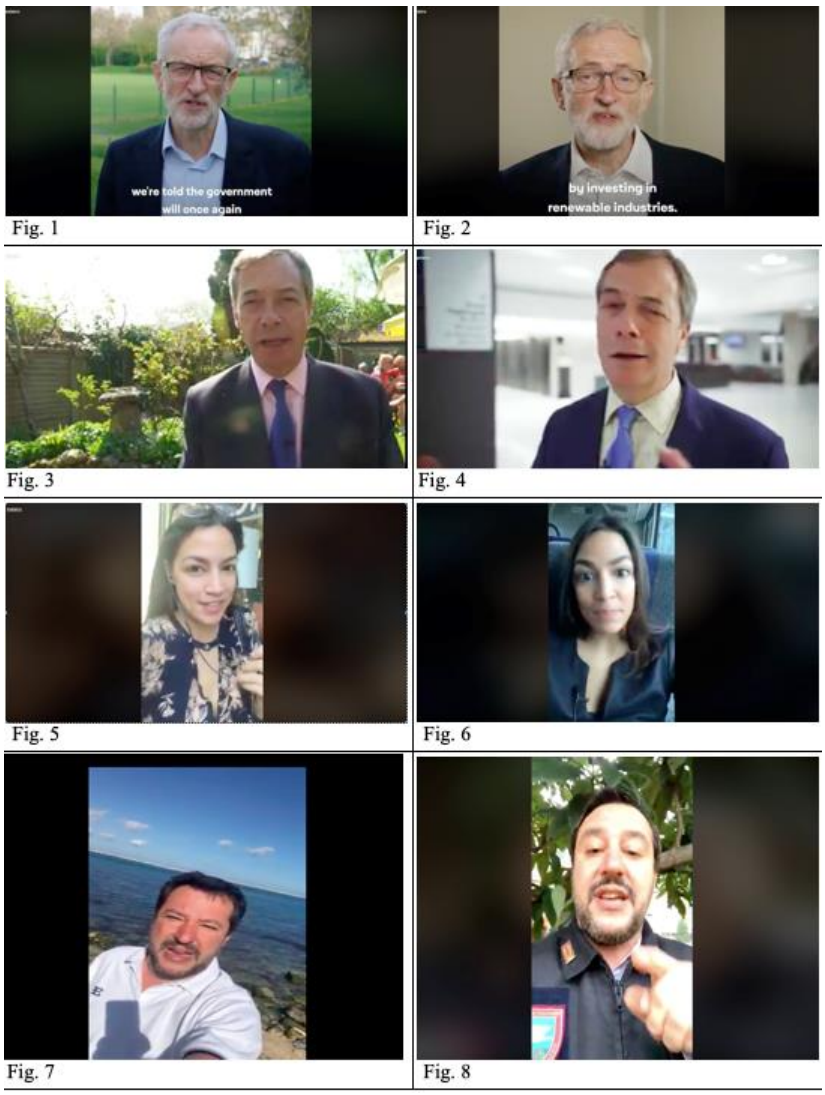

Fig. 1-8: Screenshots from several politicians' Facebook pages: Corbyn (Fig. 1-2), Farage (Fig. 3-4), Ocasio-Cortez (Fig. 5-6), Salvini (Fig. 7-8)

These political actors vary in terms of age, gender, geographical as well as ideological position, and their inclusion increases representativeness of data analysis. However, considering the extreme heterogeneity of the videos, the corpus is viewed as a collection of videodata intended as case studies, to determine how political actors perform on a social platform for new paradigms

of authenticity (self-presentation). Owing to space limitations and copyright issues, (visual and written) texts will not be reproduced here.[1]

At the first stage of analysis, it was clear that not all the politicians exploit the full potential offered by social media, i.e. LSVs. The two British politicians, Corbyn (leader of the Labour Party) and Farage (former leader and relatively well followed representative of *UKIP*) seem to use videos quite similarly. Their videos are professionally produced, composed of several modes, edited, and *then* shared online. The composition of the videos is quite articulated and includes subtitles, switching cutaways in transition pieces, montages, and voice over. These are direct markers of postproduction and suggest professional editing, although they address accessibility issues (e.g. impaired watchers, non-native speakers of English) and credibility (e.g. camera wipes to news coverage images represents and refers to the reliability of the verbal message and its truth value). Once again, owing to space limitations, these examples of traditional use are not included in the analysis.

3. Politicians' use of social media videos

A more interesting use of SM tools is made by two unrelated figures in terms of political ideology: the emerging American Democrat Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Matteo Salvini, the leader of Italy's far-right *Lega*. Ocasio-Cortez (also known as AOC) is a young, progressive Democrat activist who won the Democratic Party's primary election for New York's 14th congressional district in 2018 and represents one of the new faces in the Democratic Party. Salvini (*The Captain* to his followers) changed the regionalism of his former party (*Lega Nord – Northern League*, which used to dismiss Southern Italians as parasites) into a nationalist one. He is known, among other things, for his (social) communication strategy, which has been increasingly effective, as shown by his electoral results.

[1] The multimodal texts are available at the following links:
1. https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1564406077029375
2. https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1996735270632909
3. https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=598562063957851
4. https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=376645042933017
5. https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1332179270206087
6. https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1433217676768912
7. https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=579665329222386
8. https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=492852757789136

3.1 Digital and Democratic: Ocasio-Cortez

The LSVs chosen for Ocasio-Cortez were uploaded on 20 May 2017 and on 29 August 2017 (with, at the time this study was completed, 2187 views, 5 shares, 3 comments, 74 reactions to the first LSV and 2006 views, 20 shares, 15 comments, 137 reactions to the second one). In the first video (101 seconds, Fig.5), the politician is portrayed while walking. The predominant distance consists of medium and close-up shots that establish a close relationship with viewers. This is an implication of the nature of LSVs, which are self-videos. Due to the hand-held camera, the distance between the subject and the camera is given by the movements of the arm. Shooting using a mobile phone allows, at best, the picturing of the torso (a selfie mode, i.e. medium/close-up) that, combined with the hand-held use of the mobile, amplifies the illusion of an improvised shooting, as opposed to formal/professional shooting. She is not alone (other people can be seen in the video), but she separates herself from the others by more prominently occupying the screen (mostly close-ups, but also medium shots, centre-right framing which, as new information, centralises the salience of the image).

By looking directly at the camera at eye-level (which suggests an equal relationship), AOC engages the viewers in direct participation, *as in* a conversation with her. There seems to be a preference for the horizontal angles or side angles that indicate social relation, which suggests that she is involved or detached, depending on the importance of what she is saying at the precise moment (Van Leeuwen 2008, 139). In addition, the vertical and horizontal angles apparently allow a better display (and recognition) of facial (i.e. gaze, eyebrows, mouth, head movements) expressions. These shooting choices, typical of self-videos, are marked by amateurism and spontaneous interaction, that are echoed by verbal expressions typical of an informal (i.e. not official) conversation. AOC starts by saying:

> *Hey guys*, *good morning*, I have *a crazy story to share with you*. *First of all, thank you everyone so much for your support* after my congressional announcement. It's been *so amazing* I feel the love, *so thank you so much*. *But anyways on to the story*, *ehm so yesterday* I got a call from this guy […][2]

This brief excerpt shows conversational characteristics that convey a friendly attitude and spontaneity. The organisation of "conversation" is structured in an opening, as she starts with an informal greeting; collective addressing, initiating topic, side-topic, topic negotiation, development and closing. AOC starts by asserting her definition of the situation and digresses

[2] Italics added by the author for emphasis.

to show gratitude for her viewers' support. The expression of gratitude appeals to the viewer and establishes a connection. Going back to the story, however, she relegates her gratitude to a place of lesser importance. The storytelling is filled with vague language ("from this guy"), informal language ("a crazy story, that makes me super happy"), emotive language ("thank you so much"), self-mention (personal pronoun), interactional expressions ("so you know," "don't worry") as well as filler words ("ehm"). This marks the urgency of saying something, and filler words convey spontaneity (i.e. LSV has not been prepared in advance).

The nodal point is self-presentation as a credible alternative to Crawley, but instead of using referential or predication markers, she uses a story to report what others say about her, which downsizes her status imposition. The only references to self involve emotive categories ("I'm happy and super excited") and address the viewer as the recipient of her gratitude ("thank you so much"). These expressions also involve the consistency level since the politician positions herself within her political frame ("my congressional announcement"). The setting (street), the voice (sing-song voice), her gestures (exaggerated expressions through eyebrow movements and facial expressions) convey spontaneity (see LSV in link n. 6 above). In particular, her exaggerated expressions suggest childish enthusiasm (high-pitched voice) and surprise (raised eyebrows, eyes wide open) that work as an emotional engagement of positive sentiments (marked by the verbal expression "I have a crazy story to share with you"). The talk is characterised by informal language and marked by the pronunciation of prolonged vowels ("I'm su:per excited;" "it's so: amazing"), which again stresses her childish/ naïve attitude. Her gaze is directed to the camera (eye level), but often turns to check the road (which is something the viewer would expect, since she is walking and crossing roads) and this marks authenticity in the video, as consistency between what the viewers see and the actor's world. It is also an epistemic modality marker since viewers see the politician in a repetition relation between what she says and where/when she says it (which is also true for the second video, when she says she is on a train directed to LeFrak and, in fact, the video setting is a train interior).

Deconstructing the LSV, however, such a childish attitude appears as a construction of naïvety: the video has the goal of positively presenting the successful nature of her political choices and increasing her credibility by implication while delegitimising her opponent. Arguments are presented in the form of the problem-solution frame as in: "the guy who runs this political group said "why just Joseph Crawley *suddenly* wanted to support, *potentially* wanted to support Medicaid for all?" and someone *sends* him *My campaign website* and says *maybe she's why."*[3] In

[3] Italics added for emphasis by the author.

addition, the spontaneity and urgency are not consistent with the construction of the LSV. In fact, although almost irrelevant at first sight, the video seemingly has several cuts/breaks (e.g. the viewer does not actually see her crossing the street), which is a mark of possible postproduction or video-construction, in contrast with the idea of an urgent need to film and upload the particular moment.

The discrepancy between the urgent need of communicating something, the authenticity conveyed by the spontaneity of situation and interaction, and the actual construction of the video is relevant in the second example. In this video (Fig. 6) the politician is more formal (the tone, the gaze, no headset, the formal clothing). She starts by telling her audience her whereabouts (she is on her way to the New York City Board of Elections) and goal (to fight the removal of a polling site in LeFrak City, Queens), without any address or opening. However, as in the first video, her verbal communication is filled with direct, interactional expressions in high pitch (i.e. *period!*), and an enthusiastic closing (*have a smash-fruitful day*). Self-reference comes through the first pronoun *I* for the main action (*I'm on my way to*) but then changes to the collective *we*, that establishes membership and possibly involves the viewer(s) in participating in the action. She imposes herself stating what is right to do ("look at your backyard and be active"), a specific speech act that reinforces the existing power relationship between political actor and viewer. Participation is an important matter, and she switches to interactional *you* to ask for, at least, digital engagement and closes the sequence with an invitation that should restore power relations (I'll bring *you all* to the rally!). The call for action appeals to passion and democracy, that are consistent markers of her political *persona*.

3.2 Digital and populist: Matteo Salvini

The two videos chosen for Salvini offer two sides of his communication strategy. The first video (10.383 reactions, 1.345 comments, 865 shares, 348.933 views, uploaded on 26 April 2019) lasts 15 seconds (as many of his videos uploaded on social media) and seems to be a short advertisement, or a "visual tweet," with limitations in time/words (verbal text accounts for the "where" he is and "why") that guarantees the politician's presence on SM. Such a visual tweet strategically addresses and involves every Italian, starting with Sicilians. In fact, he praises the ("splendid") Sicilian sea he claims to have at his back (in fact, there is the sea in the background), captivating Sicilians' attention (Sicily is a big basin of votes, and *Lega* was not very welcome on the island some time ago), and yet he manages to say in a very short space of time that the whole country is beautiful, he sets his agenda (which makes the viewer appreciate the time he spends working), up and down the country (which marks a call for unity). He charismatically

speaks to the People (*from South to North*), characterised by being *united*, in reason of *the name, the pride* and *the beauties* of the Nation, in a typical right-wing populist style.

This is a self-video, so social distance is determined by arm length. Salvini looks directly at the camera, despite the effort caused by having the sun in his face (his eyes are squinting, Fig. 7). The resulting facial expression and the shadow of the mobile he is handling, and which is unprofessionally visible on his face, mark the amateurish shot. The natural setting (i.e. opposed to institutional ones), together with the self-video (hand-held camera) evoke both the spontaneity and the urgency of the message, despite its content, which does not seem consistent with such urgency.

The second video (64.327 reactions, 14.544 shares, 1.2K views, uploaded on 23 December 2018) is more complex (Fig. 8). It is an LSV that lasts twenty minutes and starts as a Christmas wish, when in fact Salvini summarises the main results and issues of his political ideals and values, in a constant dichotomy between the (ordinary) People against the Others. The video is structured in an opening, as he starts with a warm greeting, a collective addressing, topic introduction, multiple side-topics, development, pre-closing and closing. He starts by expressing gratitude to the "many" ("tutti quelli") who follow him "on Facebook, on Twitter, on Instagram"[4] and support him. This marks a relationship between one who has power *because of* the people's support. He keeps on greeting and thanking "the fellow journalists,"[5] who are immediately delegitimised ("if the Italians were to inform themselves, were to understand what's happening by reading a newspaper, by listening to the radio, by watching the news [...] they would understand little or nothing," "all the media controlled by those who have an interest […] defy me, the *League*, the Government"[6]). Through metonymy, he identifies himself with the Party and the whole Government, a climax that advances his role position. This is particularly true when he claims he is concerned about people's economic problems and works for them, which implies his position of power. It is an informal monologue about political themes (e.g. in quality of Deputy PM, he approves a budget *that concerns everyday lif*e, for the ordinary people rather than *a virtual budget based on philosophy or finance)* that address (supposed) anti-elite policies and practices and mark his political role, which does not interfere with the parallel relationship between himself and the viewer. Despite his claims of being a problem-solver (in politics), he

[4] Italian text: "su Facebook, su Twitter, su Instagram."
[5] Italian text: "gli amici giornalisti."
[6] Italian text: "se gli italiani si dovessero informare, dovessero capire cosa sta succedendo leggendo un giornale, ascoltando una radio o guardando un telegiornale [...] capirebbero poco e niente," "tutta l'informazione controllata da chi ha interesse […] massacra me, la *Lega*, il Governo."

still presents himself as a common man who *didn't have time to buy Christmas presents like all those who run to the shops to buy last-minute presents*. However, self-mention involves pronouns, his name and nickname, *The Captain*, that refers to a leader-team relationship and, by extension, leader of the People. His talk is filled with vague language (*we are annoying someone, a few exceptions, we are liked by many*), informal language (including strong language), emotive language (*thank you with all my heart*), and discourse markers (mostly marking results, examples, addition and contrast).

Involvement is conveyed by his gaze (directed to the hand-held camera), and the interactional *you* ("if it wasn't for you, none of what's happening would be possible. So, thank you"[7]) is marked by a pointing finger directed to the camera as if to address the viewer. More importantly, side-expressions allow verification of the streaming ("thanks to Denis who wrote first, thanks to Veronica, thanks to Giulia Sandra, thank you, people of the web"[8]), that may be challenged by the absence of filler words (and justified by his rhetorical abilities, where pauses are realised by smiles, and facial expressions, e.g. raised eyebrows). He always looks directly at the camera as if interacting directly with the viewers. The medium close-up, combined with the use of a mobile camera held in Salvini's hand amplifies the illusion of direct participation. It allows a strong presence of the politician's body, that serves the political (specifically, populist) rhetoric of being in contact with his audience. However, the most important thing is the addressing of individual viewers, and the politician's urgency of addressing them as they appear on the screen (he interrupts himself circa every four minutes to thank them). These interruptions produce a meaning-effect on viewers in that they seem to reproduce a genuine instant interaction with the represented participant's followers ("Thank you, Nicoletta, thank you, David, thank you, Adriana, thank you, Claudia, thank you, Marco"[9]). This is in line with other choices: Salvini always uses vertical angles (both high and low angles) in close shots that allow proximity between the politician and the viewer, increasing social relation and reducing social distance (Van Leeuwen 2008), and make his body more visible. Such proximity goes in parallel with the contact established between the viewer and the *Lega* leader, who always directs his gaze to the camera, establishing a virtual interaction with the viewer, who is also addressed by the pointing

[7] Italian text: "se non ci fosse stati voi, nulla di quello che sta accadendo sarebbe stato possibile. Quindi grazie."
[8] Italian text: "grazie a Denis che ha scritto per primo, grazie a Veronica, grazie a Giulia Sandra, grazie al popolo della rete."
[9] Italian text: "ringrazio Nicoletta, ringrazio David, ringrazio Adriana, ringrazio Claudia, ringrazio Marco."

finger. Such gestures direct rhythm but also act as a reminder of a (paternalistic) interaction between someone who knows and someone who listens.

Modality is epistemic since the viewers see the represented participant "as he is" (e.g. what he eats, where he is), often in a repetition relation of what he says and where/when he says it. However, viewers would never actually know where he is (e.g. viewers assume Salvini is in Sicily because he *says* he is in Sicily) nor "the when" of interaction, which is decided by the viewers.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Although self-videos might seem a degradation of political communication, in this paper, they are considered as the latest step in the evolution of political speeches. While some politicians (e.g. Farage and Corbyn) use videos without taking into account the SM environment, others (e.g. Ocasio-Cortez and Salvini) boldly exploit SM affordances to promote themselves as authentic, one-among-us politicians, giving the impression of spontaneity (Demata 2018) and promoting different forms of visibility (Veum and Moland Undrum 2018). Unlike selfies, that reproduce features of commercial discourse (e.g. ordinary people posing like celebrities with imperfections digitally hidden/modified), live-streamed self-video makers aim at authenticity.

However, authenticity must be understood as a *performance* (Enli 2015), where "performing as" an authentic politician is not (necessarily) about speaking the truth and being honest but is a (performed) quality in the process of managing visibility (Sorensen 2018). LSVs allow a line of immediacy: both the medium (the social network) and the modality of video making (self-videos) result in more authentic communication and stress the urgency of saying something. What is said by the politician during a video is not considered an urgent official statement and seems only to provide visibility of an unofficial moment in the politician's everyday life. Political actors address their audience and "perform" a conversation with their followers, engaging them, and demonstrating their ordinariness through simple language, directness, and spontaneity. To do so, they choose a set of multisemiotic strategies (e.g. gaze, gestures, shooting angles, settings, as well as conversational constructions of spontaneity, consistency, amateurism, and replica) that convey their authenticity. This is articulated as a strategy of self-branding, i.e. individuals present themselves on social media "in order to be 'consumed' by others" (Gaden and Dumitrica 2015, 3), in line with those who affirm that social media downgrade the political debate to a popularity contest and become the place for popularity building practices (e.g. KhosraviNik 2018a; 2019).

Despite their different political backgrounds, both Ocasio-Cortez and Salvini boldly possess the popular platforms and are considered consensus builders, since they offer themselves as authentic interlocutors, engaging followers in participation practices. Videos trigger post-screening discussion and create a space for dynamic interaction, which is the essence of SM community-based participatory interactions. LSVs are interaction-based: addressing is particularly important and is displayed both verbally (informal greetings in openings and closings, interactional expressions) and visually (the pointing finger, as well as the eye-level, are forms of direct address to a virtual "you," and call for an answer) (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006, 117). While Ocasio-Cortez refers to collective interlocutors (e.g. "Hey guys") and addresses her audience, Salvini has individual interlocutors (e.g. "ciao Andrea") and addresses people at large (e.g., "those who love me and those who hate me").[10] However, such "conversation" (e.g. the request of others' points of view) is *performed*, as it is of a one-way nature, despite the comments appearing on the producer's screen. Interaction occurs only if the video producer allows it by reading the comments, otherwise, live streaming offers a *performed* interaction. Indeed, too many comments (and interlocutors) cannot be replied to and go missing; therefore, they only exist as a meaning-effect, or as an interpretation of performed interactivity. Indeed, the two politicians have different styles: Ocasio-Cortez uses naïve, mildly evaluative language ("it's bad") in contrast to Salvini who is not afraid to use bold and marked evaluative language ("mafia is shit"). Despite this difference in verbal style, they use the visual means in a similar way: they look spontaneous in videos, showing a private momentum that is consistent with their public one, and thus re-interpret authenticity. LSVs allow the performance of both urgency (private/public neutralised dichotomy) and spontaneity (informal language, direct, unmediated talk) throughout the communication of a topic that is prioritised over others, staging an otherwise common event (e.g. a phone call) with anecdotal details, and attributing political relevance, i.e. they create politainment (Riegert and Collins 2016). Politainment is the adoption of infotainment genres (i.e. the transmission of information in forms of public entertainment) where the message is structured as breaking news (the where, the when, the how) or an exclusive story (the urgency of telling (private) news). It is a media product, where represented participants and setting appear authentic, and entertain the audience occupying interstitial moments with temporary events (Chen and Lin 2018), boosting emotionalised content through its audiovisual form. This is concerned with the politicians, not their political message, and what they say seems de-ideologised. However, Castells claims that "the most powerful message

[10] Italian text: "coloro che mi amano e coloro che mi odiano."

is a simple message attached to an image" (2007, 242): politicians add their presentation as truth-tellers (e.g. saying what happened in the morning, where they are and why) by increasing their quality of relationship with the audience in interaction.

Politainment is also a new form of political communication and a reflection of digital culture. Political actors construct authenticity, not only as a reference to transparency (that is, the promotion of trust through the sharing of information, ideas, or beliefs) but as constructions of effect of meanings to promote the Self. For example, amateurism is performed by breaking the norms and conventions of public communication (hand-held camera and staging expedients, e.g. the setting, the *mise-en-place*, the backstage, the casual clothing that suggests transparency), to perform the "non-establishment" and construct unmediated access to politicians. Videos resemble the way we would see politicians if we met them in reality, in an informal moment, and seem to satisfy a naturalistic truth criterion. Different from self-presentation during elections that is derived from a sophisticated communication strategy (Shane 2018), LSVs carry the idea of non-intentionality, authenticity and even naïvety. The paper suggests that videos help in achieving at least some of these meaning-effects (authenticity, immediacy, direct-dialogues), that are used as a communication strategy at play in the SM environment to boost credibility and (self) connection to the "People." Emotionality, dramatisation, as well as colloquial language, serve the goal of being close to one's followers, the digital People, who seem to be more important than the political processes and messages, despite the political background. It could be hypothesised that SM smooth out the politicians' ideological differences by focusing, instead, on some meaning effects (e.g. immediacy and authenticity) that serve the purpose of self-branding. As some studies suggest, voters and consumers are influenced by social media videos since these videos use micro-targeting processes with specific messages that increase their impact in small segments of the public in terms of interactions and reactions (for instance, Vacariu and Gavra 2017). Thus, the use of social media by some political actors seems to provide the opportunity to skip the institutional and official media, in favour of the immediacy of messages that promote a performed image of oneself, with the possible aim of attracting voters. Videos on SM seem to be characterised by a cogent proximity with the People and their needs, that in populist actors is marked by a stronger appeal to emotions than to policies. However, the distance between over-recognised populist actors (e.g. Salvini) and non-populist politicians (e.g. Ocasio-Cortez) seems to be thickening, not for the ideological values expressed in these streamed communications, but for the use of the SM affordances to express their political *persona*. There is a substantial literature on the link between SM and populism (either

as ideology or rhetorical style), and focusing on left-wing or right-wing populists' use of social media, but SM are not exclusively a populist tool (i.e. for populist ideologies, Laclau 2005).

On the one hand, populism can be considered as both the answer to and the construction of an urgent need, having the "weaker" in mind. It is based on urgency, on closeness, and spontaneity. As a style, it employs linguistic and rhetorical devices to create trust (e.g. through affective engagement and "me like you" narratives) and considers authenticity as more crucial than truth (Montgomery 2017). On the other hand, the direct communication without mediation, the focus on the political actor rather than on ideological values and the importance of the interlocutor (addressed *as in* conversation) evoke a *logic* of politics (Laclau 2005), in which the politicians (of any colour) represent what they identify as oppressed against what they identify as a construction of power. Echoing Laclau populism is an essential component of politics (2005), and politicians may adopt a populist political style while maintaining a non-populist agenda (Bossetta 2017).

Politicians, whether populist or non-populist, use SM affordances to look closer to their electorate and LSVs highlight the link between contemporary politics and new media technologies. Far from considering all the politicians referred to in this paper as populist, the paper has addressed how they employ SM tools to communicate to their followers, analysing what strategies are evident in these political communications. Interestingly, Ocasio-Cortez and Salvini both assign central value to closeness and interaction with their followers.

This paper suggests that (self-made) politicians' videos are a form of political discourse, framed as politainment, which advance political performances of authenticity (constructed *as in* interaction with followers) by seemingly allowing the viewer to see the backstage of the politician's life in "me-like-you" conversations. They are finally seen as a multimodal product, used by political actors, independently from their political ideology, to be close(r) to their People in interaction, engaging them within the social practices of the SM culture.

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