The mediatization of politics in the hybrid media system: The case of Italian political journalism

ABSTRACT
Despite the major changes that have occurred in the ecology of media, this article considers mediatization to be still a concept valuable for grasping and interpreting relations among political communication actors. This article analyses the use of Twitter by politicians as evidenced by journalists’ accounts (and practices). In particular, it focuses on journalistic uses of Twitter in the context of political current affairs. This article investigates how and to what degree the use of social media has changed journalists’ practices in gathering political news. Moreover, it analyses how journalists describe politicians’ use of Twitter and how they reflexively conceive whether adjustments by those politicians to the media logic exist. To this end, the studies present results from 25 semi-structured interviews with Italian journalists occupying prominent roles within the Italian news organizations most important in terms of newspaper circulations and unique visitors to their websites. The research proves that mediatization is still an important framework within which to interpret practices in the new media environment.

KEYWORDS
mediatization
hybridity
Twitter
journalists’ practices
political journalism
digital journalism
INTRODUCTION

*Mediatization* is one of the most discussed theories in recent media studies (Lundby 2009; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Couldry and Hepp 2016). Simply stated, it explores the influence that media – in their different forms – exert on various other fields of society and social life: among others, politics, war, religion and education (Cottle 2006; Hepp et al. 2015; Hjarvard 2013). Politics is one of the fields in which the concept has been both more frequently and convincingly applied (Mazzoleni and Schultz 1999; Strömbäck 2008; Strömbäck and Esser 2014). Here, mediatization is identified as the process by which political institutions and political actors – in order to convince other actors and the public – are becoming increasingly dependent upon media and conform to their logic of production and distribution. Therefore, media have gained a central position in most political routines, such as election campaigns or government communication (Mazzoleni 2008: 3047−48).

Nonetheless, a considerable amount of criticism surrounds the use of the concept of mediatization. First, obviously, the digitalized new media system is a challenge to the most traditional definitions of the concept (Schulz 2004; Klinger and Svensson 2015). Second, for some, mediatization also appears to refer to a media-centric causal process where crucial interrelations among diverse actors and institutions are ignored (Deacon and Stanyer 2014). Third, yet for others mediatization as theory relies too much on a vague and monolithic central concept of ‘media logic’ (Chadwick 2013; Landerer 2013).

This article analyses how the use of *Twitter* in political journalism influences the everyday social interactions and power relations among actors of political communication (in particular, between journalists and politicians). The entrance of social media into the political communication environment also compels adaptation of the theoretical perspectives from which the interaction among the actors involved is analysed. The most convincing framework applied to analyse the new environment is the one defined by Chadwick as the ‘hybrid media system’ (Chadwick 2011, 2013; see also Iannelli 2016). According to Chadwick (2013: 15), the hybrid media system is a process of simultaneous integration and fragmentation, and it disrupts the dominant media logics that were previously established. The media environment is today far more diverse than it had been in the heyday of the mass media era in the late 1970s, when the ‘media logic theory’ emerged (Altheide and Snow 1979). Today, media logic disaggregates into different competing yet interdependent logics, and it ‘is best seen, not as a force that emanates from media and then acts upon politics, but rather as a force that is *co-created* by media, political actors, and publics’ (Chadwick 2013: 20). Journalists still use their power and professional resources to control the flow of information, but politicians, public relations officers and online activists are now engaged in loosely coupled assemblages characterized by conflict, competition, partisanship and mutual dependency (Chadwick 2011: 19). Chadwick (2013: 21) affirms that ‘[g]iven the panoply of newer ways in which politics can now be communicated, it therefore makes sense to move away from Altheide and Snow’s idea of an all-encompassing, hegemonic media logic driven by the values of commercialism and entertainment’. In an environment like this, Chadwick argues, the public debate is much more complex and the political information cycle is (supposedly) greatly transformed. Political information, then, needs to be conceived of as the result of a media hybridization that involves television, press and social media.
This systemic shift therefore explains why some scholars have considered the process of mediatization – often regarded as specifically relevant to television – as unable to grasp and comprehend the complexity of the communication relations among media, political actors and citizens (Schulz 2004; Klinger and Svensson 2014). The hybrid media system framework (2013) implies the superseding of mediatization theory because media logic blurs into new media logics, becoming even vaguer, and because the new environment foregrounds complexity, interdependence and transition instead of the simple dichotomies or causalities that media logic appears to entail.

On the contrary, we consider that encounters between newer and older logics indicate a hierarchy of hybrid cultures (Hermida and Young 2017) where some legacy media still have the same capacity to influence efforts by politicians to gain coverage by the media, despite politicians’ use of new media. In such an environment, mediatization is still a valuable concept for interpreting relations among key actors of political communication. This is the approach we apply to the analysis of how journalists deal with the new ubiquity and pervasiveness of the flow of information about politics. To open this insight, our study presents the results from 25 semi-structured interviews with journalists who occupy prominent roles within key Italian news organizations: newspapers with the largest circulations and websites with the most unique visitors.

**MEDIATIZATION AND MEDIA LOGIC**

The definition of mediatization sketched above means that we assume the institutional approach. We start from the view that media are more or less ‘an independent social institution with its own sets of rules’ and thus mediatization ‘here refers to the adaptation of different social fields or systems (e.g., politics or religion) to these institutionalized rules’ (Couldry and Hepp 2016: 196). Consequently, politicians are well aware of the media’s attention rules, production routines and selection criteria, and adapt their communication behaviour to media requirements (Strömbäck 2008; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999). Even crucial political activities such as the setting of political agendas and the generation of public consent for political decisions and actions rely on the decisive role of the media. From a theoretical perspective, this is precisely what distinguishes a mere process of mediation from mediatization (Strömbäck 2008; Aelst et al. 2012).

This basic definition of mediatization, seen as the extension of media logic into other domains, would further legitimize the recurrent criticism of the concept of media logic: that it is too monolithic (Deacon and Stanyer 2014; Landerer 2013; Kunelius and Reunanen 2016).

As a counter-argument, Esser (2013) specifies that it is more accurate to talk about ‘news media logic’, which consists of professional, commercial and technological elements (Strömbäck and Esser 2014). However, Esser’s counter-arguments do not completely refute those criticisms. It is therefore necessary to elaborate the meaning that we attribute to media logic. In the case of mediatization, we apply a basic definition to ‘media logic’. The concept as introduced by Altheide and Snow (1979, 1991) concerned a pragmatic journalistic attitude. In this sense, media logic consists predominantly of a formatting logic that determines the selection of social experience and news, the classification of materials, and the choice of the mode of presentation. Media logic therefore refers to the ways in which producers define, select, organize and present content (see Splendore 2015). Nevertheless, this meaning of media logic is far more complex than it is normally conceived by those who criticize it (Deacon
Northern Lights

Mediatization is not just one type of thing, one logic of doing things; [...] it is best understood as the variety of ways in which possible ordering of the social by media are further transformed and stabilized through continuous feedback loops.

(Couldry and Hepp 2016: 4)

Couldry and Hepp’s definition is more sophisticated and complex than ours. Nevertheless, ours focuses precisely on continuous adjustments and feedback loops. Moreover, we also reject the idea that media logic and political logic are involved in a zero-sum game and, similarly to Downey and Neyazi (2015), we defend a view that those logics (professional, commercial, technological, organizational and cultural) interact in competitive and complementary ways dependent upon prevailing circumstances and configurations. This view helps us to support our argument that politicians use social media in various ways. On the one hand, they can use them as acts of disintermediation that bypass legacy media practitioners and allow them to communicate with the electorate directly. On the other, they are prevalently influenced by media logic.

In sum, then, we therefore regard the process of mediatization in these precise terms: as the way politics and politicians strive to adapt to media logic (Strömbäck 2008) at its different levels, often in an attempt to impose their political logic. This article explores how journalists see and interpret politicians’ efforts to gain public attention through media and whether or not they consider those efforts helpful for their work. The level zero of those practices consists of the most traditional forms of information subsidies (Gandy 1981); the highest level is the mediatization of the social interactions between politicians and journalists, even in contexts where technological affordances may allow different social practices.

Although it is more common to study mediatization via content analysis and interviews with politicians, given our conception of media logic, it is more convenient to explore journalists’ accounts. We therefore investigate how journalists reflexively conceive whether adjustments by politicians to the media formatting logic exist, and how journalists interpret those adjustments. Our approach is even more suitable given the advent of various social media and the change in media ecology, which makes interactions among political communication actors more complex and entangled than ever (and more difficult to investigate via content analysis).

**TWITTER, JOURNALISTS’ PRACTICES AND HOW THEY CAN REVEAL SOMETHING ABOUT MEDIATIZATION**

The hybrid media system certainly refers to a complex flow of communication in the digital environment, and consequences are said to lead to patterns of disintermediation (one example of this is the weakening of intermediation by
traditional legacy media) (Chadwick 2013; Iannelli 2016). Disintermediation calls into question the traditional role of journalism as an intermediary (Hermida 2010). As Deuze puts it, ‘instead of having some kind of control over the flow of (meaningful, selected, fact-checked) information in the public sphere, journalists today are just some of the many voices in public communication’ (2008: 12). An environment like this could erode the professional autonomy and media independence that are one essential element of media logic (and consequently the process of mediatization). Therefore, since professional jurisdiction arises from daily routines, and since its authority is discursively constructed by what journalists do and say that they do (Abbott 1998; Lewis 2012), we will evaluate journalists’ discourses and practices in order to delineate the effects of the new media ecology.

The use of social media by journalists has been the subject of an increasing number of studies. Journalists are making extensive use of social media in each phase of their work (gathering, filtering, verifying and distributing news) (Hermans et al. 2009; Hermida 2012; Barnard 2016). Within the field of political journalism (Esser et al. 2012) there are various studies dealing with the adoption of social media (Verweij 2012). Using social media to gather news has been assumed to be a crucial activity in various domains, including politics, particularly election campaigns (Broersma and Graham 2013), foreign news (Cozma and Chen 2013) and conflicts (Hermida et al. 2014). In this regard, Paulussen and Harder (2014) consider journalists’ daily routines, asking specifically whether social media (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) have the potential to alter professional newsgathering and sourcing routines in Belgian newspapers. They obtain a result similar to that of Broersma and Graham (2013): social media do not diminish the power of elite sources, but have the capacity to increase the diversity of voices in the news. Broersma and Graham (2013) also offer an interesting typology of journalistic uses of Twitter as a source: it gives reporters the opportunity to tap into the private sphere of well-known and newsworthy people, to access their thoughts and opinions and add quotes to their stories from people that are suitable as sources; reporters can use tweets to flavour news stories; and tweets can also trigger news stories (Broersma and Graham 2013: 462).

Canter (2013) maintains that since news organizations are interested in social media as a platform to market their news content, journalists take a more informal and personal approach. They use social media to talk about what they are working on, and they share opinions. Rogstad (2014), who also deals with political journalists, detects five Twitter user types among political news journalists. Independently from those categories, she states that only a few reporters blur traditional professional boundaries, and that they usually respect traditional journalistic norms. According to Holton and Lewis (2011), many journalists use social media to show off their personalities through humour and personal updates (Holton and Lewis 2011). Nonetheless, they also state that journalists working for elite media are less inclined to compromise traditional journalistic norms in the realm of social media. Lasorsa and colleagues call this process normalization: ‘[J]-tweeters appear to be normalizing microblogs to fit into their existing norms and practices but, at the same time, they appear to be adjusting these professional norms and practices to the evolving norms and practices of Twitter’ (Lasorsa et al. 2012: 31). Revers (2014), who focuses on the change of journalism professionalism, presents a slightly different point of view. He points to the ‘growing insistence on disclosure of information and openness of procedures’ (Revers 2014: 826).
due to the new media environment that creates a constant tension between transparency and the logic of professional control. Nevertheless, transparency, which appears to be a challenge for professional autonomy, can also be seen as a key new professional value (see Fengler et al. 2014) that journalists have to respect.

We believe that this literature review confirms that the practices by which political communication actors (namely journalists and politicians) construct public attention (Kunelius and Reunanen 2016) are changing. At the same time, it shows that mediatization can still be a valid concept with which to interpret how actors behave within the political communication field. Given the idea of media logic (which entails professional organizational, technological, commercial and cultural logics) as a concept that deals with a pragmatic journalistic attitude by which producers define, select, organize and present content, the relative independence and autonomy of those procedures do not appear to be in question. More importantly, when journalists change their practices, they do so to reinforce their pragmatic journalistic attitude: for instance, social media increase the diversity of voices in the news (Paulussen and Harder 2014) and they may also increase viewership, or Twitter enables reporters to tap into the private sphere of well-known and newsworthy people (Broersma and Graham 2013).

This article seeks to verify whether – and to what degree – journalists regard politicians as adapting to media logic and thus are useful for the realization of their journalistic attitude. We focus on journalistic uses of Twitter in the context of political current affairs. Below we present our empirical data, discussing first how Twitter has changed journalistic practices and particularly how journalists gather sources to produce political news; this is followed by a discussion on how they use politicians’ tweets and finally how they interpret politicians’ use of Twitter and reflexively conceive political actors as adjusting to media logic.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research was based on 25 semi-structured interviews with political journalists. The use of qualitative interviews is the most suitable tool with which to investigate evolving attitudes and practices (McCacken 1988; Kvale 1996), and it is well established in journalism studies (see among others, Singer et al. 2011). In-depth interviews provide insights into interviewees’ perceptions and accounts; they make it possible to try to ‘step into the mind of another person, see and experience the world as they do themselves’ (McCacken 1988: 9). The majority of the interviews (twenty out of 25) were conducted face to face; some took place via Skype. They were carried out from October to November 2015.

To select journalists, we chose the Italian newspapers and press agencies most important in terms of circulation (according to Audipress 2015 data: La Stampa 205,798 copies a day, La Repubblica 319,126, Il Corriere della Sera 390,726, Il Fatto Quotidiano 40,690, Il Manifesto 11,524; referring to the online only Huffington Post in its Italian edition, about 330,000 unique daily visitors). In each outlet, we interviewed an average of three persons in different roles: a political reporter; a desk journalist (generally a news editor); and a journalist working on the company’s digital output. Using the same selection criteria, we also interviewed journalists working at press agencies (ANSA and AdnKronos). To those 25 journalists we put questions from a
semi-structured grid. The template covered three major issues: (1) organization of the work aimed at the production of political news; (2) accounts of personal daily routines and practices and (3) the journalists’ uses of social media accounts.

**TWITTER AND THE CHANGE OF JOURNALISTIC PRACTICES**

With regard to our assumption that the concept of mediatization grasps the communication relations within the political communication field, it is crucial to point out that social media have not dramatically changed journalists’ practices in producing political news. Obviously and expectedly, the interviews produced a nuanced and rich view of the professional practices of political journalists. The recurrent and dominant discourses were often ambivalent. On the one hand, it became obvious that the importance of social media in political communication has grown (e.g. the number of general users and newsworthy people who use them has increased) and accelerated the flow of information and consequently challenged some of the journalists’ practices.

Twitter is becoming better than a press agency. Using Twitter, you can find news stories that are even better than those that press agencies provide. The politicians of the Five Stars [a political movement that gained 25 per cent of votes during the 2013 election] provide comments that the press agencies themselves report later. I use Twitter to be faster than my competitors do. Twitter hasn’t changed my life [i.e. his work and daily routines] but it can certainly help me [in doing his work].

(D. C., *Il Fatto Quotidiano*)

On the other hand, a discourse claiming ‘nothing has substantially changed’ was equally recurrent. That discourse was frequently strengthened by citing other media that have really – in comparison to Twitter – influenced journalists’ work (mobile phones or all-news websites).

Twitter hasn’t changed my work, especially because if politicians need to tell me something really important, they will never use Twitter. They’re more likely to use their mobiles.

(G.G., *AdnKronos*, original emphasis)

Twitter has made everything faster. Smartphones even more so. The mobile phone has really accelerated the process of news making and news distribution. When I started as a journalist, mobiles didn’t exist. At that time, communicating with sources or with my newsroom was dramatically slow. Today you can talk constantly with your sources and the newsroom. The mobile is what has really revolutionized journalism.

(C. T., *La Repubblica*)

Predictably, there were some differences between journalists working for offline media and those who worked for online media. The former generally declared that their work was almost unchanged and Twitter was an occasional source. The latter said that Twitter was a regular additional source. Nevertheless, both groups agreed that Twitter had not subverted the basic hierarchy of sources.

[Twitter works as a] news agency flow of primary sources. Sometimes it provides news that needs to be worked rapidly, at other times it

---

1. The fully anonymized transcriptions in Italian of the interviews are available on request.
provides some hints to be explored. It’s undoubtedly an important source, regardless of which persons you follow.

(A. C., *Il Fatto Quotidiano*)

Politicians used to make their statements via fax, later via email … today some still use those channels, others use Twitter, and they use it also to provide news […]. Twitter hasn’t made any dramatic change. For a newspaper journalist, getting news from press agencies or Twitter makes no difference, because they work to produce a news item for the day after. At the same time, we are aware that another tool that politicians can use exists.

(M. S., ANSA)

These journalists therefore testified more or less explicitly – that there had been no fundamental change of logic in what they did every day. Rather, there had been a change only in the tool and the medium that they used to gather information. Accordingly, with respect to sources, the majority of the journalists (regardless of the media outlet for which they worked) confirmed and emphasized the importance of two traditional journalistic ways of collecting sources: personal contacts and press agencies. Obviously, the journalists who worked mostly at their desks said that they were dependent on mobile phones or on the information gathered by their colleagues in the field.

I spend most of my time in Parliament. I walk, I talk, I try to understand if my sources have something to say.

(A. T., *Il Corriere della Sera*)

First, my sources are my personal contacts. Then press agencies still have a crucial role, both for the press and television, because they are the fastest in gathering political leaders’ official statements, even those statements that are driven by social media such as Twitter or Facebook.

(F. M., *La Stampa*)

My primary sources are the press agencies and then my personal contacts with politicians. A good political journalist spends his or her day between Parliament, Senate and Palazzo Chigi [the official residence of the Prime Minister]. There you can find the most important sources, for the rest you can use the press agencies.

(C. T., *La Repubblica*)

Overall, Twitter had somewhat influenced journalists’ daily practices. Politicians, as well as other sources, have begun to use Twitter to communicate and gain coverage. Journalists must also check that channel just in case something interesting occurs.

[Twitter] has changed our work because [it] multiplies your ability to stay tuned and to find new keys to interpret the reality. At the end of the day, every politician has produced at least one tweet, but at the same time they haven’t done anything important. I truly don’t remember any important event influenced by Twitter. Twitter is just an alert.

(A. M., *La Stampa*)
Compared with other channels (news agencies or press releases by communication offices), the interviewees evaluated Twitter as being faster and including a higher number of sources. In their view, Twitter did not represent a challenge in terms of their professional autonomy (except for the fact that they had to be faster, which generally defines some limits of autonomy) but rather in terms of the organization of their work (they had to also consider social media). Nevertheless, the journalists considered Twitter valuable for their work in order to gain further viewpoints or background information, but they continued to rely on personal relations with politicians to gain original news or leaks.

You spend your time at the Parliament trawling. There you find many colleagues, and with them you share chats with politicians. While by mobile phone your conversations are private with your source.

(A. M., La Stampa)

When press journalists were questioned about their typical workday, their accounts resembled well-known discourses about the routinization of journalistic work.

Mondays and Fridays politicians are not at the Parliament, or anyway they come late. Then it’s necessary to work by mobile, or read newspapers to find some idea to investigate. On Tuesdays, I usually arrive at the Parliament late, around 9.30 a.m. Our workday depends mainly on the political agenda.

(A. C., Repubblica)

In the interviewees’ accounts, their daily work appeared to be unchanged. The political agenda and the most important institutional events were still strongly influential on their practices. Their daily routines do not appear to have been profoundly modified. Overall, social media had been normalized and adapted to the above-discussed pragmatic journalistic attitude that follows media logic.

**JOURNALISTS’ USES OF POLITICIANS’ TWEETS**

To grasp how journalists reflexively conceive of political actors as adjusting to media logic and how they describe politicians’ efforts to gain public attention through the media it is necessary to explore how news media use politicians’ tweets. In this regard, the typology provided by Broersma and Graham (2013) is valuable in the Italian context as well. Our interviewees said that Twitter enabled them to tap into the private sphere of well-known and newsworthy people; they could use tweets to flavour news stories; and tweets could trigger news stories.

If tomorrow the meeting between Bersani [the former Partito Democratico leader] and Five Stars occurs, if a live streaming is available, then everyone will comment! Every comment counts, from the most to the least popular politician, because that meeting will be the news of the day, and because you can understand what is going on.

(F.S., AdnKronos)
News stories driven by social media must be verified. Obviously, when they’re provided by a trustable source it’s different. Anyway, they provide an alert, and that alert often comes earlier than the press agencies.

(A. M., *La Repubblica*)

The mediatization frame appears easily adaptable to the contexts in which the journalists talked about tweets that helped them to tap into the private sphere of newsworthy people and tweets used to flavour news stories. The journalists considered politicians’ tweets as fitting their production logics: they could easily and rapidly be transformed into news in that they were professionally acceptable because they had been verified, and they presumed that the audience could appreciate tweets of that kind. It represents therefore a way in which old media logic incorporates new media affordances (Chadwick 2013). The following interview excerpts provide further proof of how those tweets are regarded to be particularly suitable from a media logic point of view because they are based on personalization, popularization, sarcasm and the like, which are typical features of media logic.

Twitter provides also a politician’s personal side, not just the institutional one, it shows how that person deals with personal matters. You can grasp whether he or she is respectful, sexist, bitter and humorous. Twitter is really personal.

(A. M., *La Stampa*)

At the beginning of Renzi’s government, it was necessary to describe a character who was almost unknown to public opinion. Italians needed to know him. It’s a journalist’s professional duty to describe also his personal character, because voters perhaps need to gather knowledge in addition to his mere political programme. Is he married, is he a father, does he go to church, what are his habits? Such information can help voters make the right electoral choice.

(C. T., *La Repubblica*)

What is more significant (we develop this point in the next section) is that journalists regard politicians as making precisely the effort necessary to meet news values and package their communication in a format suitable for media. As stated below, the new media ecology has sometimes even strengthened this process.

Today politicians are aware that everything works in real time. A news website usually monitors newsworthy people’s Twitter accounts, and it can produce several news stories when those politicians write via social media. As a journalist, I’m aware that websites’ headlines can drive the daily political agenda, and so do politicians. In the past, politicians strove to be covered by newspaper or TV news headlines. Today via websites they know that they can achieve the same effect in half an hour.

(A. M., *La Repubblica*)

Moreover, the fact that Italian journalists consider that ‘Twitter can trigger news stories’ means mainly that media practitioners can monitor an increasing number of sources likely to become news, and that they can give access to alternative voices as well.
It happens that we use statements from minor politicians when they talk via Twitter on issues outside the current agenda but appear to be interesting anyway. You can get some important news from their tweets, or by following a hashtag like #opencamera or #opensenato.

(A. C., ANSA)

Politicians are usually closely bound to the geographical regions that they come from. Most of them promote those areas, as well as explaining and warning about their problems. Particularly when a public speech of theirs is scheduled, they usually announce it via Twitter. Those stories, properly investigated, not rarely become news that I write for my newspaper.

(I. L., La Stampa)

The fact that journalists can obtain more practical and efficient access to a larger number of suitable sources also implies that they can opt to give coverage to what fits better with their pragmatic attitude.

**HOW JOURNALISTS INTERPRET POLITICIANS’ TWITTER USE**

Finally, in order to discuss how journalists use politicians’ tweets and how they reflexively conceive whether political actors adjust to media logic, we describe how journalists make sense and interpret politicians’ use of Twitter. We outline three recurrent discourses articulated by Italian journalists: (1) normalization; (2) fostering audience involvement and (3) gaining public attention.

The first discourse may be termed the normalization of Twitter (Lasorsa et al. 2012), seeing the use of social media within the framework of usual or traditional political communication activities. In this way, social media were not found to be an innovative instrument used to communicate events, but rather a different way to gain news media attention. In other words, Twitter was not considered to have dramatically changed the journalistic field; rather, it was only a new tool used by politicians to gain public attention. This process fully fits the media logic requirements.

At the beginning it was difficult, because it could happen that even a minister would write a naive tweet that could be used as a news story. Something changed, and journalism itself took a position telling spokespersons that it was very difficult for journalists to monitor the Twitter accounts of politicians twenty-four hours a day. Today, press offices advise newsrooms before politicians issue a tweet.

(A. C., ANSA)

Today politicians write their tweets and later advise journalists. So we obviously consider Twitter as well, especially for practical reasons, because previously we used to receive press releases about their statements, today we receive press releases about their tweets […]. Some don’t call us, but the majority advise us about their tweets

(G. G., AdnKronos)

The second recurrent discourse made by the journalists about politicians’ use of Twitter can be labelled ‘fostering audience involvement’. This frames
Twitter use through the role of the third actor of political communication. In the discourse, politicians use Twitter to introduce some issue that they care about onto media agenda. To impose that issue on the public agenda, according to the journalists, they try to involve Twitter followers as much as possible. Practically, this can work: if a hashtag becomes a trending topic, journalists must consider it.

In my opinion, today they often use Twitter to campaign using hashtags. They try to rally converts and followers. For instance, the hashtag 
#Alfanodimettini (#Alfanoresign. Alfano is a minister in the Renzi government) was boosted by Salvini (leader of the Northern League). As I see it, the reason was that Salvini didn’t perform well during a face-to-face TV debate with Alfano. The same strategy was used by Di Battista (a leader of the Five Stars movement) after a mediocre performance during another TV interview. In that case, he launched the campaign #renzirispondi (#renzianswer) about ISIS. The Democrats have started a large-scale Twitter campaign to finger gaffes and mistakes by Five Stars themselves.

(A. C., Repubblica)

Even if this is a new kind of practice mobilized by political parties, intrinsic to it is a mixture of political logic (maintaining a direct relation with their electorate) and media logic (increasing the number of supporters in order to put the issue on the media agenda). Thus, while the actual practice is new, the ingredients of the (heteronymous) logic it articulates are not particularly new to journalists.

The third discourse applied by the journalists concerned the use of Twitter by particularly prominent and powerful politicians. The interviewees generally evaluated those tweets as part of the politicians’ communication strategy or – using a recurrent term – as their propaganda. They usually said that they used those tweets exactly to understand what communication strategy politicians were using.

In order to understand the mood, I often use Twitter. The reference to Renzi’s tweets is intriguing, because you find several statements that help you understand where he is steering the day and the political debate, what his communication strategy is.

(W. M., Il Fatto Quotidiano)

Social media content is simply propaganda; but our professional duty is another one. We have to do our best to provide news before they put the machinery in motion.

(G. G., AdnKronos)

That is exactly how propaganda works. Propaganda has always existed, but today it is even more apparent. The greatest problem occurs when journalism follows those statements and that propaganda. If as a journalist you think that blindly following what the Prime Minister writes on Twitter is important, you’re welcome. But, according to me, as a journalist, you should doubt what the Prime Minster writes on Twitter.

(M. P., Il Fatto Quotidiano)

Nevertheless, to interpret the journalists’ words further, when prominent politicians – especially the Prime Minister and his staff – efficaciously used their social media to package their propaganda, journalists sometimes appeared
to be helpless: they could not avoid covering those tweets journalistically. *Efficaciously* means that those communication strategies fully fitted the media logic as it has been understood so far: they were tweets considered able to engage a large audience; journalists could easily transform them into news because they did not require any adjunctive organizational effort; they were in line with journalistic professional norms.

‘Enrico [the reference is to Enrico Letta former Prime Minister] #staisereno [#keepcalm]’ has become a slogan. In that way, Twitter becomes a manifesto! Renzi’s entire communication is based on Twitter and the sloganeering it allows. Renzi relies on speed and change. In these things he’s amazing, because everything can be translated into a hashtag and everything rapidly enters the communication circuit. At the end of the day, you can’t even distinguish what is news from what is propaganda.

(A. M., *La Stampa*)

But ‘enrico #staisereno’ was amazing. I mean, that tweet was a political programme. However, there are other tweets and other politicians able to use Twitter in that way. They are able to give an impression of genuineness, but those tweets are strategically produced. Consider Obama, a couple of days ago he provided a photo that pictured him with a child during Halloween. He was lying on the ground like any other dad. Renzi is able to provide similar photos with the help of his staff!

(M. B., *Il Manifesto*)

Lately, politicians are using social media. As a journalist, I can’t ignore that. In the end, if Renzi writes ‘enrico #staisereno’, come on, it’s almost a symbolic event. He wrote ‘enrico #staisereno’ and a couple of weeks later he replaced him. Obviously, as a reporter, you can’t avoid mentioning that tweet, giving it full coverage.

(F. M., *La Stampa*)

The journalists interpreted those tweets as politicians’ attempts to gain visibility both through independent channels beyond news media and through the news media themselves. The journalists also agreed that politicians used social media to match the media logic. What the journalists did not explicitly say is that politicians could often obtain coverage (not rarely efficaciously, restricting the newsmaker’s intervention) because via social media they were able to match the media logic, in the terms listed above.

Renzi is able to use social media. Today he’s also employing a new format in which he answers various questions online. However, he provides coverage also of institutional events, he provides photos, he definitely uses social media in an efficacious way.

(M. B., *Il Manifesto*)

Renzi has used Twitter in a very innovative way since the beginning. I remember when the official meeting took place between him and Giorgio Napolitano, the Italian President. At the end of the day, he would be officially designated as Prime Minister. The meeting lasted longer than expected, and Renzi wrote a tweet ‘I’m coming’ from the President’s office. This is amazing. To us it was surprising.

(S. M., *ANSA*)
The journalists were aware that their professional duty is to deconstruct propaganda, but they were also aware that the use of Twitter by politicians is occasionally so efficient in media logic terms that – in particular circumstances – they cannot avoid providing coverage. What we see here, then, is a strengthened adaptation to media logic, boosted by the new media system itself. Paradoxically, this supports politicians’ propaganda rather than practitioners’ autonomy or media power. We are, then, fully in the fourth phase of mediatization discussed by Strömbäck (2008), where political actors not only adapt to the media logic and the predominant news values ‘but also internalize these and, more or less consciously, allow the media logic and the standards of newsworthiness to become a built-in part of the governing processes’ (Strömbäck 2008: 240). It is no coincidence that the journalists singled out the then Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, as one of the best interpreters of media logic via social media.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This article has discussed the accounts and practices of legacy media journalists concerning their use of social media (particularly Twitter). Given the literature on the effect of hybridization, the research expected to find pervasive changes in journalistic practices in terms of the use of new voices (particularly from outside the traditional domain of politics) and in how journalists collect their sources. From a theoretical point of view, that change process was presumed to challenge the applicability of the mediatization framework. The notion of hybridization draws attention to change, the passing of an older set of cultural and institutional norms, the gradual emergence of new norms, and the settlement of a widespread hybrid status (Chadwick 2013: 10).

Based on accounts by Italian journalists of their practices and perceptions of politicians’ use of social media, this study largely argues against the idea of radically new hybrid logics. Even if we assume that hybridization is meant as integration and that fragmentation exists, and that it implies the presence of different logics co-created by media, political actors and publics, there are still settings where traditional practices and logics predominate.

In line with Altheide and Snow (1979, 1991), we consider media logic to be the rules and codes at professional, technological, commercial, organizational and cultural levels for defining, selecting and presenting media content. Media logic must be understood as the way in which (the complexity of) reality is transformed into something new called the news. Our understanding of media logic, in line with other authors (Strömbäck and Esser 2014; Downey and Neyazi 2015), is therefore feasible in the new media context. Our research showed that those rules and codes, even when journalists had altered their practices because of the advent of social media, appeared to be essentially unchanged.

In Italian political journalism, social media have been integrated by practitioners into their daily practices, but they have not radically upset conventions and routines – not to speak of the discourses that make sense and provide professional legitimation to these routines. Social media have become ‘another thing to do’ (i.e. checking Twitter to monitor politicians’ activities). Twitter has not substantially modified the relation between journalists and politicians, and journalists have not radically changed their practices to produce political news.

Moreover, according to the journalists interviewed, politicians rarely use social media to reach beyond the traditional media logic, and they use the
new media at their disposal essentially to gain public attention (Kunelius and Reunanen 2016) according to the media logic grammar. At least within the context analysed here, the new media system does little to challenge the most traditional understandings of mediatization (Chadwick 2013; Schulz 2004; Klinger and Svensson 2015). In this regard, even Lundby’s criticism (2009) that Altheide and Snow have reduced Simmel’s notion of social form into communication format appears to be excessive. What we dare to assume here is that within the political communication field – even if technological features have dramatically changed the scenario – the social form as a variety of seemingly different interactions among political communication actors assumes the form of media logic. This means that the effort by politicians to meet media logic requirements is not even an effort; it is what politicians have incorporated into their daily routine and social interaction with journalists. Media logic requirements are taken for granted; politicians have internalized them (Strömbäck 2008).

Does this mean that the idea of hybridization is misleading? It does not: first, because our views are also in line with Chadwick’s point (2013) that hybrid logic often means that legacy media incorporate new media practices into their existing structure; second, because our results allow us to talk about a hierarchy of hybridity (Hermida and Young 2017). Twitter is something new, it is something different, but in the context analysed here, it is – ‘merely’ – something more. The relation between old and new practices, like new and old media logic, is not a zero-sum game; it is not something that changes conventional routines. Most probably contexts exist where hybridization is increasingly influential on journalistic practices and discourses; and there are others – like that of the Italian political journalism analysed here – in which it appears less apparent. It certainly depends upon prevailing circumstances and configurations as a journalism culture that is historically linked to the political power, as it occurs in Italy (Hallin and Mancini 2004), and where the press is still decisive in determining frames of political facts, and political journalism is still rooted in traditional practices. The consequence is therefore that the old media logic appears to prevail in the new environment.

Nevertheless, even in our context, which appears favourable to convention, hybridity is ambivalent. On the one hand, instead of increasing the media power it makes those journalists even more influenced by politicians when the latter are able to package their propaganda efficaciously – in other words, the permanence of media logic. This is not the same as to say that media have taken over politics. On the other hand, it can potentially help poorly resourced journalists (those who work in small newsrooms, those who have small amounts of time, those who have fewer personal contacts) to access diverse sources, to be prompted to subvert traditional and routinized practice, in order to enhance alternative voices.

Finally, our research has some limitations. First, we interviewed mainly journalists working for legacy media and with prominent and stable roles in their newsrooms. Second, we have not been able to precisely take into account the daily Italian political landscape when the research was conducted. In that period the Prime Minister was Matteo Renzi, a politician able to use social media specifically to gain legacy media coverage. Third, journalists’ own accounts may have overestimated their autonomy and provided biased understandings of politicians’ behaviours. The self-reported nature of the evidence used here indicates that we have dealt with the journalists’ roles studied with regard to their narrated performance (what they say they do) (see Hanitzsch
and Vos 2017); however, a gap between professional attitudes and journalistic performance may exist. Nevertheless, our focus is on journalists’ conceptions and their professional attitudes, and therefore from our perspective that possible inconsistency is not highly relevant.

REFERENCES


SUGGESTED CITATION

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS
Sergio Splendore is assistant professor at the University of Milan where he presently teaches communication research and media sociology. His research interests include journalism studies and political communication. He has authored or co-authored papers in these areas for New Media & Society, Journalism, Sociology Compass, Media, Culture & Society, Journalism Practice and Journal of Popular Television. His current research involves journalism professionalism, digital journalism and data journalism. He is a part of The Worlds of Journalism Study network.
Rossella Rega is a research fellow at the Department of Communication and Social Research; she holds a Ph.D. in communication sciences at the Department of Communication and Social Research – ‘La Sapienza’ University of Rome. She passed the evaluation to become associate professor in sociology of cultural and communicative processes in Italy (2015) and in information and communication sciences in France (2015). She currently carries out research activity on language and forms of political communication, examining in particular the relationship among politicians, journalists and citizens, and their evolution from traditional to digital media. She has authored or co-authored articles in these areas in various national and international journals and she has been a visiting professor and visiting researcher in France several times.

Contact: Università degli Studi di Roma ‘La Sapienza’, via Aldo Moro 5, 00185, Italy.
E-mail: rossella.rega@uniroma1.it

Sergio Splendore and Rossella Rega have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the authors of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.
This book offers rich insights into the news media’s role in the development of policy in Australia and explores the complex and interactive relationship between news media and Australian Indigenous affairs. Kerry McCallum and Lisa Waller critically examine how Indigenous health, bilingual education and controversial legislation were portrayed through public media, and they look closely at how Indigenous people were being excluded from policy and media discussion, as well as using the media to their advantage.