Follow the leader! Dynamics and Patterns of Activity among the Followers of the Main Italian Political Leaders during the 2013 General Election Campaign

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Abstract

Politicians can communicate with citizens on social media in essentially two ways: directly, through messages that they broadcast to those users who “follow” or “like” them on a given platform, and indirectly, through messages that their supporters get from them and autonomously re-circulate to their own contacts on social media. Whereas the potential for direct communication lies essentially in the numbers of people who follow a politician on a given platform, the potential for indirect communication depends on how active, engaged, and connected are the people who follow that politician. This paper aims to shed light on these issues by investigating the levels of activity (number of tweets sent) and audiences (number of followers) of Twitter users who followed ten national party leaders during the Italian 2013 general election campaign. Analysis of more than 2 million accounts shows that the vast majority of Twitter users who follow Italian politicians are rather inactive and have very small followings. Moreover, there is a negative relationship between the number of followers a politician has and their levels of activity, so that the most followed politicians have on average the least active and followed users, and vice versa. Users’ activity and followings are also very unevenly distributed, with very tiny minorities accounting for the vast majority of tweets and followers. While most Twitter political users thus seem to be relatively obscure lurkers, only a selected few have the potential to be powerful channels of indirect communication for politicians. We analyze who these “power followers” are through a content analysis of their Twitter biographies, through which we find that most of them are celebrities in realms other than politics or people who are already highly visible in the politics-media ecosystem. We conclude by suggesting that most of the potential for indirect communication may lie in those sectors of the Twitter population who are more active than average while not being part of the restricted elite of high-impact outliers.

Introduction

The 2013 election has been, without any doubt, the first “Twitter Italian general election”. Whether or not candidates’ activity on the 140-character social media has been relevant in determining the outcome of the race, most politicians flocked to this platform and the mainstream media paid very close attention to it, often reporting politicians’ tweets and citizens’ reactions to them. Although most new digital tools of political communication are often characterized by excessive media hype when they are introduced, Twitter may, as other web 2.0 platforms, contribute to broadening citizens’ networks of political conversation and sources of political information, as well as allowing politicians to address new voters in new ways and to engage with the “information exuberance” (Chadwick 2009) that is characteristic of these environments.

This article addresses how candidates develop networks of direct and indirect communication and, possibly, influence on Twitter. Politicians can communicate with citizens on social media in essentially two ways: directly, through messages that they broadcast to those users who “follow” or “like” them on a given platform, and indirectly, to the extent that their supporters autonomously re-circulate these messages to their own contacts on social media. While the direct route corresponds to what Bennett and Manheim (2006) have characterized as a “one-step flow of communication”, the indirect route corresponds to an updated version of the two-step flow hypothesis (Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955).

First of all we aim to understand the dynamics of the followings of national party and coalition leaders during the election campaign and to comprehend the extent and intensity of the Twitter activities of these followers. Secondly, we investigate whether politicians who have the most followers also have the most active ones, so that inequalities rooted in the potential for direct communication are reinforced by indirect communication. Then, we focus on the structure of the communities of candidates’ followers, assessing the distribution of their Twitter activity and followers, in order to assess the extent to which social media engagement is an egalitarian or uneven terrain. Finally, we offer an in-depth analysis of the most followed followers of party leaders in order to assess the extent to which they can effectively function as vehicles for indirect communication between politicians and their own followers.

Literature Review
In order to properly address our research interrogatives we should start from a preliminary review of how research has, to date, dealt with the following questions: What type of political arena is Twitter? How can we categorize political users on Twitter and what reach do they have when they distribute messages? How do all these patterns affect the dynamics of interpersonal communication and influence on Twitter and thus its relevance in political campaigning?

Various scholars have already focused specifically on the “political use” of Twitter by politicians, parties, and citizens during and out of electoral campaigns. Some researchers (e.g. Tumasjan et al. 2010) have tried to demonstrate, with interesting results, that the analysis of political activity on Twitter could help predict election results. Golbeck et al. (2010) investigated the activity of US Members of Congress and found that their main goal on Twitter was promoting themselves through dissemination of information, news, and links related to their political activity, instead of engaging with citizens. Larsson & Moe (2012) focused on the 2010 Swedish election and defined more specific different styles of Twitter use, mainly by politicians, and distinguished between “senders” and “receivers” of messages.

Andrew Chadwick, taking a broader systemic approach, addressed the impact of Twitter and social media on the production and consumption of political news, and talked about a new political information cycle characterized by “the combination of news professionals’ dominance and the integration of nonelite actors in the construction and contestation of news at multiple points” (2011a: 3). Anstead and O’Loughlin (2011), working on the same idea of “hybridity”, analyzed patterns of citizen commentary of political programs on TV arguing that with Twitter “viewers can share their views on a television broadcast while it occurs, and debate content and interpretation in real time […]. The viewertariat is an example of media hybridity, meaning a blurring of old and new processes to form new systems and practices” (2011: 441). Accordingly, Burgess and Bruns (2012: 23), in their analysis of the Australian 2010 election, argue that Twitter was important “not simply as a space in its own right, but as a means of disseminating information alternative to the mainstream media coverage and mass-mediated political discussion, and connecting such information to current debates”. These studies thus confirm not only that Twitter is becoming a relevant arena for political communication but also that it is tightly integrated with other channels, outlets, and messages.

These assessments suggest that social media, and Twitter among them, are perhaps
more inclusive and resonating arenas of citizen communication than political websites. The prevailing theory so far has been that, because the internet is a “selective” medium – that is, it encourages users to select the contents they are exposed to and the people and organizations they engage with – it mostly increases opportunities for those who are already informed and engaged to become even more so, while having very little effect on everyone else (Bimber & Davis 2003). This, in turn, is also often understood as a source of increasing polarization of the electorate, as citizens rely mostly on sources that they already agree with rather than being exposed to counter-attitudinal messages (Alvarez & Hall 2011; Conover et al. 2011).

Social media may contribute to these patterns by providing an avenue for the most informed and the most partisan to reinforce their information and attitudes, while leaving the uninterested and the uncommitted mostly isolated from political stimuli. While some of their affordances still enable ample room for users’ selection of contents, which could thus lead uninterested citizens to simply avoid politics, others might allow opportunities for unintended exposure to political contents. Burges and Bruns (2012) have described the users who were most active and involved (in term of tweets posted) in political conservations on Twitter as a subculture of “political junkies” (Coleman 2003), which echoes the definition of “political omnivores” introduced by Chadwick and Howard (2009). Twitter would thus mostly attract highly engaged voters, offering them a viable avenue for self-expression and advocacy, but could not bridge gaps between them and the less uninterested, let alone uninterested, citizens (Schlozman et al. 2010). As Margolis and Resnick argued in the heyday of internet politics, “To be sure, the Net is now and will continue to be a boon to those who already have an active and sustained interest in public affairs, but there is little evidence that the Internet by itself will increase the attentive public.” (Margolis & Resnick 2000: 212). This was one among various reasons that led them to claim that the internet would be an arena for “politics as usual” rather than a transformative environment.

However, it might be argued that the political twitterverse is not just about talking (writing), it is also about listening (reading). As suggested by Crawford (2009), scholars’ normative preference for “voice-as-democratic participation” has highly influenced critical accounts of online activities. This idea, together with some technical issues related to “passive” membership during the period of the first online bulletin boards, brought to a stigmatization of just-readers, negatively defined as “lurkers” (Kollock & Smith 1996). On the contrary Crawford (2009) acknowledges that lurkers have always constituted the majority of users in most online spaces (Mason 1999; Nonnecke & Preece 2003) and analyzes the
“following experience” on Twitter by individuals, politicians, and corporations. This leads her to argue for a re-definition of lurkers as listeners: “listening more usefully captures the experience that many Internet users have. It reflects the fact that everyone moves between the states of listening and disclosing online; both are necessary and both are forms of participation” (2009: 527). Listeners give talkers the feeling to be heard by a larger community and, thus, motivate them to talk; listeners might also be “talkers” in other online or offline contexts, contributing to the spreading of information and ideas.

This brings us to the issue of influence and opinion leadership on Twitter, which is obviously one of the most relevant to be addressed in investigating the impact of social media on political campaigning and participation. The function of opinion leaders in influencing others and in circulating information has been acknowledged for the first time by Katz & Lazarsfeld (1955) with their two-step flow theory, and since then has become a milestone in political communication research (see also Beck et al. 2002; Huckfeldt, Johnson & Sprague 2004; Campus, Pasquino & Vaccari 2008).

Twitter could thus become another arena in which various types of personal influence and opinion leadership develop. As noted by Marwich and boyd (2011) and by Page (2012), saying that Twitter is a “conversational” environment, and that newcomers and listeners are not completely passive, does not mean arguing that participation and influence opportunities are equally distributed. In their analysis of the 2010 United States midterm election, Vaccari and Nielsen (2012) found that online popularity on various social media platforms is very unevenly distributed, with very few candidates garnering substantial numbers of Facebook “likes”, Twitter followers, Youtube views, and website traffic, while the vast majority fail to gather more than a few hundred of supporters on these platforms. Thus, most politicians fail to achieve large-scale direct communication with citizens on social media platforms in spite of the large number of voters that use them. On the other hand, even those who do amass large audiences online are not necessarily influential on social media. In this respect, Cha et al. (2010) warn against “the million follower fallacy” that can result if we equate influence with followers. Celebrities, such as athletes, musicians, Tv stars, models but also top politicians and news persons (or outlets), usually have the largest audiences on Twitter. However, the number of followers one account has might be a first indicator, but it is definitely not an exhaustive measure of its’ owner’s influence (Cha et al. 2010; Bode et al. 2013). Thus, opportunities to address large audiences directly through social media accrue to only a very selected few politicians, but drawing large crowds online does not necessarily result in
influence.

A broader understanding of influence on Twitter should thus not be limited to the audiences that one can address directly, but also those that can be reached indirectly through one’s direct audience. In this regard we should consider not only the specific activity of politicians, but also their followers’ activity and numbers of followers. As Bode et al. (2011) argued in analyzing the use of Twitter by voters in the 2010 US mid-term elections: “Although having a large following may be reflective of voter support, unless followers of candidates are engaging on Twitter with others beyond the candidate community, social media campaigns may not be as successful in reaching less active and interested populations”, including swing voters.

Unlike direct communication by politicians on social media, indirect communication is the result of low-threshold activities (Chadwick, 2009) by users who follow politicians and share (or retweet) messages, pictures or videos that they received through these politicians’ Twitter presence. Consequently, these followers’ personal networks on social media could highly expand the reach of the campaign beyond the candidate or the party’s direct audiences. As summarized by Vaccari (2012: 199): “Because it is very easy to share content online, particularly on social networking sites, a new type of two-step flow occurs by which opinion leaders use digital media not only to comment on messages that they and their acquaintances have received via the mass media (Schmitt-Beck, 2003), but also to distribute messages, or, to quote Holbert et al., ‘to play a role in the filtering of political messages’ and ‘become agenda setters’ (2010: 24)”. Campaigns are thus increasingly aware that “indirect mobilization through their supporters' social networks is cheaper and more effective than direct mobilization” (Haynes & Pitts 2009: 58), regardless of whether these social networks are located online, offline, or, most likely, spanning both dimensions.

Because of their granularity and potential to engage users in low-threshold activities, social media may thus play an important role in user-driven diffusion of messages that are generated by both elite and non-elite actors. In the context of the first televised leaders’ debate in the United Kingdom, which was held during the 2010 general election campaign, Andrew Chadwick (2011b: 29) argues that, even if less than fifty thousand people commented on the debate on Twitter, the potential reach of these messages may have been much wider as a result of the dynamics of social propagation that this environment affords:

The 47,420 active debate tweeters constituted just half a per cent of the total television
audience of 9.4 million. But the important number here is the combined amount of followers these 47,420 active tweeters had—in other words, the number of people who were potentially exposed to commentary on the debates. [...] The basic statistic that 47,420 Twitter users tweeted about the debate therefore only tells part of the story, which is that, due to its design, Twitter can quickly scale in ways that expose surprisingly large potential audiences to messages.

Thus, in analyzing politicians’ social media presence, communication, and potential influence we should not just focus on follower/following patterns (e.g. Krishnamurthy, Gill & Arlitt 2008). Even ordinary users might develop successful strategies in order to gain niches of authority (Cha et al 2010) and undertaking practices of “micro-celebrity” (see Senft 2008, Page 2012). Burges and Bruns (2012) proposed a classification based on “uses” of Twitter in term of interactions where users’ activity is described within a spectrum going from “broadcast-only” to highly “engaging” while Valeriani (2013) discussed the community building and brokering activities that users entertain around certain hashtags. However, it is still unclear whether citizens, micro-celebrities and “peripheral” politicians can really compete, in terms of the audiences they can reach, with “power users” like show-biz personalities or figures that are highly visible in the politics-media ecosystem.

In this study, we aim to shed light on these issues by analyzing the Twitter presence and activity of the main Italian national party leaders and their size of their audiences during the 2013 general election campaign. Italian Twitter users grew massively between the end of 2010 and the end of 2012, as total users per month were 1.4 million in December 2010, 2.4 million in October 2011, and 3.3 million in October 2012 (Audiweb/Nielsen data)1 out of a 60-million population, of which only two-thirds are internet users.2 Although Twitter is still only a niche outlet compared with mainstream media arenas and even with Facebook (the most popular social network in Italy, with 23.2 million users per month in October 2012)3, this social media platform is a vital part of the contemporary Italian information ecosystem.

Research Questions and Methodology

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1 Available at http://vincos.it/osservatorio-facebook/ (accessed 28 April 2013).
3 See note 1.
Our study addresses four research questions that are related to the possibility of direct and indirect communication (and, possibly, influence) on Twitter in the context of the 2013 Italian general election.

First, we aim to understand the dynamics of the followings of national party and coalition leaders during the election campaign. These patterns will allow us to assess how extensive the potential is for direct communication by political leaders, i.e., how many people can be reached by the messages these politicians post on Twitter.

Secondly, we aim to comprehend the extent and intensity of the Twitter activities of these followers. In particular, we want to discover whether most of these users are active and frequent participants to Twitter conversations or they are mostly “lurkers” – or “listeners”, in Crawford’s (2009) terminology – to discussions animated by others. We also aim to find out how many people follow these users, which leads us to the question of indirect communication, i.e., how extensive is the network that politicians can tap via their supporters’ connections.

Thirdly, we will analyze the relationship between the first and the second set of variables, that is, whether politicians who have many followers also have the most active ones, in which case inequalities rooted in the potential for direct communication would be reinforced by indirect communication. This is a way to assess whether the “million follower fallacy” is indeed a fallacy or not.

Fourthly, we address the distribution of Twitter activity and followers among politicians’ followers, in order to assess the extent to which social media engagement is an egalitarian or uneven terrain among these users. We also aim to understand what characteristics distinguish the most active users that follow political leaders: in particular, whether they can be defined as elites, political or otherwise, or as ordinary citizens, and how likely they are to pay attention to Italian politicians’ digital messages.

In order to answer these questions, we first identified the national party leaders whose followers we were going to study. According to public opinion polls, in January 2013 five main coalitions were attracting the vast majority of support: the center-left, led by the Democratic Party, the center-right, led by the People of Freedom, the center, led by a civic list in support of incumbent Prime Minister Mario Monti; the Five Star Movement, led by former comedian Beppe Grillo (who did not run for office), and the radical left, which coalesced into a unity list named Civil Revolution. For each coalition, we consider the leader of the main party and that of its largest junior ally. (Since the Five Star Movement ran on its own, we could not include
any partner for this list.) We also decided to include Italy of Values, a party which was not
fielding candidates in the election directly but competed under the banners of Civil
Revolution, because it was the biggest among the parties that coalesced in this cartel. For the
People of Freedom party we included both its formal secretary, Angelino Alfano, and its
founder and president, Silvio Berlusconi, because the latter led the campaign, but had said
that Alfano would become Prime Minister in case of victory. (Also, Berlusconi did not have an
official personal Twitter account, but only an account that was labeled for his “digital
volunteers”.) In sum, we analyzed the accounts of the following ten leaders (for each coalition,
we name coalition leaders first and junior partner leaders second):$^4$

- **Center-left**
  - Pierluigi Bersani (Democratic Party, Twitter screen name @pbersani)
  - Nichi Vendola (Left, Ecology and Freedom, @nichivendola)

- **Center-right**
  - Angelino Alfano (People of Freedom, @angealfa)
  - Silvio Berlusconi (People of Freedom, @berlusconi2013)
  - Roberto Maroni (Northern League, @maroni_leganord)

- **Center**
  - Mario Monti (Civic Choice with Monti for Italy, @senatoremonti)
  - Pierferdinando Casini (Union of Center, @pierferdinando)

- **Five Star Movement**
  - Beppe Grillo (Five Star Movement, @beppe_grillo)

- **Civil Revolution**
  - Antonio Ingroia (Civil Revolution, @antonioingroia)
  - Antonio Di Pietro (Italy of , @idvstaff).

We then collected three types of data on these profiles.

First, in order to understand the dynamics of their followings on Twitter, we collected
data on the number of followers that each of them had on every day between 23 December
2012 and 23 February 2013, the last day before the election was held.$^5$

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$^4$We did not include the list “Acting to stop the decline”, led by journalist Oscar Giannino, which was polling
around 2% and ended up getting around 1% of the votes. Nonetheless, Giannino had a rather significant
following on Twitter (almost 73,000 by Election Day).

$^5$The data are publicly available and were retrieved from the website http://twittercounter.com/TweetCount
(accessed 4 April 2013).
Secondly, in order to assess the levels of Twitter activity of these leaders’ followers, we collected data on their screen names, the number of tweets – regardless of their content and of whether they were retweets, replies, or status updates – they had posted since they had created their profile, the number of accounts they followed, and the number of accounts that followed them. The data were collected through an application that queried the Twitter public API through an authenticated account. This procedure allowed us to automatically extract this information for all followers of the accounts we studied in batches of 5,000 accounts. However, occasional technical impediments implied that at times less than 5,000 accounts were retrieved, so that not all accounts that followed a politician were included in our dataset. Although the accounts that were occasionally not retrieved were most likely determined randomly, we strove to minimize the bias that could result from these errors by retrieving the data at least twice for all leaders and eliminating the duplicates. This procedure, which was conducted between 11 and 23 February (the day before the election), allowed us to retrieve information on 2,078,265 accounts, or 95% of the 2,186,972 which is the sum of the numbers of followers of each leader. The number of unique accounts, once all duplicates were removed, was 1,281,217. This means that about 40% of the users who followed one national leader also followed at least another one. Considering that there are 3.3 million active Italian accounts on Twitter, and assuming that one million of the 1.28 million accounts we are studying belongs to Italian users, our data would suggest that about one-third of Italians who are on Twitter follow at least one of the ten party leaders we are studying.

Thirdly, we aim to analyze the characteristics of the followers of politicians that offer the greatest potential for indirect communication because they have the most followers

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6 When a user has never posted any tweet since its creation, the API returns an empty cell; however, the same result is obtained when a user has protected her tweets, enabling only her followers to see them. Thus, when an empty cell appears in our dataset, we cannot determine whether it is due to the former (no tweets ever sent) or the latter cause (protected tweets). In order to adjudicate between these two hypotheses, we randomly selected 500 accounts that had returned empty cells and directly retrieved their accounts on Twitter. Only 23, or about 5% of the total, turned out to be protected accounts, whereas all the remaining were indeed accounts that had yet to send a single tweet. We thus decided to treat all empty cells as ‘0’ rather than missing values, knowing that this choice leads us to slightly underestimate the total number of tweets posted by the users we are studying. However, the bias resulting from the other alternative would be much greater because a large number of users who have actually never posted any messages would be excluded from calculations of the central tendencies in our distributions, which would thus be highly inflated.

7 In particular, we could cover 100% of the followers of Alfano, Berlusconi, and Casini, more than 95% of those of Di Pietro, Ingroia, Maroni, Monti, and Vendola, and more than 90% of those of Bersani and Grillo. Coverage rates are essentially a function of the number of accounts to be retrieved, as the accounts with larger followings required more retrievals of 5,000-user batches and, thus, greater statistical probabilities of errors in the retrieval process, some of which could not be overcome even by running two full retrieval cycles. In the cases of Alfano and Berlusconi, we actually have slightly more total users than the total number of their followers on election eve. This is most likely because some of their users stopped following them between our first and second retrieval cycles, so they remained in our dataset even if they were no longer following these politicians right before the vote. Most likely, these situations apply to a very limited portion of all politicians’ followers.
themselves. In order to do this, we selected those followers of national party leaders that have at least 10,000 followers. In our dataset, a total of 1,148 accounts meet this criterion. We then retrieved these users’ public profiles on Twitter and, based on information provided therein and other that could be found through internet searches, we coded the following characteristics:

- Whether they are individuals or organizations
- Whether they are male or female
- Whether they are Italian or not
- Whether they are journalists or media organizations
- Whether they are politicians or political organizations, or trade unions and unionists
- Whether they are bloggers or blogs
- Whether they are political consultants or professionals, or companies providing these services, or academics
- Whether they belong to the realms of sport, entertainment, arts, and show-business
- Whether they are businessmen or companies
- Whether they are involved in the world of technology
- Whether they pursue public interest and civic goals, such as charitable organizations, NGOs, and public interest groups
- Whether they are comedians or satirical publications.

Findings

Let us start by analyzing the potential for direct communication between leaders and Twitter users, which we can assess by looking at the number of followers that leaders accumulated throughout the campaign. As Table 1 shows, the size of politicians’ direct audiences on Twitter grew substantially during the two months before the vote, from 1.5 to almost 2.2 million (+44%). Although some of this expansion might be related to the increase of Italians that started using Twitter during the same period, a large part of it is most likely due to the growing interest in the campaign among Italians who use this social media platform, not least due to vast media coverage of it. The data also suggest that there is no relationship between the election results and politicians’ initial or final amount of followers, nor their growth rates: for instance, the People of Freedom won 21.5% of the popular vote, but its two leaders combined for only 6% of the total followers; the Democratic Party achieved 25.4% of the
Table 1 – Number of Followers of the Ten Main National Party Leaders, 12/23/2012 – 2/23/2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Politician</th>
<th>12/23/2012</th>
<th>1/23/2013</th>
<th>2/23/2013</th>
<th>% Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alfano</td>
<td>50,525</td>
<td>65,796</td>
<td>71,583</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berlusconi</td>
<td>10,484</td>
<td>65,001</td>
<td>67,240</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bersani</td>
<td>184,947</td>
<td>238,650</td>
<td>270,339</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casini</td>
<td>84,984</td>
<td>99,179</td>
<td>105,113</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Di Pietro</td>
<td>146,324</td>
<td>156,792</td>
<td>161,854</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grillo</td>
<td>768,710</td>
<td>836,073</td>
<td>916,252</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingroia</td>
<td>(Not present)</td>
<td>20,332</td>
<td>35,658</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maroni</td>
<td>10,246</td>
<td>16,842</td>
<td>21,062</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monti</td>
<td>(Not present)</td>
<td>192,887</td>
<td>229,432</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vendola</td>
<td>265,663</td>
<td>289,831</td>
<td>308,439</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,521,883</td>
<td>1,981,383</td>
<td>2,186,972</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we highlighted in the previous paragraph, the potential for direct communication is not necessarily conducive to influence, nor can it be equated to the potential for indirect communication through one’s audience. In order to assess this latter asset, we need to look at the levels of activity and followings of those users who followed national party leaders on
Twitter. As explained in the previous section, we collected information on 95% of these users which includes the number of accounts they follow, the ones that follow them, and the number of tweets they posted since they started using Twitter. Table 2 shows some summary statistics that allow us to assess their activity and popularity and, thus, the intensity and reach they could achieve as distributed mouthpieces for the politicians they follow. Central tendencies hardly suggest an intensely engaged public: the median follower of the average party leader follows 123 accounts, is followed by just 11 other users, and has only tweeted 18 times—hardly a strong potential loudspeaker for indirect communication. If we look at all the users in our dataset, the median follower of political leaders in Italy only follows 28 accounts (including that of at least one leader), is followed by just 3 other users, and has only posted 4 tweets since opening her account. Averages are slightly higher, with users following 154 accounts, being followed by 113 other users, and having tweeted 228 times since landing on this social media platform. Even that, however, is hardly the portrait of a very active online citizen, especially considering that the data combine activities related to all sorts of nonpolitical domains—such as following show-biz celebrities and tweeting about personal matters. If we were to isolate only the political uses of Twitter, the resulting figures would be dramatically lower.

**Table 2 - Summary Statistics of Twitter Activity of the Followers of Political Leaders**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Following</th>
<th></th>
<th>Tweets</th>
<th></th>
<th>Followers</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Median</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Median</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alfano</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>472</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berlusconi</td>
<td>865</td>
<td>581</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bersani</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casini</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Di Pietro</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grillo</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingroia</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>787</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>514</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maroni</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>601</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monti</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>389</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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8These figures are consistent with market research on Twitter users. According to a study conducted in October 2012 based on a sample of 36 million accounts, the mean number of followers is 208 and that of accounts followed is 102, but more than four-fifths have fewer than 50 followers and one-fourth have never been used (see http://www.beevolve.com/twitter-statistics/#e1, accessed 26 April 2013).
Apart from these general tendencies, the data also reveal interesting differences between the followings of different national leaders. The two politicians with the smallest numbers of followers – Ingroia and Maroni – also have, on average, the most active followers in terms of the number of accounts they follow, the ones that follow them, and the number of messages that they posted. By contrast, Grillo, who had by far the largest number of followers, also had the least engaged followers by all available measures. There seems to be a rather systematic negative correlation between the size of a politician’s Twitter audience and the level of activity, political or otherwise, of his followers. While this phenomenon is particularly pronounced for Grillo, Table 3 shows that the pattern occurs among all leaders and across all types of activities. Correlation coefficients are negative in all cases and are significant in three out of six occasions. If we exclude Grillo – who is somewhat of an outlier due to the particularly low activity of his followers – results do not change dramatically and if we exclude Berlusconi – an outlier in terms of the number of accounts followed by its followers, as well as the only non-official account in our sample – all correlations become stronger, in some cases substantially so. Thus, a law of diminishing returns seems to be operating by which the more followers a politician accumulates, the less active they tend to be. Leaders with smaller followings probably have more loyal audiences, made of users who are more committed to that politician and more active on Twitter in general, whereas more popular politicians attract large amounts of users who are “lurkers”, i.e., they prefer to listen than to talk, and who follow that particular leader out of passing curiosity rather than genuine interest.

Table 3 – Correlation Between Politicians’ Numbers of Followers and their Mean and Median Levels of Twitter Activity (Pearson’s $R$ coefficients, $p$ in parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vendola</th>
<th>203</th>
<th>52</th>
<th>379</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>244</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>299,365</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>436</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All unique users</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1,281,217</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9The followers of Alfano and Casini, which also fall on the lower end in terms of followers, also have high numbers of followers and tweets. Followers of Berlusconi’s account follow an exceedingly high number of accounts, a finding on which we do not venture to speculate in light of the fact that this was not the official account of the leader of the center-right. Speculations have been made, however, that at least part of the followers of this account had been purchased from social media marketing agencies.
The data shown in Table 2 also indicate that there are wide disparities not only among different leaders, but also among the followers of these leaders. This is revealed, for example, by the large differences between mean and median scores. Scatterplot diagrams also unequivocally suggest a power-law distribution of all types of Twitter activities among the followers of all politicians (data not shown). Another way to address this issue is to look at how many of these followers are utterly inactive on Twitter, and how many are instead particularly active to the point that they can be considered “power followers”. We define inactive users as those who have no followers or have not tweeted a single message since they opened their account. We characterize power followers as those who have at least 1,000 followers or have tweeted at least 1,000 times since using this platform. While the former choice is naturally dictated by the lowest possible boundary in how active a user can be, the latter corresponds to an easily interpretable threshold. Table 4 shows that as many as 19% of the accounts in our sample had no followers and 22% had never tweeted when we collected the data. (Granted, in light of Twitter’s fast user growth, some of these accounts may have just been opened when we collected our data, and their activity may thus have increased since then.) By contrast, only little more than half of 1% (.6%) had achieved more than 1,000 followers and only 4% had sent more than 1,000 tweets. Taken together, the data reported in Table 2 and 4 suggest that a very uneven dynamic is in place by which a large amount of politicians’ followers are entirely inactive (or have never really accessed their accounts), half of them are barely active, and only a tiny minority of no more than five percent are intensely engaging with Twitter, regardless of the contents of their interactions. The potential for large-scale indirect communication, defined as having more than one thousand followers, escapes
99.4% of those users who followed at least one national party leader during the campaign. In turn, if they want to achieve massive levels of indirect communication, politicians must rely either on the very select few of their “power followers” that have amassed wide followings or, more realistically, on smaller-scale amplification by a large number of their “ordinary” followers, also considering that as many as one-fifth have never tweeted and thus are not likely to start doing so to amplify a politician’s messages.

Table 4 – Politicians’ Followers with 0 and 1,000 Followers and Tweets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0 Followers</th>
<th></th>
<th>0 Tweets</th>
<th></th>
<th>1,000 Followers</th>
<th></th>
<th>1,000 Tweets</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alfano</td>
<td>6,334</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>10,763</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>1,154</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>6,426</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berlusconi</td>
<td>3,968</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>9,273</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>866</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>4,562</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bersani</td>
<td>30,452</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>57,002</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>2,595</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>14,908</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casini</td>
<td>10,135</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>18,741</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>1,625</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>8,667</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Di Pietro</td>
<td>19,471</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>35,518</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>1,553</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>10,075</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grillo</td>
<td>175,610</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>266,547</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>4,006</td>
<td>.5%</td>
<td>26,797</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingroia</td>
<td>1,813</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3,602</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>768</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>4,642</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maroni</td>
<td>1,698</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>2,670</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>458</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>2,288</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monti</td>
<td>29,768</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>41,598</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>2,499</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>15,487</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vendola</td>
<td>33,896</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>67,446</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>3,418</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>19,186</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>31,315</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>51,316</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>1,894</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>11,304</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All unique users</td>
<td>239,834</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>368,477</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>8,275</td>
<td>.6%</td>
<td>49,525</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consistently with previous findings, the politicians with the fewest followers also have the lowest percentages of inactive followers and the highest percentages of active ones. By contrast, almost one-third of Grillo’s followers have never sent a tweet and only one-tenth of 1% of them is followed by at least 1,000 other users. The law of diminishing returns that we have found applies not only to central tendencies but also on the relative size of the populations of the most and least involved users.

Finally, let us focus on the characteristics of the most followed followers, i.e., the 1,148 followers of national leaders that at the time of our data collection had more than 10,000
followers. Since these users have by far the greatest potential to reach large audiences, they could be the most powerful channels of indirect communication for political leaders to the extent that they retweet and share politicians’ messages with their own numerous followers. Understanding the characteristics of these power followers will thus allow us to answer various questions: first, to what extent they are likely to really pay attention to messages from Italian party leaders; secondly, whether they are likely to be credible and effective channels of indirect communication, by allowing politicians to reach audiences that usually ignore politics; thirdly, whether they can be characterized as elites or ordinary citizens, and thus the degree to which the potential for communication and influence on Twitter is distributed in a way that resembles or challenges offline power arrangements. In order to address these issues, Table 5 shows the distribution of various characteristics among Italian politicians’ “power followers”.¹¹

Table 5 – Characteristics of the Followers of Political Leaders Who Have More than 10,000 Followers (N = 1,119)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage of the total</th>
<th>Percentage who are Italian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>794</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>616</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>697</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalist/media</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogger</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹¹In our dataset, a total 2,730 cases had more than 10,000 followers, but when we eliminated the duplicates (i.e., those that followed more than one politician), unique accounts were 1,148. Of the original 2,730 cases, 184 followed Alfano (7% of the total), 174 Berlusconi (6%), 365 Bersani (13%), 259 Casini (9%), 214 Di Pietro (8%), 478 Grillo (18%), 107 Ingroia (4%), 85 Maroni (3%), 352 Monti (13%), and 512 Vendola (19%). ¹¹The table is based on 1,119 cases rather than 1,148 because 29 accounts could no longer be accessed on Twitter when we conducted this analysis, which was about two months after the data on politicians’ followers had been retrieved. These accounts may have changed their usernames, may have been suspended or banned by Twitter, or may have voluntarily left Twitter.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Politician/party, trade union/unionist</th>
<th>127</th>
<th>12%</th>
<th>69%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political professional, academic</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGOs, public interest groups, social movements</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports, show-business, popular culture, arts</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satire/comedian</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate/consultants</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Power followers of Italian politicians were predominantly male individuals, but less than two-thirds of these accounts were Italian. It is difficult to imagine that foreign users, who publish messages in languages other than Italian (as a cursory analysis of their profiles revealed) may indeed be interested in the tweets of Italian politicians and the situation of the country, with a few exception such as foreign correspondents. It is thus even more unlikely that these users may retweet Italian politicians’ messages to their large networks of followers. In terms of the social roles of these users, the categories that are most common are celebrities (33% of all accounts, not including comedians and satiric accounts that comprise another 3%) and journalists and news organizations (22%). A second group of accounts includes those of corporate entities and consultants (14%) and those of politicians and political organizations (12%, not including political professionals, experts and academics that account for another 3%). Bloggers constitute 7% of the power followers of politicians. All other categories are numerically residual.

Celebrities may offer politicians some potential for indirect communication. It is well known that celebrities tend to have the most followed accounts on social media (see e.g. Cha et al. 2010) and their followers may include a remarkable amount of citizens who are not particularly interested in politics. To the extent that they share political contents from the party leaders they follow, celebrities’ presence on social media may thus play a similar role to talk shows and “infotainment” television programs in allowing low-information and low-interest voters to acquire political information that they do not normally seek (Delli Carpini & Williams 2001) and bypass the filter that high-choice media allow these citizens to apply to political messages (Prior 2007). However, only two-thirds of the celebrities in our cohort of power followers were Italian and foreign celebrities comprise one in ten of all these users. It is indeed unlikely that U.S. rap singers and European deejays – categories that comprised a large amount of celebrities in our population – will ever pay attention to what an Italian
politician says on Twitter. They probably follow these accounts as part of social media marketing strategies that often suggest to follow accounts with high numbers of followers (and some politicians do achieve such numbers) in hope to be followed back and to then be able to rely on these accounts as indirect disseminators of their tweets. The logic may apply to the many corporate and technology-related accounts that comprise almost one in five of these highly-visible accounts and that are mostly located outside of Italy.

Journalists and bloggers, however, comprise almost as large a number of power followers as celebrities and are more likely to function as conduits of politicians’ social media messages. Both of them play an important role in the broader political information cycle (Chadwick 2011a) and four in five journalists in this group were Italian. This finding suggests that journalistic mediation is still relevant in the flow of political information and communication on Twitter (Hermida 2010). The 7% of power followers that are bloggers constitutes the only group that could be characterized as non-elite actors. However, many of these bloggers have now become highly visible in the hybrid media ecosystem that characterizes Italian political communication and some of them have been co-opted by the mainstream media or political organizations. As Matthew Hindman (2009) has argued for the United States, attention and popularity tend to be concentrated to a few top-tier blogs and bloggers, and many of those that were among the power followers of Italian politicians can indeed be considered elite bloggers.

A final interesting aspect involves the large number of highly visible politicians and political organizations who follow political leaders. Apart from the fact that almost one-third of these political power followers are not Italians – which suggests that interesting patterns of transnationalization of political communication may be enabled by social media – the fact that prominent politicians follow each other suggests that Twitter often functions as an intra-elite channel of public communication. Politicians often use Twitter to attack each other or to engage in discussions with their allies and opponents, knowing that their statements will be picked up by journalists who follow them as well by their and their opponents’ followers. This network of connections among politicians can thus be seen as a sign of their strategies to disintermediate from mass media routines and constraints while still maintaining journalists’ attention (Chadwick 2011a).

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12 For instance, an how-to guide to Twitter popularity on a technology website suggests to "Follow the top twitter users and watch what they tweet" (see http://techcrunch.com/2009/01/25/kevin-rose-10-ways-to-increase-your-twitter-followers/, accessed 26 April 2013).
Conclusions

Our analysis of more than two million Twitter accounts of users who follow the main Italian party leaders during the 2013 general election campaigns has important implications for the potential for direct and indirect communication that Twitter affords politicians. It must be acknowledged that our analysis focuses on the overall Twitter activities of the followers of politicians rather than on specific measures of their political engagement on social media. The data we have presented only provide an estimate of how intensely users pay attention to (at least once, when they make the following choice) and interact with other users. Whether the general patterns we have presented here are replicated in the specific domain of politics is a question that still needs to be answered. In all likelihood, however, even among those who have enough interest in politics to follow at least one party leader, reading and sharing political messages only constitutes a fraction of their overall Twitter usage. That being said, our data allow us to uncover important aspects of the structure and boundaries of an increasingly relevant political communication environment, which define the scope of more specific activities.

Our study has shown that the vast majority of Twitter users who follow party leaders in Italy are inactive or have a very limited number of followers, and cannot therefore function as effective vehicles for wide-ranging indirect communication between politicians and citizens. The data have also revealed very profound inequalities in the activities and popularity of these Twitter users, with power-law distributions by which tiny minorities produce the vast majority of tweets and gather most of the attention of other users. Thus, while most users who follow politicians behave as “lurkers”, or “listeners”, or perhaps are even “deaf” to these messages having abandoned their accounts, only a few have the potential to become influencers by reaching large numbers of followers. Moreover, among the top tier of elite users who have more than 10,000 followers (an indicator of high but by no means stellar visibility), a plurality turned out to be sports and popular culture celebrities and a vast number consisted of individuals or organizations that are already extremely visible in the media-politics ecosystem, such as high-profile journalists and politicians.

From the standpoint of political competition, our findings provide mixed support to the normalization hypothesis. The number of users who followed politicians did not correlate with their levels of electoral support, as outsiders such as Grillo and minor party leaders such as Vendola gathered large numbers of supporters on this platform. Moreover, the hierarchies
of potential influence on Twitter have turned out to be come complex than can be assessed by the simple number of followers a politician has. The negative correlation between a users’ following and his followers’ levels of activity and popularity suggests that there is a trade-off between having a large audience of relatively inactive users and having a smaller but more engaged public. High numbers do not necessarily equal strong engagement and, in turn, wider reach.

The combination of our findings regarding the hierarchical structure of users’ popularity and engagement with Twitter and the profile of power followers – which were found to be either elites already engaged with political debates or celebrities unlikely to become part of them – suggest that the most viable channels for indirect influence might be found in that middle that Hindman (2009) found to be missing in his study of political blogs. That is, among those Twitter users who are more than minimally popular within the platform, roughly located above the median levels of activity and popularity, but who are not as popular as the elusive elite users. Rather than a missing middle, a “vital middle” seems to exist on Twitter where each individual activity does not reach large audiences, but aggregation of many small-scale contributions might lead to wide-ranging distributed diffusion of political messages.

References


DOI:10.1080/19331681.2012.758072.

Vaccari C. (2012) "From echo chamber to persuasive device? Rethinking the role of the Internet in campaigns". *New media & society* 15(1) 109–127

Follow the leader!
Dynamics and Patterns of Activity among the Followers of the Main Italian Political Leaders during the 2013 General Election Campaign

Cristian Vaccari and Augusto Valeriani
University of Bologna
Conference “Social Media and Political Participation”
New York University Florence, 10-11 May 2013
Social Media and Politicians’ Communication

• **Direct** (“One-step flow of communication”, Bennett & Mannheim 2006)
  
  Politician → Followers
  
  – How many followers do politicians have?

• **Indirect** (“Two-step flow of communication”, Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955)
  
  Politician → Followers → Followers’ followers
  
  – How active are politicians’ followers?
  – How many users follow them?
Theoretical Background

- The web as a “selective” medium (Bimber & Davis)
- “Political omnivores” (Chadwick & Howard 2009)
- “The missing middle” (Hindman 2009)
- “The million follower fallacy” (Cha et al. 2010)
- “Lurkers” or “listeners”? (Crawford 2009)
“The 47,420 active debate tweeters constituted just half a per cent of the total television audience of 9.4 million. But the important number here is the combined amount of followers these 47,420 active tweeters had—in other words, the number of people who were potentially exposed to commentary on the debates. [...] The basic statistic that 47,420 Twitter users tweeted about the debate therefore only tells part of the story, which is that, due to its design, Twitter can quickly scale in ways that expose surprisingly large potential audiences to messages.” (Chadwick 2011: 29)
Twitter in Italy

• 2010: 1.4 million monthly users
• 2011: 2.4 million
• 2012: 3.3 million

• About 40 million Italians are online
• 23.2 million are on Facebook
Research Questions

1. What is the scale of direct communication that different politicians could achieve during the 2013 Italian election?

2. What is the scale of indirect communication that Twitter affords these politicians?

3. What is the relationship between politicians’ potential for direct and indirect communication?

4. What are the characteristics of politicians’ “power followers”?
Methodology

• Monitoring of politicians’ total number of followers throughout the campaign
  – http://twittercounter.com/TweetCount
• Data collection on followers’ screen names, number of users they follow, number of users that follow them, and number of tweets sent (N=2.07 million; 1.28 million unique users)
  – Queries to Twitter API
  – Data collected between 11 and 23 February
• Content analysis of the biographies of 1,148 “power followers”, i.e., those with more than 10,000 followers
Party Leaders

• Center-left
  – Pierluigi Bersani (Democratic Party, Twitter screen name @pbersani)
  – Nichi Vendola (Left, Ecology and Freedom, @nichivendola)

• Center-right
  – Angelino Alfano (People of Freedom, @angealfa)
  – Silvio Berlusconi (People of Freedom, @berlusconi2013)
  – Roberto Maroni (Northern League, @maroni_leganord)

• Center
  – Mario Monti (Civic Choice with Monti for Italy, @senatoremonti)
  – Pierferdinando Casini (Union of Center, @pierferdinando)

• Five Star Movement
  – Beppe Grillo (Five Star Movement, @beppe_grillo)

• Civil Revolution
  – Antonio Ingroia (Civil Revolution, @antonioingroia)
  – Antonio Di Pietro (Italy of Values, @idvstaff).
Followers of the Ten Main National Party Leaders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,521,883</td>
<td>1,981,383</td>
<td>2,186,972</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Alfano
- Berlusconi
- Bersani
- Berlusconi
- Casini
- Di Pietro
- Ingroia
- Grillo
- Maroni
- Monti
- Vendola
Distribution of Maroni’s Followers, by Number of Followers
Median Number of Followers of Politicians’ Followers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unique users</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vendola</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monti</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maroni</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingroia</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grillo</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Di Pietro</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casini</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bersani</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berlusconi</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alfano</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Median Number of Users Followed by Politicians’ Followers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Politician</th>
<th>Unique Users</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Berlusconi</td>
<td>581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alfano</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bersani</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casini</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Di Pietro</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grillo</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingroia</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maroni</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monti</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vendola</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Number of Users Followed by Politicians’ Followers</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Median Number of Tweets Ever Posted by Politicians’ Followers

- Alfano: 3
- Berlusconi: 12
- Bersani: 8
- Di Pietro: 8
- Casini: 16
- Grillo: 3
- Ingroia: 52
- Maroni: 36
- Monti: 12
- Vendola: 8
- Average: 18
- Unique users: 3
Politicians’ Followers with 0 Followers

Unique users: 19%
Average: 11%
Vendola: 11%
Monti: 14%
Maroni: 8%
Ingroia: 5%
Grillo: 21%
Di Pietro: 12%
Casini: 10%
Bersani: 12%
Berlusconi: 6%
Alfano: 9%
Politicians’ Followers with 0 Tweets

- Unique users: 29%
- Average: 19%
- Vendola: 23%
- Monti: 19%
- Maroni: 13%
- Ingroia: 10%
- Grillo: 31%
- Di Pietro: 23%
- Casini: 18%
- Bersani: 23%
- Berlusconi: 14%
- Alfano: 15%
Politicians’ Followers with at least 1,000 Followers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Politician</th>
<th>Unique Users</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alfano</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berlusconi</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bersani</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berlusconi</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casini</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Di Pietro</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingroia</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maroni</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monti</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grillo</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vendola</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average: 1.4%
Politicians’ Followers with at least 1,000 Tweets

- Alfano: 4%
- Berlusconi: 8%
- Bersani: 6%
- Berlusconi: 6%
- Casini: 3%
- Di Pietro: 6%
- Grillo: 8%
- Ingroia: 11%
- Maroni: 13%
- Monti: 7%
- Unique users: 4%
- Average: 8%
# Correlation Between Politicians’ Numbers of Followers and their Mean and Median Levels of Twitter Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Leaders</th>
<th>Without Grillo</th>
<th>Without Berlusconi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean following</strong></td>
<td>-.461 (.180)</td>
<td>-.485 (.186)</td>
<td>-.842** (.004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Median following</strong></td>
<td>-.342 (.334)</td>
<td>-.396 (.292)</td>
<td>-.803** (.009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean followers</strong></td>
<td>-.658* (.039)</td>
<td>-.513 (.158)</td>
<td>-.722* (.028)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Median followers</strong></td>
<td>-.732* (.016)</td>
<td>-.811** (.008)</td>
<td>-.761* (.017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean tweets</strong></td>
<td>-.734* (.016)</td>
<td>-.687* (.041)</td>
<td>-.777* (.014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Median tweets</strong></td>
<td>-.578 (.080)</td>
<td>-.728* (.026)</td>
<td>-.624 (.073)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Pearson’s $R$ coefficients, $p$ in parentheses

*p ≤ .05 ** $p ≤ .01 ***p ≤ .001
Characteristics of the Followers of Political Leaders Who Have More than 10,000 Followers ($N = 1,119$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>% of total</th>
<th>% who are Italian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>794</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>616</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>697</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Characteristics of the Followers of Political Leaders Who Have More than 10,000 Followers \((N = 1,119)\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>% of total</th>
<th>% who are Italian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Journalist/media</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogger</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politician/party, trade union/unionist</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political professional, academic</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGOs, public interest groups, social movements</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports, show-business, popular culture, arts</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satire/comedian</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate/consultant</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sky TG24 🔄
@SkyTG24
News, video, fotogallery e la diretta web 24 ore su 24
skytg24.it
Benvenuta Sinistra.

Nichi Vendola 🌍
@NichiVendola
Presidente della Puglia, Presidente di Sinistra Ecologia Libertà.
Qualcosa su di me in meno di 160 caratteri.
Bari, Puglia, Italia · http://www.nichivendola.it
Roberto Cavalli
@Roberto_Cavalli
This is the official Roberto Cavalli twitter page, made just for you!
Firenze / Paris / NY / London · http://www.robertocavalli.com
Yoko Ono
@yokoono
IMAGINE PEACE: Think PEACE, Act PEACE, Spread PEACE.
New York · http://IMAGINEPEACE.com
EZY-BID.COM Auctions
@EZYBID
Wanna buy cheapest iPhone?... Don't miss your chance to grab a new iPhone for $85.00 at EZY-BID Auctions online for cheapest iphone and more... Hooray!!!
Australia. · ezy-bid.com
Limitations & Lessons for Future

• Data measuring potential for direct/indirect communication, not actual occurrence of it
• Single-country case study (is Grillo an exception?)
• Lots of noise in aggregate Twitter data
• Manipulation of Twitter by tactical agents
• Need to integrate different measures and techniques of analysis
Conclusions

• Many “listeners”, very few “megaphones”
• “Vital middle”
  – Small contributions
  – Potential for rapid mass-scale aggregation
• Twitter as an equalizer?
  – Number of followers uncorrelated with the vote
  – Diminishing returns of having many followers
THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!

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augusto.valerian@unibo.it