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Image, self-presentation and political communication in the age of interconnection: An alternative understanding of the mediatization of politics

ABSTRACT

The way politicians 'look' is taken to be one of the essential aspects of the 'mediatization' and 'professionalization' of politics. Yet there is very little research about the role of image and self-presentation in political communication. This article presents the results of a study that aims to fill this gap by mapping where and how image fits within broader processes of identity and meaning construction in contemporary politics. On the basis of 51 interviews, it compares the role of personal image in the everyday political practices of both British and Italian local politicians and members of the European Parliament. The analysis develops an alternative conceptual framework to make sense of the role of image in twenty-first century politics, showing that the alleged deleterious effects of a 'cult of appearances' on democracy reflects more the narrowness of academic enquiry and the legacy of outdated linear models of politics-media relationships than the much more variegated and networked reality of contemporary politics.

KEYWORDS

mediatization
professionalization
image
technology
actor network theory
(ANT)
interviews

INTRODUCTION

The notion that the way one 'looks' when conducting political activity is so important could appear almost obvious. Beyond the cult of leaders' portraits and representations, the massive

role of propaganda art, logos and posters in the elaborate public choreographies of totalitarian regimes (Heller 2008), the cultivation of appearances has always been essential to the exercise of political power. Systematically managing a politician's image – one can think about the increasingly large budgets allocated to media consultants during political campaigning – seems to have acquired an even greater role in the last few decades as a part of the alleged 'mediatization' of politics.

Mazzoleni and Schulz, as a part of a wave of systematic studies that aimed to address the impact media developments have on politics and society, have explained since the 1990s how this signals a form of 'politics that has lost its autonomy' (1999: 250) and that has yielded to a 'media logic', particularly the 'commercial logic of the media industry' (1999: 251).¹ As they put it: '[w]hat is newsworthy, what hits the headlines, what counts in the public sphere or in the election campaign are communication skills, the style of addressing the public, the "look," the image, even the special effects'.

This transformation, according to Blumler and Kavanagh (1999: 210–11), is the result of a number of changes that have reshaped western democracies in the second half of the twentieth century: 'modernization' – particularly the proliferation of lifestyles and the rise of identity politics; 'individualization' – the orientation towards self-gratification and consumerism; 'secularization' – with its decreased reverence for official politics and party identification; 'economization' – or the subordination of most aspects of life to economic criteria of performance; 'aestheticization' – individuals' increased concern with stylishness and image; 'rationalization' – the valuing of systematically gathered evidence, which supports politicians' efforts to achieve persuasion through the techniques of market research and public relations; again 'mediatization' – this time as the 'media moving toward the centre of the social process'.

Connected to this is a parallel process of 'professionalization' of politics. As Mancini (1999: 241) explains, in the context of this transformed society, traditional party bureaucrats committed both to a political ideology and to the figure of the party leader are being increasingly replaced by professionals with technical skills, especially media and public relations experts, consultants and pollsters. This, as the author explains, has particularly been a response to 'globalization' and a 'growing detachment of citizens from politics' (Mancini 1999: 241). The weakening of the traditional party structure also plays an important part. The alleged disappearance of the hierarchical apparatus bridging the local to the national (see also Mancini 2011), in fact, leads to a greater reliance by political actors on communication technologies for engaging with citizens at a distance.

It is not difficult to see how personal image and self-presentation become crucial in a context in which direct contact with a politician is (allegedly) lost, voters are more volatile, and parties have to rely on mass media, mainly television, to convey their message to the electorate. In the words of Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999: 256): '[t]he crisis of the parties has only expanded the political function of the mass media'. Brought to the extreme, this could lead to what Mazzoleni (1995: 315) calls a 'videocracy' or 'democracy by the [visual] media'.

Is this, however, really a new kind of politics? Is contemporary political communication truly revolving around mere appearance? Where do image and self-presentation fit exactly? The argument of this article is that there is no satisfactory account for the role of image in politics in an age of interconnection because we do not have the right theoretical scaffolding to develop one. The analysis thus combines a critique of the current way in which the role of image in politics is (only partly) conceptualized with the presentation of a new theoretical framework that firmly places the visual aspects of political communication within the broader construction of political identity in contemporary societies. This framework brings together relational sociology,

¹ For a historical overview of the development of terms to define the media impact on politics, from 'medialization' to 'mediation' to 'mediatization' see Lundby (2009a) and Couldry and Hepp (2013).

actor network theory (ANT) and symbolic interactionism. The analysis presented here aims to demonstrate the utility of the new framework by showing that it can generate deeper and more comprehensive insights than the investigation of the (mostly) structural factors that characterize current political communication approaches.

THE ROLE OF IMAGE IN THE MEDIATIZATION OF POLITICS: RESEARCH GAPS AND EXTREME CLAIMS

Although personal image and self-presentation constitute essential aspects of the 'mediatization' of politics, there is, at closer look, very little research about them. Collections of the latest state-of-the-art research about 'mediatization' (e.g. Esser and Strömbäck 2014; Lundby 2009b, 2014) hardly deal with the role of a politician's image. 'Image' appears to be mentioned in passim as an aspect of the political communication of populist politicians (Mazzoleni 2014) or within an examination of the metacoverage of a campaign (D'Angelo et al. 2014), but never really taken as the focus of the investigation. In *Mediatization of Communication* (Lundby 2014), an edited volume of studies that extends to over 700 pages and many approaches involving a political dimension, a single chapter explicitly deals with self-presentation: it examines the construction of the performed identities ('personae') of celebrities like Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj (Auslander 2014).

Studies that do get closer to addressing the issue of self-presentation in politics are those that examine the impact of the political candidate's image on the electorate's preferences (for instance: Sigelman et al. 1986; Banducci et al. 2008; Lawson et al. 2010). Studies in political marketing tend to have a narrow focus on the political campaign application of marketing techniques (Butler and Collins 1994; O'Cass 1996; de Landtsheer et al. 2008; Smith 2009; for the limitations of this approach see O'Shaughnessy 2001), particularly in terms of branding (for one e.g. Schneider 2004), most often at election times.

Beyond electoral campaigning, it is possible to observe a widespread interest in political leaders and their media management efforts in dealing with the media, especially in getting their 'message' across and controlling the 'story' – what is normally called 'spin' (Gaber 2000; Bennett and Entman 2001; Moloney 2006). The attention here is mainly directed at rhetoric. The focus on this kind of content is such that, even in studies about 'image', the analysis is still about text (media coverage in the case of Kotzaivazoglou [2005] and Stuntz Tresky [2009]). A further branch of research has examined the parallels between mediatized politics and popular culture (van Zoonen 2005; Mazzoleni and Sfondini 2009), particularly between the engagement of the public with reality TV (Coleman 2003; Cardo 2011) and voting.

When the field of political communication attempts to address image within the broader conceptual framework of identity construction, it does so through the theoretical lens of cultural studies. Corner and Pels, for example, in their edited book *Media and the Restyling of Politics* (2003b) aim to engage with the 'aesthetics of the political self' – what they call 'political style' (Corner and Pels 2003a: 6). The contributing chapters to their volume, however, not only remain rather abstract (Ankersmit 2003; Pels 2003; Corner 2003) but also end up conforming with the main existing avenues of research – again the analysis of political campaigning (Bennett 2003), the connections of political communication with popular culture (Simons 2003; Street 2003; van Zoonen 2003) and political marketing (Scammell 2003).

There are very few exceptions to this general neglect of the role of image. Although rather dated, one of the best sources is still the study by Fenno (1978), *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts*. In it, the author examines through participant observation the activities of eighteen congressmen in their home districts between 1970 and 1977. Such activities, which he calls 'home-style', involve 'the congressman's *presentation* of self to others [...] the congressman's *explanation* of his [participants were all men] Washington activity to others' (Fenno 1978: 33, original emphasis). Additional studies conducted in the last decade have

further examined the projection of politicians' image (or 'self'), particularly through the Internet. Gulati (2004) has studied the self-presentation (particularly expressed through pictures and symbols) by US Senators and House members on their web homepages; Stanyer (2008) compared the identity that US members of Congress and British MPs project through their websites.

This scarcity of research about image is both surprising and troubling, particularly considering the moralistic undertones underlying many assessments of the growing importance of visual aspects of political communication (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999: 248; Coleman and Blumler 2009). Strong claims are often made about the negative effects of this phenomenon leading to a 'crisis', 'decay' or 'degeneration' of politics. Strömbäck (2008: 229) in this respect notes that:

[t]he present situation when politics is mediated and mediatized [in the literature] is implicitly or explicitly compared to some kind of golden age – the exact timing of which is conspicuously absent in most accounts – when politics was truer to its ideals, when people were more civic minded, or when the media facilitated, rather than undermined, the way political communication and democracy work.

The characteristics of the transformed politics revolving around televised (or online) images – what Manin calls 'audience democracy' – are on the one hand the public's passivity, ignorance and disinterestedness in politics, and on the other hand the artificial – not to say fake – nature of the politicians' media personas: 'the *initiative* of the terms of electoral choice belongs to the politician and not to the electorate' (1997: 223, original emphasis). Coleman and Blumler (2009: 46) make the same point arguing that 'in their approach to politics, citizens have become more like consumers (instrumental, oriented to immediate gratifications and potentially fickle) than believers'.

One cannot escape the feeling that the public is assumed to be a mass of gullible individuals, 'a black hole into which the political efforts of politicians, advocates of causes, the media, and the schools disappear with hardly a trace' (Edelman 1988: 7). Conversely, political actors are seen as 'pious, trained and organized liars' (de Beus 2011: 32), whose efforts in keeping ratings up 'seems only to fuel public mistrust in the authority and honesty of political leaders' (Brants and Voltmer 2011a: 1). The 'mediated reality' politicians conjure up is seen as being different from the 'objective reality' (Strömbäck 2008: 239), and the 'staged' self (or media persona) as something that hides a 'real' self.

This article aims to address the gaps in political communication research in theorizing the role of image by developing a systematic approach to the role of self-presentation in contemporary politics. 'Image' is approached *not* as the pictures and footage of a politician. Instead, image is examined as the *way politicians present themselves* publicly to their constituents and wider audiences, both in face-to-face encounters and through the media. This involves investigating the reasons and thinking processes behind their choices of how to dress in different circumstances, how to behave and how to address the interlocutors, including aspects such as demeanour during conversation and tone of voice. It also means taking a broader approach both ontologically and methodologically. Adopting a social ontology that *also* includes attention to individual agency (individual politicians in this case) helps overcome the tendency of the 'mediatization' literature to focus mostly on structural factors (modernization, social change, technological advances...). Empirically, the approach demands a deeper micro-level examination of the everyday political process.

METHODOLOGY

The study at hand is anchored in 51 interviews with British and Italian politicians.² They were conducted in February–March 2012 and lasted between ten and 45 minutes, with an average of about twenty minutes. To examine a more diverse scope of political practice the interviews included local politicians, national parliamentarians and members of the European Parliament (MEPs).³

The interviews did not focus on detecting *opinion*, but on mapping the participants' actual *practices* and *daily reality*.⁴ The aim, in this respect, was twofold: first, to gauge the extent to which self-presentation mattered to the participants in different situations and contexts. This task was approached through paying attention to indirect and (as much as possible) concrete indicators. For example, in the case of British local councillors, the questions covered, among others, the following: what do you wear when you meet your constituents at your weekly surgeries? What issues do you talk about with them? How do you start the conversation? How do you dress when you meet a journalist? Did you ever receive any training or consultancy support on how to present yourself? (outlook, presentation skills, public speaking, voice coaching, etc.) The data were complemented by and cross-checked against politicians' images online (websites, blogs, Facebook accounts and Twitter feeds) if available. Second, the interviews were used, consistently with the principles of ANT, to map the *relationships* between the participants and any other relevant actor (voters, broader audiences, other politicians, journalists), and the uses the participants made of technological platforms (websites, social media, phones).

The British local politicians were councillors⁵ from Leeds (West Yorkshire), the second largest district in the United Kingdom, with almost 800,000 inhabitants.⁶ The Italian politicians included the *consiglieri comunali* (town councillors) of the *comune* (town) of Brescia and Iseo within the region of Lombardy. Brescia is a town of about 1,250,000, while Iseo has a population of around 9000.⁷ I chose both to examine the function and extent, within the professional life of political representatives, of face-to-face social relationships against mediated ones.

While the findings of this analysis demonstrate the deeper explanatory insights provided by the relational approach, the comparative design also enables an exploration of several structural variables. Based on current research, they are expected to affect the role of personal image in politics. I discuss these variables and use them to develop some loose hypotheses for the purpose, later, of showing their limitations in providing an understanding of the role of self-presentation in politics. The variables and corresponding hypotheses are the following:

Party system: The 'personalization' of politics has been more strongly associated with two-party systems rather than with multiparty ones (e.g. van Biezen and Hopkin 2005). Britain offers fewer

² A total of 33 interviewees were British; eighteen were Italian. All excerpts from interviews with Italian politicians are the author's translation.

³ Of the 33 British politicians, 30 were local councillors in Leeds (22 men and eight women), two were members of the European Parliament (MEPs) (one man and one woman), and one was a MP (man). Of the eighteen Italian interviewees, seven were *consiglieri comunali* (town councillors) in Iseo (two women and five men), seven were *consiglieri comunali* in Brescia (three women and four men), three were MEPs (two men and one woman), and one was an MP (man).

⁴ As in all interviews, a potential limitation of the data could be the self-reported nature of the evidence. More specifically in relation to this study, one could argue, would not politicians want to stress that their job is about substance rather than appearance? The interviewees' statements, however, neither were ever taken at face value nor were about identifying what the interviewees *thought* about the role of image in their activities.

⁵ For more on the councillors role and responsibilities see: <http://www.leeds.gov.uk/council/Pages/Councillors-and-Committees.aspx>.

⁶ The 2010 population estimate is 798,800 (Leeds Council 2010). The West Yorkshire Urban Area (Leeds, Bradford and Wakefield) has a population of 1,499,465 (Office for National Statistics 2005).

⁷ The exact figures are 1,256,025 inhabitants for Brescia and 9205 for Iseo (Comuni Italiani n.d.).

parties than Italy, and they tend to converge towards the political centre.⁸ This would suggest a greater emphasis on a candidate's image in Britain than in Italy.

Electoral system: The first-past-the-post electoral system (the candidate who gets the most votes wins) is expected to support a greater role for politicians' self-presentation than a proportional system (where even parties who do not get the most votes can still get elected representatives). Britain follows the first-past-the-post system in national and local elections.

Italy has traditionally had a proportional system, but this has evolved over the years. At the time of the interviews the electoral system was regulated by the 2005 Calderoli Law (*Legge Calderoli*).⁹ According to this at least 340 seats (majority) within the Parliament (lower chamber) were allocated to the coalition that gained the relative majority of the votes at the national general elections. The remaining seats were allocated according to the proportional system. The electoral lists for each party were 'closed'. This meant that each party decided which candidates would sit in Parliament. The voter did not therefore express any preference (as it would be the case for 'open' electoral lists), which led to expect a lesser role for a political candidate's personal image. At the local level, in the cases of Brescia and Iseo, the system was different and more complicated. Without getting into its details (see Archetti 2014: 21–22), there the preference of the voters was important not only in choosing the mayor but also in determining who, within the mayoral list, would actually sit on the *Consiglio Comunale* (town council).

Elections to the European Parliament are held according to the proportional system. Party lists are 'open' in Italy (voter preference is important) but 'closed' in the United Kingdom (each party decides whom to send to Strasbourg).

In the interviews, attention was paid to whether and how politicians attempted to use their personal image to influence voters' preferences, especially in the case of 'open' lists.

Media system: As Brown points out comparing the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, media management and spin make more sense where journalism aspires to objectivity, as in the Anglo-Saxon context, rather than where media are politically aligned (Brown 2011: 62–63). Hence, one would expect more attention towards media management and self-presentation in the United Kingdom than in Italy, characterized by a commentary-oriented tradition (Archetti 2010: 17–19).¹⁰

Size of constituency: There are several references, especially in examining the image of politicians on the Internet, that online projections are 'the initial point of contact between the representative and the constituent' (Gulati 2004: 24). Personal image appears therefore crucial for politicians who lack geographical proximity, a chance to directly introduce themselves to (to be known by or even 'exist' in front of the eyes of) their constituents. One could hypothesize that the bigger the constituency, the more significant the role of projected personal image – this being expected to be most important for MEPs and national politicians than for local councillors.

Political culture: Although 'political culture' might refer to both 'attitudes toward the political system' (Almond and Verba 1989: 12) and 'the operating norms of a polity' (Pye 1968 in Wilson 2000: 247), I will be concentrating on political culture here mostly as it is manifested through

⁸ There were at least seventeen different factions represented in the Lower Chamber (*Camera dei Deputati*) at the time of the interviews (Parlamento Italiano 2012).

⁹ This was replaced by a new law in 2015

¹⁰ For more on the characteristics of journalism traditions in different media systems, including Italy and the United Kingdom, see Hallin and Mancini (2004).

individual beliefs, values and meanings. In this perspective, the Italian political culture is believed to have been revolutionized by Berlusconi and his media-centred campaigning (Mancini 2011). The role of image, especially televisual *voyeurism*, has permeated society and degenerated to such an extent that Belpoliti (2009: 156) goes as far as talking about a '*pornocrazia* [pornocracy]'. Self-presentation is thus expected to play a greater role in Italy than in the United Kingdom.

A NEW FRAMEWORK

The interviews focused on the politicians' personal image – the way the interviewees dressed, but also the way they presented themselves through their approach to audiences, meeting fellow citizens at the local supermarket, speaking publicly, interacting with journalists – and their engagement (either face-to-face or mediated) with their respective constituents. The aim was not only to test the hypotheses generated by the 'mediatization' literature. The study also wanted to explore the combined effects of the variables that have been discussed, the way they are connected, as well as the role of possible extra factors in shaping the role of personal image in politics, which might have been so far neglected. To enable the detection of alternative relevant relationships, connections and ways in which media and communication technologies both affect the life of politicians and are appropriated by them in their everyday practices, a new theoretical framework is suggested. This framework combines elements from relational sociology, ANT and symbolic interactionism.

Relational sociology provides the ontological scaffolding by offering a conceptual framework that seamlessly spans the micro and macro dimensions of a key aspect of politics: identity. Relational sociology conceives the social universe as being *entirely made up of relationships* constantly being negotiated. In this process communication is 'central' (White 2008: 3). Identity, in this perspective, is constituted in and through social ties (Bearman and Stovel 2000: 74).

ANT enables the understanding of the role of *technologies* (communication platforms and media in our case) in changing the identities of social actors (here politicians), particularly by affecting the *scope* of the networks they are a part of. ANT conceives the social fabric (compatibly with relational sociology) as an assemblage of associations between humans and objects (Latour 2005): 'humans' in this case being political representatives, journalists, members of the public, and 'objects' referring not only to technologies like mobile phones, cameras, buildings and transport systems but also ideas and meanings. ANT, in this respect, is useful in explaining the 'agency' of objects and materiality: their ability to 'make a difference' in the world of humans (Latour 2005: 71). We can think, for example, about how a local political representative plus a mobile telephone and a car conducts a very different kind of activity than the one run by a party leader with a mobile phone, a car, a blog, a Facebook page, a website, several offices, not to include countless support staff and relative resources.

Symbolic interactionism, in turn, with its focus on the social construction of the *visual aspects* of self-presentation, helps make sense of how a social actor's identity affects personal image. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the world is shaped by the *meanings people construct* and such meanings, in turn, are affected by the interactions that people have with each other. The 'self' is therefore socially constructed through a continuous process of interaction. Identity, in this view, is 'part of what we mean by self' (Charon 2010: 84). The presentation of the self through appearance is a part of that identity. Self-presentation provides a wealth of information to our social interlocutors even before we open our mouths: socio-economic status, attitudes towards them, trustworthiness, competence (Goffman 1959: 13). Social actors constantly seek these clues to 'know in advance' what is being expected of them and how best to act in each situation (Goffman 1959: 13). Clothing, one of the aspects this study pays particular attention to, plays a crucial role in this respect. As Lurie (1981 in Charon 2010: 147–48) eloquently phrases it: '[w]e can lie in the language of dress, or try to tell the truth,

but unless we are naked and bald it is impossible to be silent'. In this sense, image (presentation, clothing, appearance) can be considered a reflection of the relationally constituted individual identity, not some kind of concealment or artificial veneer used to hide something different. For Goffman (1959) the whole of social life *is* performance: the very fact of being in contact with other people and communicating with them means that we are constantly on stage.

Guided by this framework, the study examined the connections between the image of the interviewed politicians, their identities, their relationships with the communities of fellow citizens they represent, and the way communication technologies and media coverage has affected/constituted/transformed such relationships.

FINDINGS: BEYOND 'MEDIATIZATION'

What emerges from the empirical investigation is a completely different reality from the one described by existing studies in political communication. Indeed, the findings suggest that the current notions of high 'professionalization' and 'mediatization' of politics only apply to a handful of top politicians within each country. In the United Kingdom at the time of the interviews such politicians would have included only the three party leaders: David Cameron (Conservatives), Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrats) and Ed Miliband (Labour). The first reflection that emerged from the interviews was thus that the practices of such top politicians represent not the norm but an exception.

The conclusion that most of the political world works according to different rules than those that apply to party leaders emerged from the analysis in two ways. Part of the insight is related to the use of a comparative research design that includes politicians in different countries and operating at different levels. Another part of it is the adoption of an ontology of the world that looks at more than the merely macro-structural factors that tend to characterize the current 'mediatization' approach. Focusing on the way the individual identities of the interviewees – at all levels, from the local councillor to the MEP – are constructed through multi-layered networks of relationships both direct (face-to-face) and mediated (through the Internet, media coverage) with their constituents is a more effective way of understanding and explaining *why* they project the self-images they do. The structural variables that were discussed earlier – party and electoral systems; media system; size of the constituency; political culture – can themselves be read in relational terms.

An electoral system, for instance, is nothing but a set of norms regulating the establishment of networks of relationships between voters and voted. The 'size of constituency' variable, to make another example, can also be conceived as a set of networks political representatives and groups of citizens are enmeshed in. This relational reading, which examines how and why ties are established among individuals, opens opportunities for a deeper understanding of the way a politician's personal image is constructed. Focusing on the *relationship* between political representatives and constituents enables one to grasp how this involves, always in the case of the constituency size, far more than mere physical distance. MEPs and local councillors, as the interviews colourfully demonstrate, do not deal with similar constituents that only differ by being geographically closer or further away from their elected representatives, but with different human beings, with varying needs and expectations. Most of the time politicians interact with multiple audiences, as in the case of MEPs who communicate at the same time with ordinary citizens in their home countries, colleagues in Strasbourg and, depending on the policy issue they deal with, transnational interest groups. It is ultimately these interactions that affect politicians' choices of how to present themselves to their interlocutors.

These differences notwithstanding, some general trends can be identified. They *tend* to run along the lines of the 'structural' hypotheses outlined earlier. This does not mean, however, that the variables that helped to construct the hypotheses are able *on their own* to explain the range

of variation in politicians' self-presentation within the study. To continue with the example above, political representatives' personal image appears indeed to be affected by the size of their constituency. Self-presentation tends to be less important for local councilors than for national-level politicians. Bluntly put, when your neighbourhood has known you on a personal basis for twenty years, it matters less how you dress, while if all that your voters see about you is a picture on the TV screen, you understandably tend to care more about appearances. Yet, again, it is not just a matter of the physical proximity between voters and candidates that affects a politician's self-presentation. There are also variations related to generational change (age), professional background and personal past experiences, even within the same cohort of interviewees (either all MEPs, or all local councillors for instance). These aspects can only be understood through examining the socially constructed identity of *each* politician. Each representative also tends to match dressing codes to the specific social engagement one is taking part in: meeting the farmers at the local market is different from sitting through a parliamentary session in Strasbourg. This reminds us that self-presentation is relationally constructed through social interaction *at any given time*, therefore flexible and constantly changing in its everyday unfolding. The analysis and illustrations below, then, draw a picture of politicians' self-presentation in Italy and the United Kingdom that exceeds the mostly structural framework of current 'mediatization' approaches: it neither smoothly nor exclusively follows the lines of a country one operates in, political or party system, media system, constituency level and national political culture at which political activity takes place.

THE EVERYDAY DRIVERS OF POLITICAL SELF-PRESENTATION

From the point of view of the respondents of this study, image is truly crucial in politics, but *not* because we live in an image-obsessed media age. Squarely countering the widespread notion that appearance is replacing substance in politics, the interviewees' experiences show that personal presentation is key to understanding a representative's political effectiveness. More specifically, an 'appropriate' personal image helps them establish a combination of trust, respect and a professional aura that enables them to address the concrete problems of their constituents.

The bottom line is that we all – politicians included – have an image of ourselves that we project, whether we are carefully managing it or not. Virtually all interviewees are *not* trying to convey an image of themselves in the sense that they would strategically plan it. On the contrary, they genuinely seem to be interested in presenting themselves for who they are. At the same time, they all realize that first impressions do count. In the words of a Leeds Labour MP: '[i]f you have no interest in the way you look and present yourself then people will get a bad impression and think you really don't care about them either'. Another Leeds Labour councillor (Headingley ward) points out that dressing smartly is important to show that politics is a 'serious business [...] you should convey that you take it very seriously. [...] It's a challenging role and you should be up to that challenge'.

In this sense image is important in both showing the interlocutor respect and gaining his or her trust. As a Labour Leeds councillor for Kirkstall puts it: '[i]f it's summer time and very hot then I think everyone will forgive you at a normal meeting to go in an open-neck shirt and flats but you've got to be smart. If you're scruffy then I think they'll say "he doesn't respect us"'. This does not apply only to meeting people in person. A Yorkshire and the Humber MEP for the UK Independence Party makes the point that

if you're on television you're going into people's homes. You're going into their living room [...] If you're going onto a platform and speaking to people – people have come in and sometimes maybe paid to hear you speak [...] it's your responsibility to present yourself with respect to your audience.

The ultimate purpose of the communication with constituents, for most interviewees, is not gaining votes, but addressing somebody's concerns. This is particularly true at the local level, where issues are as concrete as it gets: housing, waste collection, anti-social behaviour, planning permissions, dog fouling and so on. In this context, the priority, as a Labour councillor for the Pudsey ward in Leeds points out, is projecting a professional image, so that the constituents will trust them in solving their problems: 'they [constituents] have to feel that you're a person that will take it [their problem] forward and how you dress can convey that at least initially'.

On the point of social expectations, it generally appears that the MPs and MEPs are expected to dress more formally than local councillors. This is mainly due to their more frequent attendance of official meetings. The following excerpt of the conversation with a Leeds Labour MP shows the role of interlocutors' expectations on a politician's choice of 'wardrobe'. He provides concrete examples of the variation of the politicians' outfits depending on what is socially 'appropriate' to the occasion:

[w]hen I go to the farmers' market on a Saturday in Oakwood I will just wear a jumper and casual trousers and a jacket because I just don't think it's appropriate [...] nobody else is wearing a suit. But today [24 February 2012] I was at a school [...] I'll be going to a presentation by Leeds City Council this afternoon and I'm going for a radio interview. People expect you to be fairly smartly dressed [...] Weekends I will not wear a suit unless it's something like the Holocaust Memorial Day, which is a really formal event. Then I will wear a suit and tie on Remembrance Day, for example. But most Sundays and Saturdays, when I do my advice surgeries, I'll just dress like anybody else and I think people appreciate that. They don't want you to look like some posh person, but they do expect you to be presentable when you're in a formal setting.

According to a Yorkshire and Humber MEP for the UK Independence Party the pressure to be 'well presented' is greater for MEPs than for other politicians because not only are they in a public office but they should represent their respective countries.

However, while politicians – as all social actors – tend to conform to rules of appropriateness, it does not mean that expectations of their 'audiences' or interlocutors entirely shape the representatives' choices about the way they present themselves. A former mayor of Milano, MEP for North Western Italy (Popolo della Libertà, centre-right on the political spectrum) at the time of the interview underlines the scope for politicians to interpret creatively what is 'socially acceptable':

Q: I see from your website that you tend to present yourself with suit and tie. Are there circumstances when you present yourself differently?

Well, there are circumstances when I presented myself in my pants! [laughs] If you go to YouTube you will find about it. I had inaugurated a swimming pool by diving instead of cutting the ribbon.

Overall image is important to politicians, as it is to all social actors. The investigation of the daily practice of the interviewees, however, suggests that the notion that politics nowadays revolves around appearances is a gross exaggeration. For most interviewees politics is about 'doing things'. The extent to which having addressed a problematic issue, rather than image, is the measure of a politicians' evaluation in the eye of constituents is well reflected by the words of a *consigliere comunale* in Iseo: '[y]ou can project whichever image you like, but at the end of the day it comes down to: "Can you solve my problem? If you can't, you have to explain me why"'.

THE LIMITS OF THE 'MEDIATIZATION' APPROACH

Above, I have argued that the variables that are often used in political communication literature to explain the role of image in the mediatization of politics are not able to fully account for the range of variation in the way politicians project their personal image. To illustrate these limitations, I discuss each variable, and suggest that the alternative relational framework I have developed is more effectively equipped to make sense of the way most politicians actually construct their self-presentation.

Party and electoral systems do not matter (as much as we think)

The evidence of the interviews suggests that party system and electoral system, by themselves, do not play a significant role in affecting how important self-presentation is for politicians in Italy and the United Kingdom. The hypotheses related to these two variables were, overall, that British politicians would be more concerned about managing their personal image than would their Italian counterparts. Political representatives across the board in both countries, however, appeared equally strongly to reject the practice of manipulating one's own self-presentation.

For instance, the most frequent reaction by the interviewees – when asked whether they had ever received any recommendations from image consultants or their parties on how to dress/present themselves – was laughter. Practically none of the interviewees – except one – ever received any training. Some Leeds local councillors attended courses organized by the Council about media interviews, chairing meetings, how to interact in the Leeds Council Chamber (related to etiquette and use of microphones), but they had never received any training related to image management or public speaking. The conversations with MPs and MEPs suggest that at higher-than-local level as well there is no real effort at image management.

Contrary to the expectation that politicians make use of consultants as a matter of routine, especially in Italy, some interviewees were irritated, almost offended, at the very suggestion that somebody could be telling them how to present themselves in public. An Italian MP for Partito Democratico (Democratic Party) (centre-left on the political spectrum) said: '[n]obody would ever dare to offer me this kind of services because they know that I would tell them to get lost [...] I hate this kind of companies [...] I dare to think that I do not need them'. A female *consigliere comunale* for Lega Nord (Northern League) (right) in Brescia told about once being contacted by a company offering image management services: they would have offered me [...] to take care of my image [...] I would have liked to punch them in the face if they had been there... [...] It's inconceivable. I am myself. If other people want, they can come and take lessons from me [*laughs loudly*].

Media systems and media (dis)interest in politics

Existing literature suggests greater attention towards media management in the United Kingdom (close to bi-party system; journalism aspiring to objectivity) rather than in Italy (multi-party system, commentary-oriented journalism). In the interviews, not only is this supposed national difference *not confirmed*, but there also seems to be a general lack of interest by the mainstream media in both countries in political representatives beyond the figures of party leaders.

Two further widespread assumptions within the literature on the mediatization of politics are that advances in communication technology make a difference in the way political actors communicate with the public and that journalists from national media outlets are interested in what politicians have to say. New communication platforms (like social media, beyond the Internet), in this perspective, are tools reporters can and will use to cover politics in a media landscape that is becoming more competitive and dominated by tighter deadlines. In such a fast-changing image-obsessed 24/7 media treadmill, the argument goes, politicians are under

pressure to manage their self-presentation to 'look good' at all times. The experiences of the interviewees, however, challenge such notions in at least three respects.

First, politicians who are not party leaders hardly get any exposure in the national media limelight.¹¹ An Italian MP for Partito Democratico, who is also a modern history lecturer at the University of Parma and who has been mayor of Brescia from 1992 to 1994, explains that he received far more media exposure as a mayor than as a parliament representative.

Second, there is a whole media landscape that is often ignored by political communication literature: local media. This does not only affect local councilors but, in a deeply interconnected world, also transnational political actors such as MEPs. A Labour MEP for Yorkshire and the Humber explains that she does not normally get national media coverage, but issues she tackles that are relevant to local areas are picked up by local media:

[t]here's lots and lots of newspapers [in my constituency]. And those newspapers will pick up on a story depending if it's a local issue for their area. For example I noticed this morning [6 March 2012] I'm in the *Whitby Gazette* [Whitby is a small coast town in North Yorkshire], [in an article] which is about fishing. Obviously fishing is not such a big interest in South Yorkshire.

Third, the newsworthiness of a political representative is a relational outcome: it is not purely dictated by the rhetorical features of what one says. A MEP for the UK Independence Party, for example, explains that he tends to get more national coverage than other MEPs because of his party's position within the UK political spectrum. Although he points out that traditional parties, especially Conservative and Labour, tend to get most media attention, being a minority party is an advantage because it provides alternative, controversial – and therefore newsworthy – stances.

Constituency size and technology

Constituency size was hypothesized to make a difference: the broader the scope of the constituency, the greater the distance between the voter and the politician, hence the stronger the need for politicians to present themselves through a TV screen or a photo shoot, and to pay more attention to the personal image they project. While the interviews confirm that distance does affect the extent to which politicians rely on communication technologies for their communication with constituents, there is more to this than much of current research would lead to expect.

Distance (greater size of constituency) does not exclude the combination of technologically mediated contact with remote voters with face-to-face interaction. The absence of physical proximity also does not mean that aesthetics necessarily become more important than policy substance. There are also different publics, like constituents in the home country or colleagues at the European Parliament, each of them with different needs and expectations, that a political representative might want to address. The attempt to communicate with these multiple audiences ultimately affects the communication strategies – and with them self-presentation choices – of the elected representatives.

The following exchange with an Italian MEP for Partito Democratico is particularly illustrative in this respect. Not only does it highlight the way European representatives combine the use of new communication technologies and face-to-face meetings to communicate with a constituency of several millions, but it also demonstrates that the concrete form taken by the political communication of an elected representative is not shaped exclusively by geography and the availability of technologies but is truly an outcome of the constellation of networks in which a politician is located. A first explanation for this is the fact that MEPs receive virtually no

¹¹ For similar findings in a Norwegian context see Skogerbø and Karlsen (2014).

media coverage in the national media, which leads them to rely on alternative channels of outreach. The second is the electoral system, particularly the existence of the preference vote in the case of the Italian MEPs, which forces them to keep themselves visible to their constituents so that they can express a vote for them on the ballot at the next election:

Q: I see you have a website. Do you use it to communicate with your constituents?

Usually, yes, I have a website where I post what I do. I write editorials, especially about topics I am most closely dealing with. [...] Also, usually once a month, I send my [electronic] newsletter in which I tell about my activity, the conclusions of the Strasbourg [discussion] round, and also political news.

Q: How many people do you send it to?

About 40,000.

Q: The constituency you represent is truly vast [15,000,000]. Even if you have 40,000 people on your mailing list, we are talking about an overall population of several millions. If people never see your face on TV or do not know you personally, how can they express a preference for you on the ballot?

One uses the new informatic tools: for instance Facebook and Twitter [...] give an idea that [one] exists to start with. Then the newsletter. Then also the TVs. Every now and then I am on them. I attend the political debates, especially on local TVs [there are over 600 of them in Italy (De Rosa and Portanova n.d.)]. Finally the normal activity one does: this evening [8 March 2012] I am returning to Italy but I have another meeting. Tomorrow I have two more. Saturday two more. And Sunday morning yet another. It is true that one does not reach millions of people, but [...] if one keeps on organizing meeting every week, each of them attended by between 50 and 100 people, at the end of the year one will have achieved something.

Political culture

For national political cultures, the expectation was to detect greater care for personal image in Italy rather than the United Kingdom. While this was generally true, there were also further differences across generations in both countries. Especially in Britain, several middle-aged interviewees complained about the recent tendency for some young representatives to look 'scruffy'. Presentation is less of an issue in Italy, where the fact that one has to look 'presentable' in public is almost taken for granted. Especially Italian politicians who are in their 50s and 60s tend to wear a jacket and tie at all times because, as a 64-year-old MP for Partito Democratico put it, it is a matter of basic 'good manners'.

CONCLUSIONS

The relational framework encourages the researcher to read a politician's personal image as the reflection of the elected representative's identity. This, in turn, is constructed through relationships that can be both face-to-face and mediated (via communication technologies or media coverage). As illustrated through the multifaceted experiences of the interviewees, such a relational view of political processes allows developing a radically different interpretation of the 'mediatization' of politics. More specifically, it is possible to draw the following conclusive points:

There is no 'new politics'. What we are witnessing today is neither a new nor a different politics; rather it is a transformation of society – something that relational sociologists acknowledge as an incessant process – in which the scope of social networks is simply enhanced by communication technologies. The analysis offers, in this respect, an alternative perspective to the one currently prevailing in political communication. Their 'mediatized politics' is approached as a new stage in which society has evolved as a result of changes in the media. As Couldry

and Hepp (2013: 197) put it: '[w]hile "mediation" refers to the process of communication in general [...], "mediatization" is a category designed to describe change'. The concept of 'mediatization' captures 'the broad consequences for everyday life and practical organization (social, political, cultural, economic) of media, and more particularly of the pervasive spread of media contents and platforms through all types of context and practice' (Couldry and Hepp 2013: 191). The underlying idea, as they continue, is that:

[p]ut simply, something is going on with media in our lives, and it is deep enough not to be reached simply by accumulating more and more specific studies that analyze this newspaper, describe how that program was produced, or trace how particular audiences make sense of that film on a particular occasion (Couldry and Hepp 2013: 191).

From the standpoint of the theoretical and analytical perspective I have taken in this study, however, there is no 'mediatization' of politics as an ontologically different reality of the media–politics relationship from a previous non- or less-mediatized stage. 'Mediation' and 'mediatization' are evolving configurations, and relative changing outcomes, of associations of humans and technologies.

All politics is relational. The study points out that the various ways in which the politicians–media–public relationships are conceptualized are rather simplistic. They can involve various 'axes'. Brants and Voltmer (2011a), for instance, explain how the development of communication technologies affects the horizontal dimension of mediatization (politicians–journalists relation) and the vertical dimension (political actors–public relation). This framework, which the authors develop through an international comparative perspective, is more sophisticated and holistic than conceptualizations of either the politicians–media, public–media, or politicians–public relationships. It also involves the possibility of two-way exchanges among the actors. Crucially, however, it is still based on linear relations within the traditional 'triangle' whose vertices are constituted by politicians, the media and the public. This study, instead, suggests that around every single individual there are overlapping clouds or constellations of relationships that exist at different levels and that constantly change over time. It is these relationships – their scope, the identity of the actors involved, their changing action – that shapes the impact that communication technologies have on political processes at any given time and location.

There is uniqueness within some common trends. The way communication technologies are appropriated by each single social actor, including politicians, depends on the set of relationships they are enmeshed in. Such relationships will shape not only the way the technology is utilized – indeed whether a politician will do so at all – but also the extent to which self-image is important to the politicians' communication activities and what form the latter will take in practice. In this respect the position of each actor – and the relative outcome in terms of the role of self-presentation – is unique. The analysis has pointed out some trends and similarities among the interviewees, but has also underlined how the backgrounds, personal histories and position within a country's political landscape of every single representative lead to countless nuances and differentiation.

There is no 'real self' as separate from the 'staged self'. Identity is shaped by an individual's constellation of relationships. In this study I have shown that the scope of these relationships is affected by communication technologies, including outreach through websites and TV appearances, for instance, as well as personal contacts. The experiences of the interviewees show a range of constellations of relationships leading to different outcomes in terms of

attention towards self-presentation as well as personal image planning and orchestration (or lack of it). Party leaders' image might well be staged, but this is not some kind of 'lying' to the public. It is the outcome of where they stand in the party network, particularly of whether they fulfil the role of the 'public face' of the party.

Image (or self-representation) is essential to all social life, not just to politicians. Politicians are, in this respect, really no different than ordinary people. We all care about first impressions. What applies to highly visible political actors, in principle, is not different from what celebrities or VIPs experience, from the Queen of England to the Pope. What changes is the audience each actor plays to.

It is not the impact of the media per se. Communication technologies have a role in affecting the scope of the network of relationships politicians, as any other social actor, are a part of. As such, communication platforms do not produce any change in political processes through their mere existence and availability – which would be rather technologically deterministic – but their effects change across context depending on how they are appropriated by social actors – not only by politicians but also by journalists and members of the public.

The public is neither passive nor gullible. The results of the study dismiss the notion that the 'initiative' in the political process rests with politicians, who increasingly and aggressively take up the public stage to perform their stunts in front of a passive public (Manin 1997: 223; Mancini 2011: 14). In reality, as political identity is shaped by social relationships, the public is constantly involved in the construction of the self-image of politicians. Political actors, as any other social actor, are incessantly negotiating the way they present themselves, balancing the influences of their personal and professional backgrounds, of their personal taste and individual character with the expected 'reading' of their appearance and outfits by the onlookers in each of the social situations they come across.

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