

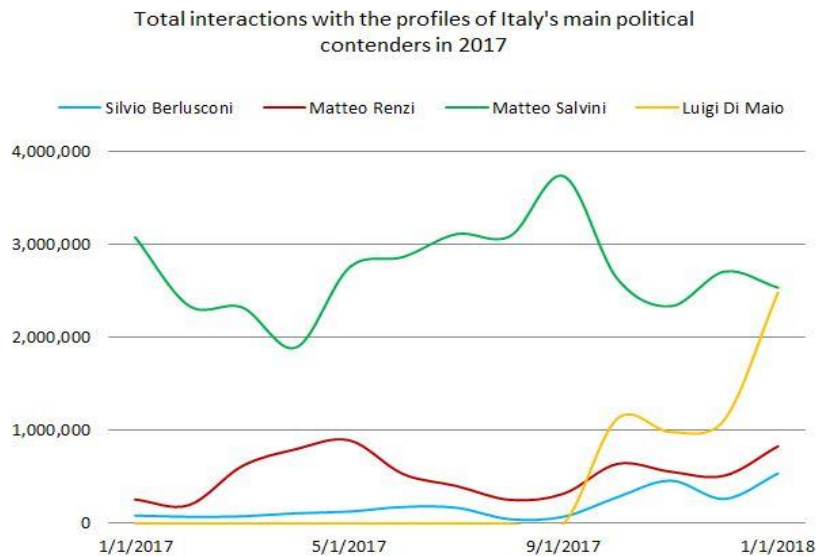
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# Is Italy having a “Facebook election”?

## Three observations of a digital election campaign

**Paul-Jasper Dittrich**

Research Fellow at the Jacques Delors Institute – Berlin



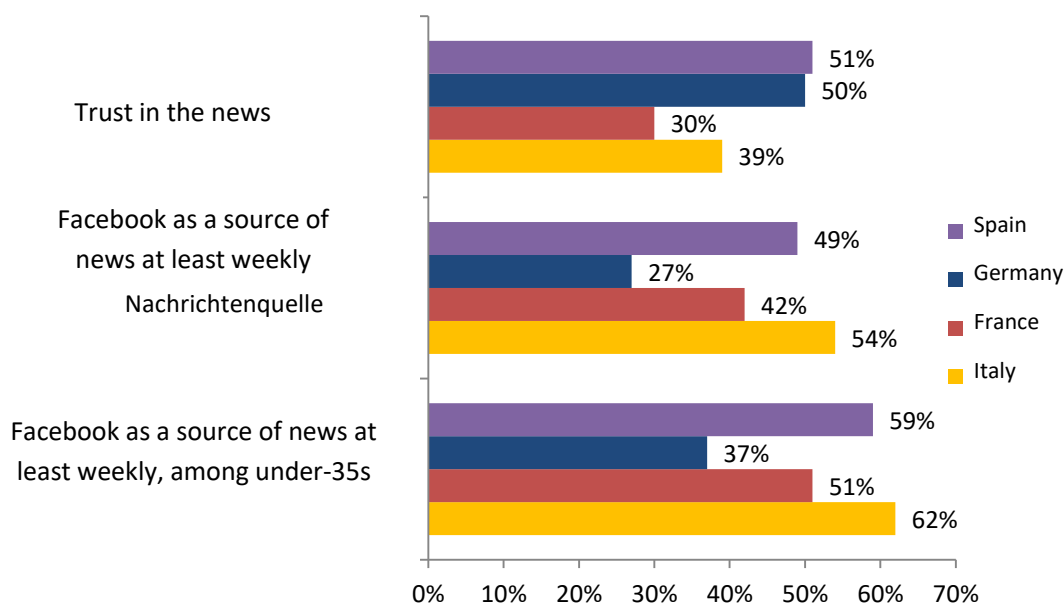
*As Italy prepares to go to the polls, the Internet is playing a significant role in the turbulent election campaign. In this blog post, Paul-Jasper Dittrich analyses three phenomena related to that topic: low trust in established media and changes in media usage; political figures like Matteo Salvini who are using social media to polarise public opinion; and M5S, a party whose ideology, organisational model and communications revolve around the Internet.*

# 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

With Italy holding parliamentary elections in less than two weeks, Europe’s attention is turned to the eurozone’s third largest economy. The election campaign has recently been dominated by increasingly inflammatory rhetoric on the topic of migration. Digital campaigning has played a large part in that escalation. Once again it is clear that the decentralised public sphere organized via social media has led to a change in election campaigns, mobilisation tactics, the internal organisation of political parties, and overall political communications. A number of global phenomena can also be observed in detail in the Italian election campaign, including 1) low trust in established media and changes in media usage, 2) political figures like Matteo Salvini from the right-wing-populist Lega (League, formerly Northern League) who make heavy use of polarisation through social media, and 3) the Five Star Movement (M5S), a kind of Italian “pirate party”, whose ideology, organisational model and communications revolve around the Internet.

## 2 Television remains the main source of news

The emergence of social media as news platforms and the accompanying fragmentation of the public sphere are reflected in Italy (and throughout the EU) in changes in media usage, as is shown by the figures of the annual [Digital News Report](#), published by the Reuters Institute at the University of Oxford. According to the report, over 50 per cent of Italians aged over 18 use Facebook as a source of news at least weekly.



Source: “Trust in the news” Reuters Institute [Digital News Report 2017](#), “Facebook as a source of news at least weekly / under-35s”, Reuters Institute [Digital News Report 2016](#)

<sup>1</sup> The original version of this blogpost was published in German on 21 February 2018

Among Italians under 35, the proportion who do so is as high as two-thirds. The rise of Facebook and Twitter as platforms for public debate goes together with relatively low trust in the news (see the table).

It is difficult to pinpoint how exactly low trust in the news in Italy relates to the growth in social media. There are many other factors that might play a role. Trust in mass media and the political sphere has traditionally been low in Italy. Readership of newspapers and printed magazines [was relatively low](#) even before Facebook and Twitter. Both the print and television segments of the Italian media landscape have long been dominated by a handful of enterprises that wield strong political influence. Overall, there is a sharp political divide in Italian society, which is also evident online. According to an index developed by the Reuters Institute, of the 36 democracies studied, Italy has the most polarised online media landscape after the USA. That means a particularly high number of people who self-identify as left-leaning or right-leaning only read online media products with a corresponding slant.

Online media may have a strong presence, but they do not necessarily sway elections. Television remains by far the main source of news for Italians. The reasons for that are among others demographic. The percentage of Italians who [use the Internet regularly](#) is relatively low at 69% (the EU average is 80.9 %). Elderly Italians in particular rarely have an internet connection and rely on television as their main source of news, while younger generations opt for social media as their main source of news.

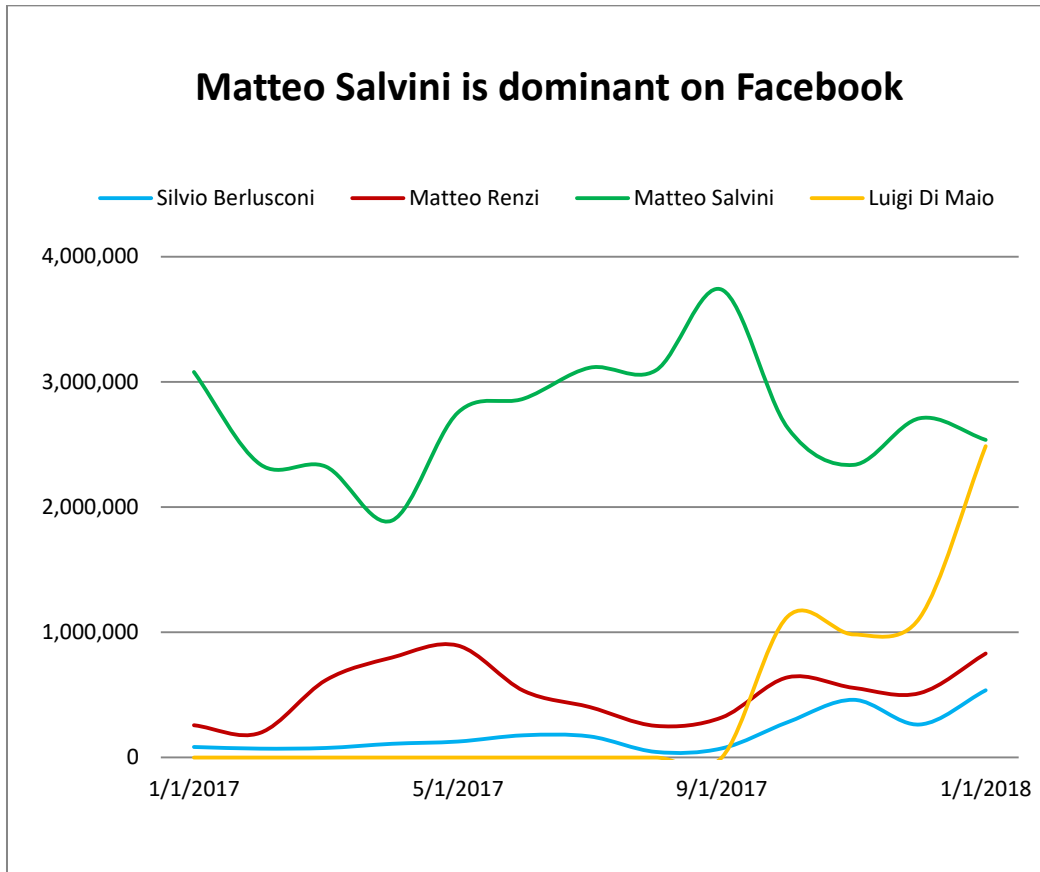
Given those clear demographic differences, it is no surprise that politicians target the various media to varying degrees. With the help of his television stations, Berlusconi from the centre-right Forza Italia party is chiefly reaching out to older, less internet-savvy voters. By contrast, Matteo Renzi from the left-liberal Democratic Party (PD), Matteo Salvini (Lega), and Luigi Di Maio (M5S), are increasingly seeking to woo voters via social media.

Differences can be observed in their strategic communications. Renzi has a particularly high number of followers on Twitter, which tends to be used by well-educated, politically-minded people. M5S's main communications vehicle is "Blog delle Stelle", a party blog where supporters and members of the movement can read news and exchange views (see below). Facebook, the social media platform with by far the greatest reach, has proven particularly successful for Di Maio and Salvini. That is in line with similar findings from the most recent election campaigns in [Germany](#) and [France](#), with populist parties achieving the greatest reach online there too.

### **3 The Salvini approach – polarise on Facebook**

Analysis of the absolute number of interactions with the profiles of the four strongest contenders for the post of prime minister shows Salvini to be out in the lead on Facebook. The leader of Lega, who now has more than two million "fans" on Facebook, probably makes the most systematic and successful use of the platform for his communications, including outside of election campaigns. For Salvini, Facebook is an [optimal strategic tool](#). He and his team are always seeking to go viral with divisive videos, statements and images, which are often focused on migration, and to trigger emotions such as rage or fear. The videos show, for example, begging Italian pensioners juxtaposed with people demonstrating for better living conditions for refugees. The aim,

presumably, is to give the impression that the Italian state is favouring refugees and migrants to the detriment of its own citizens. During the election campaign, Lega has been pledging mass expulsions of migrants under its hashtag #tuttiacasa (“all go home”). In a [report](#) on online trends in Italy, the “Mapping Italian News Online” project shows that the topics of migration and refugees have become prominent in the online debate.



*Total interactions (reactions, shares, comments), between 1 January 2017 and 1 February 2018, profiles of Matteo Salvini, Silvio Berlusconi, Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Renzi. Source: [Quintly](#). Note: the official profile of Luigi Di Maio, which these figures refer to, was only created in October 2017, after Di Maio’s nomination as M5S’s leading candidate.*

In tandem with polarising public opinion, Lega – like populist actors in other European countries – pursues a strategy of agenda setting. Viral or controversial posts in particular are often reported on by the established mass media, raising the profile of such content still further. Using Facebook, Salvini has managed to garner attention beyond Lega’s traditional base in northern Italy. That is a convenient way for Salvini to publicise the party’s rebranding as a pan-Italian party, which he has been promoting for several years now together with Lega’s sister party Noi Con Salvini in southern Italy.

When considering the success of populists on Facebook, the many possibilities of manipulation must naturally be pointed out. The reach of populist politicians is often artificially inflated by means of bots and fake accounts. Facebook itself estimated in November that there are a total of some 270 million fake or duplicate accounts. There are various ways of artificially increasing interactions, as Salvini’s Lega shows. For example, it uses a mini program that enables its supporters to automatically [spread certain content](#) on Twitter. As a result, the (real) profiles of Salvini’s supporters become “selfbots”, which automatically retweet or like Salvini’s tweets.

## 4 M5S – a successful “pirate party”?

Media usage is changing rapidly throughout the EU. Almost every EU Member State is home to populists whose communications strategies rely heavily on social media. However, Italy stands out in one respect – it is the only EU Member State in which a version of the “pirate party” – M5S – is highly likely to win the largest share of the vote in the elections on 4 March. For M5S, which was founded in 2009 by a comedian/blogger (Beppe Grillo) and an online marketing specialist (Gianroberto Casaleggio), the Internet plays a key role at three levels: as the central vehicle of a web-based democracy, as an internal organisational tool, and as its main means of communication.

*Ideology:* in the eyes of many of the Five Star Movement’s supporters and politicians, the Internet is [a revolutionary instrument](#) with the power to reshape society. The aim is to establish direct democracy with the help of web-based “collective intelligence”, meaning that citizens jointly discuss all political decisions and then vote online. Supporters of the movement regard intermediaries in the democratic decision-making process, such as Members of Parliament, as susceptible to corruption. They might water down the democratic online decision-making of citizens and, in the worst-case scenario, ignore citizens’ wishes in favour of the interests of lobby groups with partisan interest. As intermediaries who influence public opinion, journalists are deemed similarly suspect. That rejection of representative democracy has led, for example, to M5S MPs having a de facto imperative mandate in the Italian Parliament – they are required to sign contracts agreeing to exercise their mandate in line with the decision-making of the movement’s members in votes in both the Italian chambers.

*Organisational model:* M5S uses an internal online platform called “Rousseau”, which was developed by and is still run by Casaleggio Associates (the online marketing company of the movement’s co-founder, Gianroberto Casaleggio, who died in 2015) for all the movement’s internal votes. For example, all candidates for the upcoming parliamentary elections were selected by just under 140,000 registered members on the platform, including the movement’s frontrunner candidate, Luigi Di Maio. In addition, the opinions of members are surveyed on the platform ahead of votes in the Italian Parliament. The MPs are then required to vote in line with the outcome of the internal online polling.

*Communication:* the central communications platform of M5S is [Blog delle Stelle](#), an online-only medium. Members and supporters of the movement can keep abreast of developments within the party on the blog. Given the great distrust of the established media within M5S, the blog is also designed to frame political events from the movement’s perspective and to shield it from media criticism – a charge repeatedly levelled at the party by its critics.

The success of the Five Star Movement is closely tied to the growth in social media. Despite the party’s refusal [to interact](#) with the “mainstream media”, it went from polling at five per cent nationally ahead of the 2013 elections to collecting 25 per cent of the vote. Besides massive use of online communications, that is chiefly due to strong mobilisation of local groups. However, even before 2013, the movement’s organisational and decision-making model came increasingly under fire both internally and externally. The party leaders’ authoritarian approach to critics in M5S’s own ranks and disregard for the outcomes of internal voting are in conflict with the decentralised, direct democracy that the party espouses. The internal voting system is also frequently criticised. In some cases, participation in the votes was so low that a number of candidates for the parliamentary elections were selected with just a few hundred votes.

## 5 Conclusion

The Internet and social media are playing a key role in the Italian election campaign. As in the rest of the EU, more and more people in Italy are using social media as a source of news and general trust in the news is low. Populist, authoritarian or nativist parties and movements, such as Lega, heavily exploit the possibilities of direct communication and manipulation. They use and [manipulate the attention economy of the platforms](#) for the purposes of polarisation and agenda setting. In addition, M5S, a party that is seeking to create possibilities for citizens to participate in online voting outside of elections, could win the most seats in the forthcoming elections. In the next few years, the opportunities and risks associated with web-based, decentralised public platforms will need to be thoroughly analysed.

Currently, public debate on this topic is mainly focused on the risks. Examples are legion: the now well-documented cases of [foreign powers influencing](#) European election campaigns, targeted [manipulation using bots](#), commercially and ideologically motivated disinformation, and [smear campaigns against public figures](#). Those risks go hand in hand with a [loss of trust in the media](#), institutions and experts. The sharp criticism directed at the Five Star Movement, which, contrary to its principles, is led in an opaque and authoritarian manner, illustrates the fact that implementation of democratic decision-making via an online platform is far more complicated in reality than in theory.

However, the risks should not blind us to the long-term opportunities presented by the new public platforms and online mobilisation. Social media make it easier for activists and fringe groups to network, as well as raising the profile of civil society actors. That had been witnessed in Europe, for example in times of crisis or during protests against authoritarian governments. Movements such as the [Indignados in Spain](#) and the [Maidan protests in Ukraine](#) would probably have carried far less political weight if they had not been able to mobilise supporters online. Many “pirate parties” in the EU have failed and M5S’s organisational model might become more conventional in the future. Nevertheless, many movements, such as [Podemos in Spain](#), are currently experimenting with various forms of internal decision-making via the Internet.

How can the EU respond to that mix of opportunities and risks? The European Commission has already [established a High-Level Expert Group on fake news](#), whose tasks include the development of proposals to counter the spread of fake news online. It would also make sense, however, to examine how EU institutions can make better use of the opportunities presented by online media. First, that involves communicating even more effectively via social media. Second, the institutions could use online platforms to allow citizens to participate in the relevant European policy questions. In the medium term, that could be a way for European institutions to forge stronger and more direct links with European citizens.