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**The Spiral of Silence and Social Media:  
analysing Noelle-Neumann's phenomenon  
application on the Web during the Italian  
Political Elections of 2013**

**Cristina Malaspina,**  
MSc in Media and Communications

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**The Author can be contacted at: [cri.malaspina@gmail.com](mailto:cri.malaspina@gmail.com)**

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# **The Spiral of Silence and Social Media: analysing Noelle-Neumann's phenomenon application on the Web during the Italian Political Elections of 2013**

**Cristina Malaspina**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory was initially developed within a mass-mediated context, and it has been widely appreciated and critiqued in several forms by scholars of political communication, who have both supported and disagreed with its original formulation. In particular, the literature exploring the application of the theory within an online context has highlighted how various conditions of online conversations, such as the decreased fear of isolation allowed by anonymity, undermine some of the fundamental components of Noelle-Neumann's model.

Drawing on such research, this study examines the relevance of the spiral of silence theory to social media, and it illustrates its application in the context of the 2013 Italian elections. By triangulating a content analysis of online political posts, and interviews with journalists and experts in social media, public opinion and political sciences, this research demonstrates how the changing climate of opinion enabled by social media may affect the willingness of users to speak out about controversial political figures, in the specific Italian online context.

The findings of the study support the existing literature which investigates the spiral of silence in its online form, and suggest that the new conditions offered by online conversations facilitate the willingness of individuals to speak out, while seeming to decrease the fear of isolation, as a result of users' perceived empowerment to speak out about politics on the Web and the anonymity enabled by specific types of channel. Furthermore, the results indicate that online discussions are strongly irrational, and that individuals seem to be more willing to express their political affiliations online. Evidence from the analysis adds to existing research by focusing on the specific climate of opinion of online conversations among Italian users, where disenchantment with politics generates a negative and aggressive climate of opinion towards political leaders. This evidence also demonstrates the mediated nature of the spiral of silence when observed in its online form.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The spiral of silence theory has mostly been appreciated by scholars of political communication, and has been studied in several forms to test the willingness of individuals to speak out about controversial topics. Developed in the 1970s by the political scientist Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann in the context of post-World War II Germany, the theory states that people will choose to remain silent if they consider that their views are those of the minority (Liu & Fahmy, 2011:45), because they fear isolation (Kennamer, 1990).

The Italian political elections of February 2013 offer an interesting opportunity to observe the presence of a spiral of silence within a new context. Although the mass media still represent the major tools of political communication in Italy (Ceccarini, 2013:31), the 2013 elections can be identified as the first in which political campaigns and public discussion have also frequently taken place on social media (Cosenza, 2013), to the extent that, for some, 'the 2013 elections will be remembered as the first ones wherein which the web has played a central role' (Boccia, 2013:167).

More generally, the 2013 elections produced considerable and sudden change in Italian politics after a long period of stalemate (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2013:13). The previous bipartisan structure of the Italian political system, based around two main parties – the Democratic Party led by Pier Luigi Bersani and the People of Freedom party, led by Silvio Berlusconi (Corbetta, 2012:156) – was challenged strongly by the foundation of Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement, a third political force, which has grown very quickly. The Five Star Movement employs social media as 'the primary medium of communication, recruitment and organization' (Bartlett et al., 2013:13), and has been regarded by many as a 'phenomenon', whose programmatic and ideological discovery of the web (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2013) further highlights the importance of Web 2.0, blogs and social media in forming, building and maintaining public opinion (Savigny, 2002:5), and in offering data that can be used to monitor changes in political preferences (Ceron et al., 2013:3).

In particular, the rise in the expression of individual opinion on social media is a result of the increasing disbelief and distrust of opinion polls, which was particularly evident during the 2013 elections (Pagnoncelli, 2013:188). Figure 1 below shows the trends in opinion polls over the six-month period centred on the result of the

election<sup>1</sup>. As it demonstrates, the polls failed to predict the success of the Five Star Movement's, the small rise in the vote for Berlusconi's centre-right coalition, and the decrease in the vote for both Pier Luigi Bersani's Democratic Party and Mario Monti's centrist coalition, Civic Choice (Albanese, 2013:18). The red and blue circles in Figure 1 show the discrepancies (negative and positive, respectively) between the voting preferences of mid-February 2013 as shown in the polls, and the actual results of February 25<sup>th</sup>. Arguably, such inability to predict patterns is due to various factors, such as the presence of new politicians such as Beppe Grillo and Mario Monti, a strong sentiment of discontent towards Italian politics, the intrinsic methodological deficiencies of opinion polls (which primarily draw their conclusions from telephone calls), and the high percentage of undecided voters, shown by the grey line the graph (Pagnoncelli, 2013). An important reason for the unreliability of the polls is also a widespread refusal of voters to declare their political affiliations – something which can be ascribed to the phenomenon of the spiral of silence (Natale, 2009).

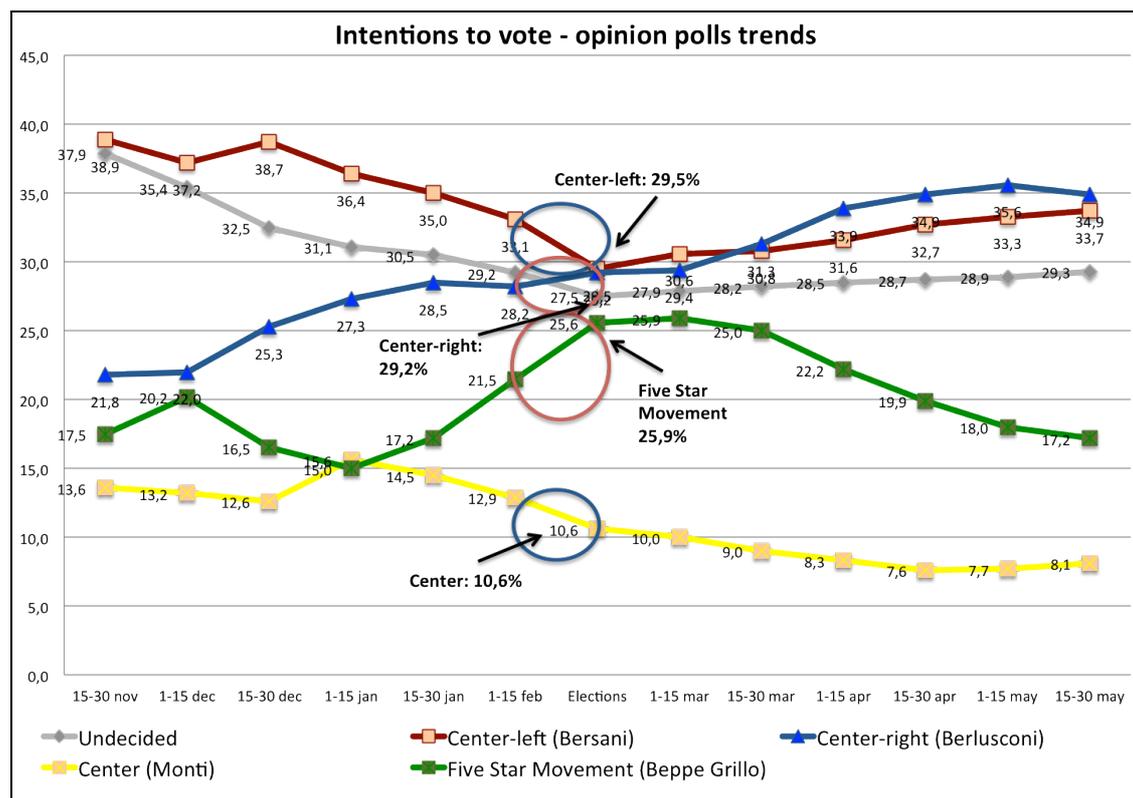


Figure 1 - Intentions to vote – trends in opinion polls trends

<sup>1</sup> Data obtained by the Department of Political Sciences at the University of Milan, Italy. Source: Ipsos, 2013. Elaborated using Ms Excel.

This changing political scenario presents an opportunity to investigate the willingness of individuals to speak out on social media, where new communication dynamics (Benkler, 2006, Castells, 2009) may make it less threatening for those who have been reluctant to express their opinions in traditional opinion polls to do so in a computer-mediated chat room (Ho & McLeod, 2008, cited in Chen, 2011:2). Thus, social media offer a cheaper, faster and continuous analysis of public opinion; they also should be less affected by the spiral of silence than traditional opinion polls (Ceron et al., 2013:5). Researchers are increasingly investigating whether a combination of factors, including anonymity, may decrease people's fear of isolation (a strong feature of Noelle-Neumann's original theory), and increase their willingness to speak out.

Drawing on such literature, this study investigates the existence of the spiral of silence during the 2013 Italian political elections, with a specific focus on social media. Despite the lack of representativeness of social media in the Italian context (Boccia, 2013), this research offers an opportunity to observe how the new features made possible by Web 2.0 challenge Noelle-Neumann's original spiral of silence theory.

The study begins with a summary of the existing literature on the spiral of silence, followed by a theoretical discussion, which in turn leads to a formulation of the study's research question. A section about the methodologies employed is then followed by a presentation of the findings, together with an outline of the limitations of the study, and proposed areas for further research.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **The Spiral of Silence**

In the 1970s, Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann developed a theory that suggested that the expression and formation of public opinion (Glynn, 1997:452) results from people's perception of the climate of opinion (Yun & Park, 2011: 202). Individuals use a 'quasi-statistical sense' to determine whether their opinions are popular or unpopular (Hayes, 2007:785). If they perceive that they share their opinions with the majority, they may be willing to speak out. Alternatively, if they perceive their opinions to be those of the minority, they will keep silent or conform to the majority view (Liu & Fahmy, 2011:46).

According to this theory, individuals base their reading of public opinion on a series of cues in their environment, ranging from newspapers and mass media to outspoken opinion formers (Heney, 2011:7). Moreover, for Noelle-Neumann, social sanctions play a key role, and silence can occur when opinions concerning topics that are perceived to be controversial and divisive are shared with at least one other person (Newirth, 2007, cited in Heney, 2011). In this respect, the spiral of silence is 'a collective phenomenon, which involves individuals relating their own perspective to those of others' (Turner & Sparrow, 1997:122). More specifically, 'when people believe that their opinions are dominant or becoming more popular, they express their convictions openly, outside their circle of family and friends' (Jeffres, Neuendorf & Atkin, 2010:115). However, people may cease to express their views because of the fear of isolation (Moy et al., 2001), thus triggering the creation of a spiral, in which individuals 'fall silent about their political opinions' (Turner & Sparrow, 1997:122).

Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory is based on four main principles:

- a) Society threatens individuals with isolation, and so cohesion in the social collective must be constantly ensured by a sufficient level of agreement on values and goals (Noelle-Neumann, 1991:258)
- b) Individuals fear becoming 'social isolates' (Sanders et al., 1985:xvi)
- c) People constantly assess the climate of opinion through their personal relationships and through the media in order to maintain a high level of awareness concerning the social consensus. (Moreno-Riaño, 2002:67)

- d) Based on their perception of the climate of opinion, people will be willing or reluctant to speak out (Oh, 2011:2).

The theory of the spiral of silence is based on ‘more than two decades of primary and investigative research that built on 200 years of research [...] about public opinion’ (Noelle-Neumann, 1977:64, cited in Lemin, 2010), while Noelle-Neumann’s socio-psychological mechanism has been widely researched as an integral process of public opinion formation (Oh, 2011). In particular, one of its strongest contributions to research lies in Noelle-Neumann’s view of public opinion as ‘social control’. Contrary to the model of public opinion as rationality, according to which individuals are rational participants who generate social change (Scheufele & Moy, 2000, cited in Oh, 2011:7), the theory of the spiral of silence proposes a model that equates public opinion as the pressure to follow others (Oh, 2011:7), and where public opinion is an opinion that can be expressed without social sanction or isolation (Scheufele & Moy, 2000, cited in Oh, 2011:8).

Several authors have acknowledged the relevance of Noelle-Neumann’s theory of the spiral of silence, and it has been tested in many studies, which frequently have a clear focus on political environments (Chen, 2011; Matthes, 2010). While most of them confirm Noelle-Neumann’s original theory (Gonzenbach, 1992; Lang & Lang, 2012; Salmon & Neuwirth, 1990; Shahanan et al., 2004; Turner & Sparrow, 1997), some studies have also tried to investigate specific components of the spiral of silence model, such as ‘hardcore groups’ (Matthes et al., 2010), fear of isolation (Moy et al., 2001), and strategies for remaining silent (Hayes, 2007).

However, despite its widespread appreciation, the spiral of silence theory has also attracted some criticism. For example, Scheufele and Moy (2000, cited in Lemin, 2010:5) question whether fear of isolation is a strong enough reason to discourage speaking out; other studies question the relationship between some elements of the theory, such as ‘media use, perception of the climate of opinion, and expression of individuals’ opinion’ (Rimmer & Howard, 1990, cited in Moreno-Riaño, 2002:69); or suggest that the media may be less influential than other factors in determining a climate of opinion (Gonzenbach & Stevenson, 1994, cited in Moreno-Riaño, 2002:69).

## **The Online Spiral of Silence**

Criticisms of the spiral of silence theory are most apparent in those studies that have investigated its online form. Noelle-Neumann's original formulation of the theory was made in a mass-media context, in which the media were seen as exercising a 'strong influence on individuals' estimates of majority opinion' (Neuwirth, 2000:139), and on their conception of social reality and social climate (Shahanan, 2004:414). More specifically, for Noelle-Neumann (1974) messages communicated through the mass media had three main characteristics: ubiquity (mass media messages are omnipresent); cumulation (they are also repeated over time); and consonance (they are uniform across the mainstream media) (Oh, 2011:8).

Clearly, the development of the Internet and of social media platforms has undermined all these characteristics, and consonance in particular. Moreover, an application of the theory to the web is subject to new conditions, which are allowed by the new dynamics of the online world, where the perception of the climate of opinion is very different from that of traditional media, and where these new paradigms and conditions have the potential to increase people's willingness to voice their opinions (Liu & Fahmy, 2011).

Even if the literature on the online spiral of silence is not as abundant as that on the theory in general, some existing studies on the formation of online spirals of silence are worth mentioning. For example, McDevitt et al.'s (2003) study of the perception of the climate of opinion in online settings has shown that even extreme opinions may be seen as moderate, thus triggering a 'spiral of moderated expression' (McDevitt et al., 2003). Schultz and Roessler's more recent research into the changing climate of opinion online showed that individuals select online information by following a 'subjective-pluralistic pattern' (Schulz & Roessler, 2012:346). In addition to examinations of the concept of climate of opinion, other authors have investigated changes in the willingness to speak out. In 2000, Wanta and Dimitrova observed the dynamics of online chatrooms, while the work of Yun and Park (2011) has provided a strong contribution to research into the anonymity offered by online platforms. Scholars have also offered a comparison of offline and online applications: in 2011, Oh examined whether the spiral of silence can still explain the willingness of individuals to speak out in offline and online communication, and also Liu and Fahmy observed how the theory may work in both settings.

What generally emerges from the literature is that an online application of the spiral of silence sees some of the key elements of the theory being challenged by the new dynamics of the Internet (Chen, 2011; Heney, 2011; Lemin, 2010). In the first place, anonymity strongly changes the willingness to speak out, so that 'when people are anonymous [...], the tendency to conform to others' views is considerably attenuated' (Mutz, 1998:205). Moreover, a distinction can be made between online channels, so that 'political forums, weblogs, or similar are probably less important for the societal opinion formation process than, for example, social network sites that everybody uses' (Schultz & Roessler, 2012:349). Finally, online individuals feel less constrained by social pressures and sanctions (Oh, 2011:9), and, in general, fear of isolation is significantly reduced by computer-mediated discussions (Ho & McLeod, 2008).

What particularly affects the spiral of silence in its online form is that the Internet is seen as 'a hybrid medium, with only a fine line drawn between virtual interpersonal communication and online mass communication, and it may thus be difficult for the individual to tell these two sources of information apart' (Hoefflich, 1997, cited in Schulz & Roessler, 2012:350). Such mediation is also reflected by the way in which individuals engage in political conversations on the web: research shows that online political discussion has been increasing its influence on public opinion (Price et al., 2006).

### **Political Participation on the Web**

Because 'technology is having a profound effect on regular political activity in advanced industrial societies, by either offering new channels for participation or modifying different aspects of existing ones' (Anduiza et al., 2009:860), political participation on the web has been extensively studied in recent years.

At a general level, researchers embrace the idea that the convergence (Jenkins, 2004) allowed by the development of the Internet, and Web 2.0 in particular, has enabled top-down and bottom-up practices to become dynamically intertwined, so that terms such as 'citizenship journalism' (Gillmor, 2006), 'viewertariat' (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011) and 'participatory culture' (Jenkins, 2004) have emerged and are now used to refer to the new possibilities allowed by computer-mediated communication.

The literature on social media and political participation can be split into two main schools of thought. On the one hand, a celebratory view of social media sees Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2003) as increasing the potential of individuals to exchange opinions and feel empowered (Kraut et al., 2002:49, cited in de Zúñiga et al., 2009), thus allowing for increased participation (Chadwick & Howard, 2008). Well-known scholars, such as Castells (2009), have advanced the notion of a 'network society' with horizontal structures, in order to describe the current scenario enabled by the Internet, which makes possible a combination of hegemonic/traditional power structures and post-hegemonic forces (Lash, 2007). An optimistic view of online participation can also be found in the theoretical approaches to web-based political communication, such as those describing the 'networked public sphere' proposed by Benkler (2006), or stronger statements about the rise of more 'deliberative Athenian modes of participation' (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011:444).

On the other hand, the idea that the Internet can enable greater freedom of expression and individual empowerment in political discussions has also encountered criticism from several quarters. In the first place, the so-called 'normalisers' argue that political life changes little with online communication (Resnick, 1998, cited in Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2011:444). More intense criticism has come from those for whom the Internet, despite its apparent democratic nature, reproduces an elitist type of structure, thus giving rise to a condition where 'the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent' (Schattschneider, 1960), so that the Internet actually empowers a small group of elites (Hindman, 2008). Other criticism of political participation concerns the 'fragmentary' nature of Internet conversations. While Van Alstyne (1997) coined the term 'Balkanization' to refer to the Internet's potential fragmentation of the global village, more recently Sunstein (2008) referred to the concept of 'echo chambers', to describe the way in which Internet users tend to filter out the news and information they do not want to hear.

Regardless of the debates surrounding the positive or negative environment enabled by online political communication, the dynamics of political expression on online-based platforms in the specific Italian context can be best understood with reference to the paradigm of an 'online public sphere' (Dalhgren, 2005).

## **An ‘Online Public Sphere’?**

In the 1970s Habermas framed the basic definition of the public sphere, by defining it as an abstract mediation between the state and society (Habermas, 1974:50). For Habermas, the public sphere was a discursive arena where individuals engaged in rational discussion, deliberation, agreement and action (Villa, 1992:712), in order to attain a democratic consensus and, ultimately, to achieve a common good, in an egalitarian and pluralistic environment (Johnson, 2006).

Clearly, the overall framework offered by the concept of the public sphere is useful for an examination of the dynamics of enhanced community engagement and communication capacity offered by the advance of social media (de Zúñiga et al., 2009:558). As such, it has been welcomed by many scholars, albeit in different ways. Scholars such as Langman (2005), and Downey and Fenton (2003), have argued that the web may become an ‘uncoerced public sphere’ (cited in Ceron et al., 2013), while for many authors the web can allow for increased democracy (Savigny, 2002). Other researchers see the Internet as playing ‘an increasingly important role in strengthening the public sphere through the mediation of (political) debate’, which can open up an ‘*opportunity structure*’ (Bennett, 2003, cited in Cammaerts and Van Audenhove, 2005:183; Dahlberg, 2007; Dahlgren, 2005). For Yun and Park (2011:202), ‘a lot of online forums operate as a public sphere where people discuss, gossip, express their ideas’.

Nevertheless, such optimistic ideas have often been opposed and criticised. As a matter of fact, the Italian political context offers a scenario for online discussion in which specific areas of discontent, and strong anti-political sentiment (Campus, 2010), have the potential to undermine the traditional Habermasian model. Consequently, the specific environment of Italian social media appears to fall within a conceptualisation of the public sphere that differs from Habermas’s deliberative model. For example, Boccia (2013) has identified the environment of Italian political social media as an ‘ephemeral public sphere’, where political communication is activated and developed. Such a definition, in line with the strong sentiment of disenchantment with traditional politics and the high level of support for protest-based phenomena such as Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement (Bartlett et al., 2013), gives this public sphere an element of irrationality. In this respect, Mouffe’s definition of a public sphere as ‘agonistic pluralism’ appears more appropriate for the Italian political elections of 2013. She suggests that the lack of power in Habermas’s

models 'denies the central role in politics of the conflictual dimension' (Mouffe, 1999:752), whereas in an agonistic pluralism model, passions are not eliminated, but 'mobilized towards the promotion of democratic designs' (756).

Clearly, the concept of the spiral of silence in general, whether online or offline, further undermines the Habermasian notion of a rational public sphere. In the first place, while the ideal concept of the public sphere conceives individuals as rational actors who democratically take 'affirmative or negative positions on issues, and they do this implicitly all the time' (Habermas, cited in Garnham, 2007:209), the assumption of a spiral of silence challenges the deliberativeness of the public sphere, since the attainment of a consensus does not take into account the silent opinions which could potentially object to such a common good. Moreover, analysing the activation of an online spiral of silence takes us further from Habermas's ideals, and reflects Mouffe's definitions, as engagements on the Internet have a democratising effect because they reveal a plurality of voices. Such discussions aim at demonstrating disagreement and thereby disclosing not only diversity, but also unequal power relations. (Papachrissi, 2009, cited in Van Zoonen, 2011:1286).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The literature review has revealed several studies that critique the idea of an online application of Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory, which is embedded within the notion of an 'online public sphere' and must be seen in the context of political participation on the web.

In particular, the increasing amount of research on online spirals of silence has highlighted how Noelle-Neumann's original work could be seen as forming a bridge between macro- and individual-level processes (McDevitt et al., 2003:455). However, much criticism has been made of the theory's tendency to ignore the intermediate domain of interpersonal communication (Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 1997, cited in McDevitt et al., 2003; Moreno-Riaño, 2002; Scheufele, Shanahan & Lee, 2001). This study will align itself with this latter trend, and aim to demonstrate how relating the spiral of silence model to the online public sphere can make it applicable to all levels of human interaction – including the 'meso' level of interpersonal communication.

Secondly, the review of the literature on political participation in the context of Web 2.0 has highlighted both optimistic and pessimistic views of online participation. Some writers see the Internet as enabling the empowerment of users and increased possibilities for them, while others criticise the fact that the web remains a hierarchical and elitist structure. Drawing on Lash's (2007) view of 'post-hegemonic' power, this research will combine these two points of view, and demonstrate how the spiral of silence model, when applied online, can constitute a mediated phenomenon. In this respect, Silverstone's conceptualisation of mediation can be a useful analytical framework for the observation of a spiral of silence within a web-based context. Silverstone acknowledges a dialectic relationship between media effects, typical of a top-down and mass-mediated context, and ritual effects, reflective of the bottom-up practices facilitated by Web 2.0. For Silverstone, such mediation requires us to understand 'how processes of communication change the social and cultural environment, as well as the relationships that participants, both individual and institutional, have to that environment and to each other, and the same time it requires a consideration of the social, as in turn a mediator' (Silverstone, 2005:189). This theory of mediation also goes hand-in-hand with Jenkins's (2004) model of convergence, according to which media concentration (McChesney, 2000) and collective intelligence (Sunstein, 2002) are necessary components of a convergence culture, which is truly reflective of the current realities of mediation in the social

media world. As a result, this research draws on the dialectical models enabled by a changing communication environment, and draws on such theories to observe the online activation of a spiral of silence.

Finally, previous literature has also shown how social media can be seen as a new form of public sphere, where the rational and consensus-based model proposed by Habermas may be undermined by the specific context of the 2013 Italian elections. This research will therefore investigate the phenomenon of the spiral of silence within a public sphere that is reflective of the disenchantment felt within Italian politics.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The burgeoning literature on the online spiral of silence shows how Noelle-Neumann's theory is affected when it is tested online. Nevertheless, no previous study has investigated the creation of an online spiral of silence within a specific geographical context, as such studies have all related to the Internet or social media in general. As a result, this research demonstrates how observing a spiral of silence within a specific national context (Italian politics) may alter the conditions of the theory, and add to the work of other scholars on its online form.

In addition, this study aims to observe online political discussions, evaluate the online climate of opinion that is created around specific political figures, extrapolate the main elements of the spiral of silence theory and show how they can be applied to Italian politics. A further aim of this research to determine whether other factors, not discussed in previous studies, affect the model in its online form.

In order to satisfy these objectives, based on the literature review and in line with its conceptual framework, this study aims to answer the following research question:

### **How did the spiral of silence manifest itself in social media during the 2013 Italian elections?**

As a matter of fact, the literature is lacking in research into the spiral of silence theory, as applied to Italian politics. While territorial studies have been carried out, for example, of Mexico and the USA (Neuwirth, 2000 and 2004), no such research has been done into Italy. As a result, this study aims not only to offer an initial platform for further research onto the Italian political context, but also proposes an analysis of the phenomenon in other geographical territories.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Public opinion has traditionally been measured using national opinion polls (Mitchell & Hitlin, 2013), while Noelle-Neumann adopted 'survey research instruments' (Noelle-Neumann, 1993:8) to assess the shifts in public opinion which allow for a spiral of silence to be activated in the political sphere. However, things are different online, as is the measurement of public opinion. 'Given the large amount of data related to public opinion available online, the challenge is to select the methods that are most appropriate' (Ceron et al., 2013:3). Noelle-Neumann's study of public opinion (1993) was grounded in a mass-media context, long before the Internet was developed. Furthermore, surveys do not allow for an adequate assessment of contingencies such as the degree of mediation, which is key to social media context (McDevitt et al., 2003:455). Since this research covers the application of this phenomenon in the online public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002a), surveys were not employed as the main research tool.

As an alternative, a mix of two methodologies was set up, in order to triangulate the results (Flick, 2011:187). On the one hand, content analysis made it possible to observe online posts related to the spiral of silence phenomenon, and to answer the research question of this study. On the other hand, interviews gave an insight into the motives behind the reluctance of users to express their political opinions online.<sup>2</sup>

### **Content analysis**

Content analysis (CA) is generally defined as a 'technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication' (Berelson, 1952:18), and enables the researcher to identify and count the occurrence of specific features of texts (Deacon, 1999:116). Krippendorff (1980:21) argues that CA allows the researcher to 'make replicative and valid inferences from data to their context'. CA can also be applied to web-based content; recently, CA of weblogs, forums and social networks has been intensively carried out to identify and quantify the structural and functional properties of content (Denecke & Nejd, 2009). Such data can be useful for investigating the ways in which people silence themselves on the Internet, a tool which 'represents a valuable source of data that is useful for

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<sup>2</sup> It is acknowledged that this extensive methodology section aims to cover in detail both methods employed in the research. This is due to the fact that they were both weighted the same importance for the purpose of analysis.

monitoring public opinion' (Madge et al., 2009; Woodly, 2007, cited in Ceron et al., 2013:2). Compared to other methods, CA makes it possible to understand online trends. Moreover, using web-based CA avoids the subjective biases of other methods, such as surveys and questionnaires, and it can answer interesting questions about politics (Callaghan, 2005:4). As a result, CA is an appropriate method for observing online posts related to political ideas.

In the present study, 'human-generated' CA has been employed to allow for an empirical observation of posts related to the silence of users. This methodology consists of manually coding selected online posts that have been traced using the application of specific web search strings, to capture specific sensitive contents, such as the nuances adopted in the shared content<sup>3</sup>.

### ***Advantages***

The traditional approach to the analysis of online feeling is based on a fully automated analysis of specific keywords based on the use of ontological dictionaries (Ceron et al., 2013:3), where the language nuances and tones involved in a specific comment cannot be captured. Human-generated CA overcomes such flaws and, because of its manual nature, provides a more reliable analysis of a smaller number of posts.

Such specific benefits will be combined with the more general advantages of CA. Firstly, the method is systematic and replicable (Hansen, 1998:95). Furthermore, it is useful for examining trends, which are key to the spiral of silence theory, while it enables comparisons to be made, and can also be employed 'for analysing cultural phenomena' (Woodrum, 1984:5). Moreover, statistics can be employed to make 'broader inferences about the processes and politics of representation' (Deacon, 1999:116). Based on such advantages, and following McDevitt et al.'s study (2003) of the spiral of silence in computer-mediated communication, this research appreciates that the occurrence of the spiral of silence can be observed without the use of questions, through the analysis of online political conversations (Lemin, 2010:1).

### ***Limitations***

However, CA also presents some problems, as 'the application of content analysis is often rather reductionist' (Flick, 2011:136), and this method has often been criticised for its objectivity and descriptiveness. Furthermore, 'content is not inherent to

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<sup>3</sup> For more information, visit [www.human-digital.com](http://www.human-digital.com)

communications, and people read texts differently' (Krippendorff, 2004:9). As a research tool, the Internet presents some limitations: firstly, 'the issue of representativeness of Internet-accessed samples clearly continues to be a major concern amongst researchers who are [...] conducting Internet-based studies' (Hewson et al., 2003:29). Moreover, despite the arguments about the progressive abundance of online data (Tambini, 2009), 'statistical results are influenced by data availability, update frequency, and language of use' (Wu et al., 2010:523). The boundaries of publicly available data, as well as constant changes in online content, represent major challenges to sampling strategies (Wu et al., 2010:523).

One additional limitation lies in the time-consuming nature of manual coding, which may affect a study such as the present one, which operates under time constraints. In order to face this type of challenge, previous online-based studies have employed alternative methods, such as automated CA (Hopkins & King, 2010), for the analysis of a large body of documents. Nevertheless, a manual strategy has been employed in this study, since manual coding can allow for more in-depth results.

### ***Media selection and selection of online channels***

Because this study aims to demonstrate how an online spiral of silence can manifest itself in social media, the Internet was chosen as the main medium of interest. Indeed, 'defining the unit of analysis on web-based content poses distinctive challenges due to the combined multiple media forms' (Inhwa & Kuljis, 2010:372). Social media were chosen as the selected areas of analysis, since they represent an interesting arena for the exploration of political preferences (Ceron et al., 2013:1).

Several types of channel were chosen as the focus of analysis in this study. These include weblogs, social network sites (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) such as Twitter, a social network for micro-blogging (Jansen et al., 2009), and Facebook, the most popular social network in Italy (Minucci & Mascheroni, 2010:190). The study also examines the comment threads of online newspapers and answer forums, such as the Yahoo! Answer query portal, because they are also relevant to the research (Agichtein et al., 2008, cited in Denecke & Nejd, 2009:1871).

Accordingly, the channels were categorised in four groups:

- Blogs
- Forums (news websites)
- Forums (YouTube, Yahoo! Answers etc)
- Social networks (Twitter, Facebook).

### ***Time period***

The time period considered for the analysis comprised the three months before the Italian elections on February 24 2013 and the three months following them. This meant that all the posts considered for analysis were collected from a Google search set with a six-month interval.

### ***Sampling***

In order to answer the research question, a random sampling technique was employed, where each unit had the same probability of inclusion in the sample (Krippendorff, 2004:114). A set of 120 search strings built around specific keywords and around the four main political figures of the 2013 Italian elections was inserted into a Google URL search. Following Schweidel et al.'s suggestion (2012:8) that different opinions can be found on diverse social media platforms, the first ten pages of each Google search result were examined, and the posts that were most appropriate posts to the research were entered on the coding sheet for analysis.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Coding***

The code book (**Appendix 1**) contains a list of the variables to be coded, together with the values or coding options associated with each variable (Hansen, 1998:116). In the present study, for each of the 407 posts, coding was performed on 33 variables, which were selected from the initial coding sheet, which contained 71 initial variables. Such variables were chosen because they were deemed to be useful for the purpose of analysis. The results of an initial pilot study demonstrated that even though ICR was quite high, some variables were not necessary. Consequently, twelve variables (marked in red in Appendix 1) were removed from the dataset, and 21 variables were retained for analytical purposes.

Clearly, observing something that is absent online (i.e., silence) is a challenging task. In order to monitor the activation of a spiral of silence, variables on the coding frame were designed to illustrate the occurrence of silence along two steps of the spiral of silence theory, assessment of the climate of opinion and willingness to speak out (Chen, 2011):

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<sup>4</sup> It is acknowledged that there were three main challenges to the sampling strategy: a) the sample is drawn from page results that are subject to Google's algorithm mechanisms (Beer, 2009), possibly causing some results to be emphasized over others; b) for ethical reasons, this research is limited to the

- Variables related to the climate of opinion were designed to consider the potential changes in climate of opinion, such as channelled aggressiveness, the tone of conversations and negativity levels;
- Variables related to willingness to speak out were designed to measure declared political affiliations and patterns of explicitness/implicitness.

### ***Inter-Coder Reliability***

Inter-coder reliability (ICR) is ‘the extent to which independent coders evaluate a characteristic of a message or artefact and reach the same conclusion’ (Lombard et al., 2002:589), and is necessary to ensure the strength of the coding book (Deacon, 1999:128). ICR was calculated by having a trained second coder and the researcher randomly code 10% of the posts under consideration. The ReCal2 platform was then employed to obtain four reliability coefficients for nominal data: percent agreement, Scott’s Pi, Cohen’s Kappa, and Krippendorff’s Alpha<sup>5</sup> (see **Appendix 2**).

The average percent agreement ICR was 90%, which is an acceptable level of reliability. It is acknowledged that the two coders had similar demographics and that, arguably, a larger study would require more than two coders, possibly with different demographic profiles, in order to provide a stronger ICR and enhanced objectivity (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991, cited in Harwood, 2003:486).

### **Interviews**

‘Content analysis alone cannot give the answers, and such limitation can be lessened if combined with another method, more appropriate to measuring those aspects’ (Inshwa & Kuljis, 2010:370). Indeed, the description of the occurrence of specific trends related to the activation of spiral of silences must be combined with a qualitative method which allows an understanding of the reasons related to the phenomenon generation, whereby ‘the real purpose of qualitative research is not counting opinions but rather exploring [...] the different representations of the issue’ (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000:41). As a consequence, interviews were also employed to investigate the motives behind the silencing of opinions.

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analysis of publicly available posts, which are limited on social networks such as Facebook; c) online content is scattered, so that maintaining a consistent coding unit is problematic.

<sup>5</sup> For more information, visit <http://dfreelon.org/utis/recalfront/recal2/>

Interviews are 'a way of generating empirical data about the social world' (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997:113) and they are a useful method for identifying common traits among narratives of respondents (Warren, 2002). For the present study, it was decided to interview experts in the subjects (social media, politics, spiral of silence) most closely related to the research aims.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they were the most appropriate type of interview for the research question. In semi-structured interviews, the goal is to explore a topic in a way that allows interviewees to express their opinions and ideas in their own words (Esterberg, 2002:87), through a combination of open questions and theory-driven questions (Boyatzis, 1998:33) The interviews were tailored to each research participant, on the basis of their area of expertise, in order to deductively test (Kvale & Brinkman, 2008) the implications of the spiral of silence theory.

Because of geographical constraints and time concerns, the interviews were carried out in face-to-face and Skype formats. Both options are based on the poststructuralist idea that meaning is socially constructed (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997:113), and that all knowledge is created from the actions undertaken to obtain it:

- Face-to-face interactions make it possible to understand the respondents' life worlds, and allow the social scientist to gain a comprehensive understanding of the account of each individual, in relation to their social constructions (Bauer and Gaskell, 2000:39).

- Skype interviews can also be employed for qualitative social research (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004:107), since video-conferencing 'has the potential to be a viable alternative to in-person interviews' (Sedgwick & Spiers 2009, cited in Weinmann et al., 2012:959). Skype interviews can overcome geographical constraints, while producing a conversation which is as fruitful as that of in-person interviews. In this study, online interviewing was made in a *synchronous* form (Flick, 2011:171), with both interview participants online at the same time.

### ***Advantages***

Semi-structured interviews have the advantage of allowing the collection of in-depth information, combined with the ability to tailor the interview process according to the developments of the interaction (Berger, 1998). This proved to be particularly useful for the present study, where interviewees had different levels of expertise on

the subject, especially concerning knowledge of the spiral of silence in the 'real' or the 'online' world. Furthermore, this methodology can be more effective than other methods as a way of collecting data that enables us to understand the true reasons for the silence of voters in the Italian context.

### ***Limitations***

Nevertheless, there are also limitations to this methodology. The data collected through semi-structured interviews can be abundant and consequently can be difficult to handle and to analyse synthetically. Moreover, interviews are a time-consuming evaluation methodology, as they require the collection, transcription and interpretation of results (Boyce & Neale, 2006). In addition, as they only allow for small samples to be chosen, the results of interviews often cannot be generalised (Boyce & Neale, 2006).

### ***Sampling***

As the topic of an online spiral of silence has hardly been investigated in the Italian political context, four categories of interviewees were established, for the purpose of obtaining a 360-degree understanding of the reasons behind the phenomenon:

- Professors of political science
- Experts of public opinion
- Journalists and bloggers
- Experts in social media analysis (**Appendix 3**).

There were two main reasons for choosing experts as the main participants in the interviews. Firstly, experts can provide a picture of the phenomenon, something which people with no previous expertise on the subject would not be able to do. It was also acknowledged that experts could provide interesting demographic data, useful for an analysis of the intrinsic motives behind the silence of voters. Conversely, users of social media were not chosen as interviewees, because the sample chosen for this present study would be too small to enable conclusions to be drawn about a diverse and geographically mixed country such as Italy.

The potential interviewees were approached by email. Out of the eighteen experts contacted, twelve agreed to be interviewed. Upon completion of the interviews, enough data was collected for the depth of available information to be considered sufficient for the analysis.

### ***Design of Interviews***

Interviews were semi-structured, with a series of predetermined open-ended questions alongside other questions that emerged from the dialogue with the interviewees (DiCicco-Bloom, 2006:315). In general, topic guides are a crucial component of interviews, since they enable the interviewer to fully interact with the interviewee without losing track, and thus avoiding unprofessional silences between one topic and the other (Meuser & Nagel, 1998, cited in Flick, 2009:167).

From an initial pilot test comprising two interviews, it emerged that the topic guide cannot always be strictly followed, since interviewees differ in their way of answering questions. Nevertheless, semi-structured interviews proved to work sufficiently well for the purposes of the study; the two pilot interviews were included in the analysis, as they generated interesting data for interpretation. Before the start of the interview process, for ethical reasons all the interviewees were informed that the interview would be recorded, that it would be transcribed and analysed at a later stage, and that they could stop the interview at any point.

### ***Coding and Thematic Analysis***

The twelve interviews carried out with experts were analysed using thematic analysis. Such analysis consists of collecting qualitative data, analysing it for themes or perspectives and reporting a few key themes (Creswell, 2009:184). This study employed a constructionist approach of thematic analysis, in which the focus is not on motivation or individual psychology, but rather on the theorisation of 'sociocultural contexts, and structural conditions, that enable the individual accounts that are provided' (Braun & Clarke, 2006:85). Furthermore, a list of key codes was designed deductively (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008:106), based on the theory of the spiral of silence and the key topics of social media engagement and public opinion.

Braun and Clarke (2006)'s six steps were employed for the thematic analysis of the interviews:

- 1) Familiarisation with data – the interviews were first transcribed and re-read. Although transcription procedures may be seen as extremely time-consuming, several scholars (Bird, 2005, Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; cited in Braun and Clarke, 2006) recognise them as an interpretative act, as transcripts enable the researcher to familiarise him/herself with the contents.

2) Generation of initial codes – in the process of coding, data was organised into meaningful groups (Miles & Huberman, 1994). **Appendix 4** shows an example of the codes assigned to some of the interview extracts, which are linked to the theory of public opinion developed by Noelle-Neumann (1993).

3) Searching for themes – Coded data differ from the units of analysis (themes), which are often broader (Braun & Clarke, 2006:88). Initially, four main themes, with respective sub-themes, were developed and related to the main concept of online/offline discussions (**Appendix 5**).

4) Reviewing themes – The themes were then reviewed and reduced. In order to be consistent with the analytical strategy adopted for content analysis, only two themes were retained: assessment of climate of opinion, and willingness to speak out (**Appendix 6**).

5) Defining and naming themes – After having created a redefined thematic map, the themes were named and, in order to go beyond “face value” (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000:53), an Excel workbook was created containing all the themes and subthemes, per interviewee categories (**Appendix 7**). In order to facilitate the writing of the report (Step 6), the frequency of the respondents’ use of the themes was also calculated (**Appendix 8**). This was followed by a final re-examination of the transcripts, to make sure that the themes produced were consistent with their original context.

## RESULTS

The findings obtained using the two methodologies employed in this study provided answers to the research question, according to the two variables of assessment: the climate of opinion (independent variable), and willingness to speak out (dependent variable). For the purpose of facilitating the interpretation, and in order to triangulate the research results, the findings of the two methodologies are here examined together.

### *Theme 1 - Assessment of Climate of Opinion*

Three sub-themes of the first general theme emerged from the interviews and were frequently mentioned by a significant number of interviewees: ‘negativity’, ‘media exposure’ and ‘social pressures’. Two of these sub-themes also emerged during the content analysis of the 407 posts under consideration. **Table 1** below shows the method used for the specific analysis of each of the sub-themes.

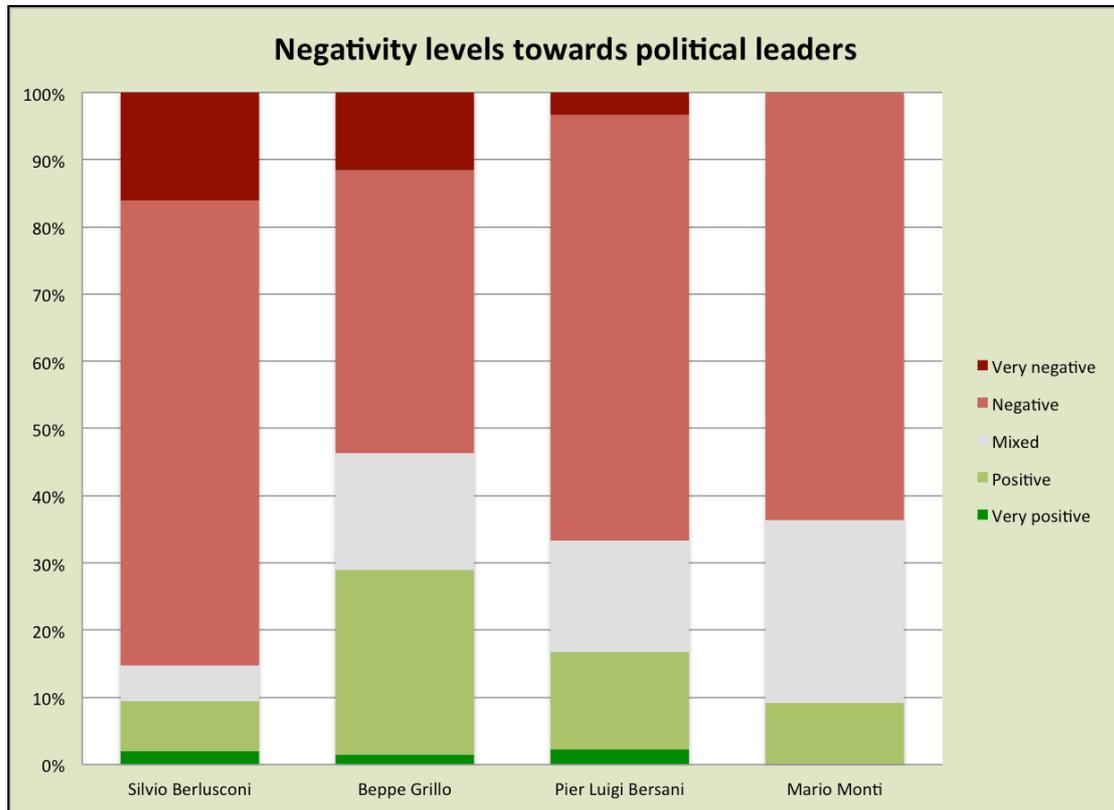
Theme	Sub-theme	Analysed using
Assessment of climate of opinion (independent variable)	Negativity	Content Analysis / Interviews
	Exposure to media (social/mass)	Interviews
	Social pressures	Content Analysis / Interviews

**Table 1 - Theme 1. Assessment of climate of opinion**

#### **Sub-Theme of Negativity**

The first finding of interest is related to the level of negativity expressed in online posts towards political leaders. People interacting on social media express comments that generally have a high level of negativity towards political figures (**Figure 2**), as illustrated by the extensive use of red in the four bars – light red indicates ‘negative’ comments, and dark red refers to ‘very negative’ comments. Indeed, negative posts seem to be more prevalent than positive ones (in green), regardless of which of the four main political leaders is under discussion. However, Silvio Berlusconi showed the highest level of ‘very negative’ results, followed by Pier Luigi Bersani and Beppe

Grillo. Negativity was also strong towards Mario Monti, but there were far fewer posts about this political leader than about the other three figures.



**Figure 2 - Negativity towards political leaders**

For Noelle-Neumann, a climate of opinion was built on individuals' perceptions of the opinions that were gaining ground and those that were losing ground (Jeffres, 2008). It is arguable that the level of negativity expressed towards a particular political leader may considerably alter the climate of opinion that is built around that specific figure, as online users may perceive that such negativity reflects opinions that are losing ground.

Several interviewees also pointed out that the perception of a specific climate of opinion could be a reason for preventing people from expressing their political ideas. In particular, three factors have been suggesting as generating a negative or positive climate of opinion:

- being a controversial figure
- the anti-political nature of the Italian political situation
- the 'shame effect' linked to specific political leaders

- **Being a controversial figure** – From one of the interviews, it emerged that

“Silvio Berlusconi and Beppe Grillo do indeed have controversial features and have been criticised because they behave in ways that we can define as ‘politically incorrect’” (Giampietro Mazzoleni).

Furthermore,

“...Many people were ashamed of voting for Beppe Grillo, because his party is a protest party. It’s subversive and it was thus a special case” (Bill Emmott).

- ***The anti-political nature of the Italian political situation*** – Four of the respondents remarked that the strong disappointment Italians feel about politics in Italy can be classified as one of the factors that have both created a strongly negative perception of the traditional parties (the centre-right and centre-left coalitions) and also facilitated the growth of protest-based movements such as the Five Star Movement founded by Beppe Grillo.

In this respect, Paolo Segatti remarked that:

“The climate of opinion in Italy is an anti-political one, and those who are in agreement with politics are those who are likely to have the strongest difficulties at expressing themselves.”

Moreover, Ilvo Diamanti remarked that:

“In Italy, the dominant climate of opinion is hostile to all parties. And the Five Star Movement becomes a channel through which such a climate of opinion can most easily be expressed.”

An opposing point of view was expressed by Stefano Cristante:

“I would not talk about anti-politics. This is a spiral of confusion, where there are uncertainties not only about your external enemy but also about your internal enemy.”

- ***The ‘shame effect’ linked to specific political leaders*** – The keyword ‘shame’ repeatedly appeared throughout several of the interview transcripts.

Negativity towards a political figure or party can, indeed, be traced to a ‘shame’ effect linked to the specific contingencies surrounding that figure, both in the real and in the online spheres (Dahlgren, 2005).

For example, one of the social media experts argued that:

“The reasons why one is ashamed in a normal context, when you hide your opinion because you are afraid of being accused or because the politician is not popular, can also be found online” (Marco Camisani-Calzolari).

Similarly, two other interviewees remarked, respectively, that:

“People are ashamed because Berlusconi is seen as an absolute evil, and nobody online will ever tell you that they want to vote for him” (Emanuela Zaccone).

and

“It is well-known that Berlusconi is judged negatively, even by his supporters, and this creates a ‘shame effect’ but, even so, this would not prevent his supporters from still voting for him” (Roberto D’Alimonte).

### **Sub-Theme of Exposure to Media**

The media plays a key role within the spiral of silence theory (McQuail, 2010:519). The Italian media situation is a complex one, in which Berlusconi’s well-known conflicts of interest and propaganda activities have had a strong effect on the political context for many years. Many interviewees remarked this feature, and stressed the key role that traditional media in general, and television in particular, still play in the Italian political context:

“There has never been such a TV-based election campaign in the history of Italy’s second republic, despite the Internet, blogs and social media” (Ilvo Diamanti).

Similarly, another respondent argued that:

“Social media alone cannot build public opinion, but they contribute to its formation because traditional media allow them to enter the realm of public discussion” (Matteo Colle).

Nevertheless, agenda-setting strategies seem to have also been adopted in the sphere of social media. As one of the social media experts argued:

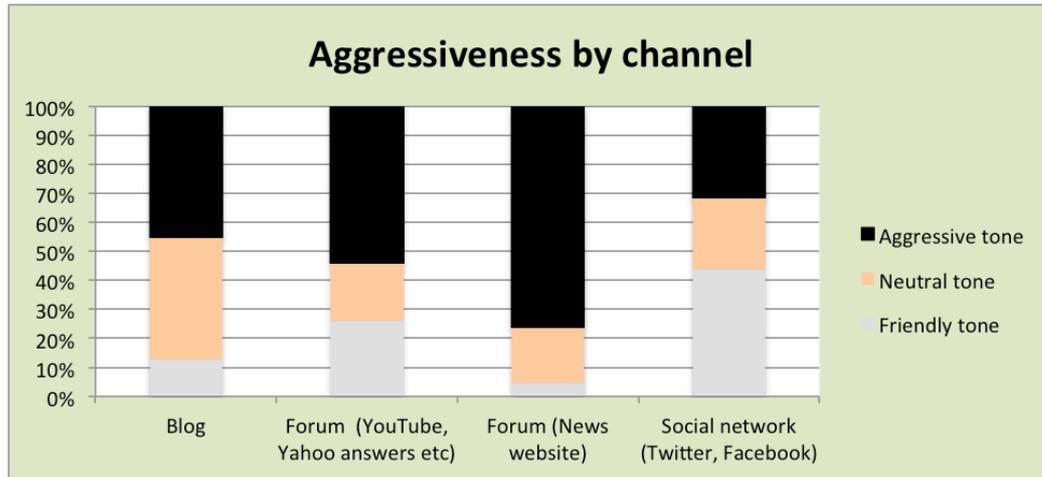
“Berlusconi does not have an ‘army’ of dedicated employees online; Beppe Grillo does. These individuals are responsible for carrying out ‘psycho-social’ and ‘social engineering’ activities in social media” (Marco Camisani-Calzolari).

Such findings suggest that the role played by social media in building a climate of opinion should be considered in the light of an interplay between online and offline practices (Pepe & Di Gennaro, 2009). Nevertheless, social pressures can also influence an individual’s assessment of the climate of opinion. These pressures are not exercised in social media in the way that they are in traditional media.

### **Sub-Theme of Social Pressures**

Social pressures also appeared as a relevant sub-theme to the assessment of the climate of opinion. Online, social pressures can be identified in the level of aggressiveness and the tone of the discussions between users:

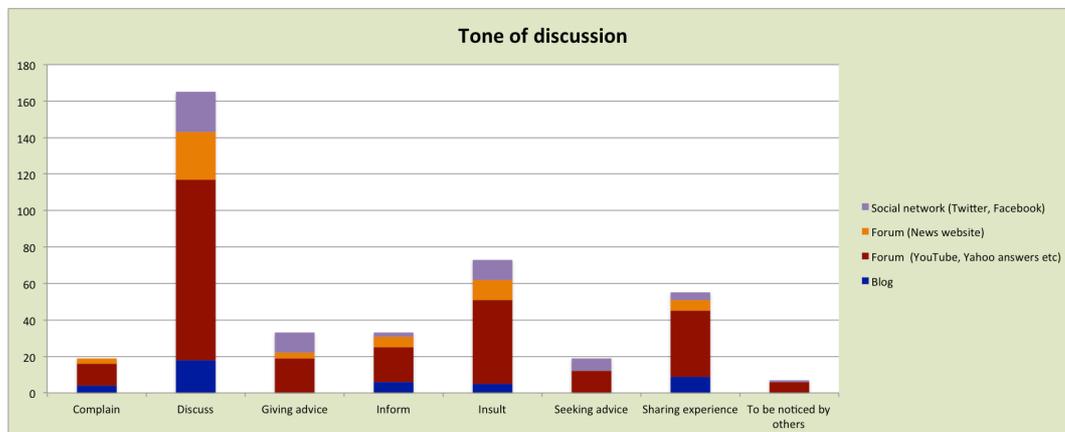
- **Aggressiveness** – Aggressiveness changes online according to the category of social channel in which conversations take place (**Figure 3**). While conversations on social networks are mainly characterised by a friendly tone, things change considerably in other channels. In blogs, levels of aggressiveness (here categorised into friendly, neutral and aggressive) are mixed. In forums, they are mainly aggressive.



**Figure 3 - Aggressiveness by channel**

The association between channels and aggressiveness was also tested from a statistical perspective. The data showed a statistically significant association ( $\chi^2 = 32,629$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p = <0.001$ ). The association was also statistically significant when the post was identified as being made before, during or after the elections, for all groups, at the 5% significance level (results: before the elections:  $\chi^2 = 25,918$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p = <0.001$ ; during the elections:  $\chi^2 = 6,061$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.048$ ; after the elections:  $\chi^2 = 17,162$   $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.009$  – see **Appendix 9**).

- **Tone of discussions** - Such findings go hand in hand with the categorisation of commentaries by objective. As **Figure 4** demonstrates, the intention of the largest group of online comments is discussion. However, it is interesting that the second largest group has a negative objective – being insulting. This is further evidence to support the idea that online conversations tend to be negative (Nation, 2011:86) and thus, arguably, hostile to the sharing of personal opinions.



**Figure 4 – Tone of discussion**

Surprisingly, the interviews presented a less negative idea of the social pressures exercised in social media. Firstly, social media are seen as a discursive arena where ‘opinion wars are more shrewd’ (Stefano Cristante) and ‘ideas can spread in a less binding and more rapid way’ (Matteo Colle). Secondly, whilst all respondents cited social pressures as key components in the assessment of a climate of opinion, the topics that were most commonly mentioned were those suggesting a distinction between majority and minority, and referring to ‘social sanctions’.

- **Majority/minority** – In particular, reference was made to the influential role that a majority might have in influencing voters’ intentions, so that:

“In the final phase of the elections, precisely in the last days, many are hauled off to vote for what they think will be the winning party” (Ilvo Diamanti).

- **Social sanctions** – Also, ‘social sanctions’ are important, as remarked by Matteo Colle:

“Anyone who votes for Silvio Berlusconi [...] perceives a social sanction according to which the vote towards Berlusconi is perceived, from a social perspective, to be unacceptable.”

Indeed, perceptions of peer opinion and prevailing social norms can have an impact on discourses concerning controversial topics (Neuwirth & Frederick, 2004:689), and, as many studies on social pressure in the spiral of silence theory have demonstrated (Oshagan, 1996; Scheufele & Moy, 2000; Scheufele, Shanahan, & Lee, 2001; cited in Neuwirth, & Frederick, 2004:675), they can be considered to be a strong influence on an individual’s willingness to speak out, in both offline and online contexts.

### ***Theme 2 – Willingness to speak out***

As a dependent variable, the willingness to speak out follows the assessment of the climate of opinion. Four sub-themes emerged as factors contributing to the online expression of political opinions: ‘perceived empowerment’, ‘explicit political affiliation’, ‘anonymity’ and ‘fear’ (**Table 2**).

Theme	Sub-theme	Analysed using
<b>Willingness to speak out (dependent variable)</b>	Perceived empowerment	Interviews
	Explicit political affiliation	Content analysis
	Anonymity	Content Analysis / Interviews
	Fear	Interviews

**Table 2 - Theme 2 - Willingness to speak out**

### **Sub-Theme of Perceived Empowerment**

Several of the interview transcripts revealed that the apparent ‘freedom’ allowed by the Internet (Benkler, 2006) plays a key role in determining an individual’s willingness to express opinions.

For example, Giampietro Mazzoleni stated that:

“Social media are a tool to show off, rather than hiding. This is particularly true of Twitter, as Twitter contains the majority of political opinions”

Similarly, Marcello Mari argued that:

“The internet enables freedom of expression, since it is composed of communities connected to ideas.”

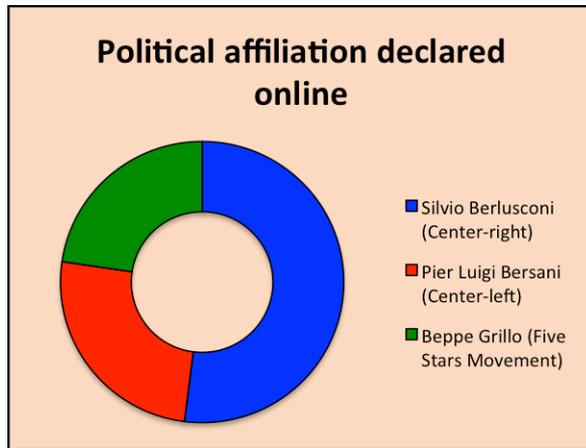
The idea of a creation of online communities, which may promote the fragmentation of ideas, was also presented by Paolo Segatti:

“Social media create certain homogeneous communities, according to what people share. People even talk of the ‘fragmentation’ phenomenon.”

### **Sub-Theme of Explicit political affiliation**

Furthermore, the content analysis showed a surprising result with regard to the overt political affiliation expressed in the user’s comment. Interestingly, the largest

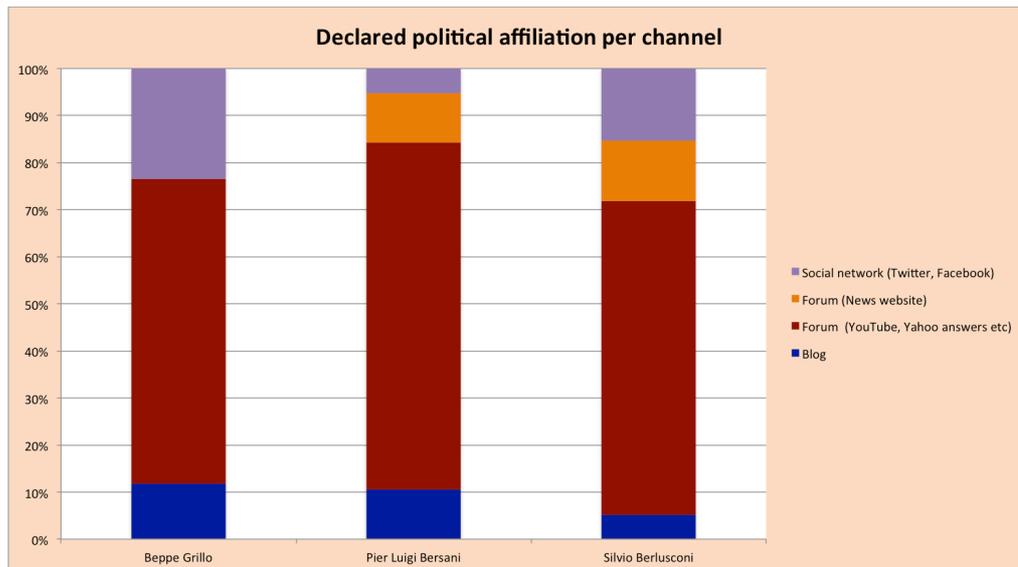
number of posts including a declared political affiliation supported Silvio Berlusconi, (**Figure 5**), followed by the posts of voters of Pier Luigi Bersani and Beppe Grillo.



**Figure 5 - Political affiliation declared online**

### Sub-Theme of Anonymity

This leads to the sub-theme of anonymity. Anonymity played a crucial role in the analysis, as it was one of the major factors which allowed for the fear of isolation to be removed from the spiral of silence original model, according to scholars such as Yun & Park (2011). The analysis of one commenter's declarations of political affiliation, across the four types of channels examined, is shown below (**Figure 6**):



**Figure 6 - Declared political affiliation per channel**

Not surprisingly, people seem to declare their support for a specific political leader on platforms where they are more likely to appear in an anonymous form (forums such

as YouTube and Yahoo! Answers), rather than on social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, where levels of anonymity are generally lower. Interestingly, Silvio Berlusconi and Pier Luigi Bersani's declared voters appear in a lower proportion on social networks than those of Beppe Grillo. Results for Mario Monti are not shown, as they were not relevant for the purpose of analysis.

Such results seem to be supported by many of the statements of the experts in social media analysis:

“The user enters with his/her own personality on a social network such as Facebook and Twitter; he is not anonymous. YouTube is different, it's a venue for commenting, where profiles are not personalised.” (Vincenzo Cosenza)

“On Facebook and Twitter, rather than a feeling of ‘I cannot express my opinion’, there is a general feeling of ‘I do not want to express my opinion’ – because users display their names and surnames.” (Emanuela Zaccone)

Moreover,

“Generally, voters are reluctant to express political opinions when they are not protected by anonymity.” (Marcello Mari)

### **Sub-Theme of Fear**

The last sub-theme of interest deals with the fear of isolation, which seems to be lower within online discussions (Schulz & Roessler, 2012:346), as shown by the interview transcripts:

“The fear of disclosing one's vote has now decreased, and the display of preferences is now less problematic, especially in an online context.” (Matteo Colle)

Moreover,

“The Internet represents a place where you can express your opinion, regardless of how extreme that opinion is. This, of course, puts very active voters in a difficult position – as the discrepancy between active and inactive users is decreased.” (Marcello Mari)

## DISCUSSION

The above results and commentaries show that, overall, the main components of the spiral of silence theory change considerably when the phenomenon is observed in its online form. Just as the characteristics of interpersonal mediated communication can reduce Goffman's concept of 'involvement obligation' (cited in McDevitt et al., 2003), which is applicable in face-to-face contexts, the approach of individuals to the assessment of a climate of opinion, and their consequent willingness to speak out, are affected in the online world.

With regard to the specific context of the 2013 Italian elections, a generally negative climate of opinion towards all parties, reflective of a strong anti-political environment (Campus, 2010:2), generated a negative climate of opinion towards all political leaders, as shown in **Figure 2**. Nevertheless, the findings show, surprisingly, that such negativity may not prevent social media users from expressing their preference for leaders with a negative climate of opinion.

More specifically, the potential removal of fear of isolation in the online context calls for a review of Noelle-Neumann's original theory, as the anonymity enabled by specific online channels increases the likelihood of declaring one's political opinion. While Noelle-Neumann's (1993:6) model also referred to isolation as a top-down process, in which people develop a desire to 'avoid isolating themselves' (Noelle-Neumann, 1993:6), the combination of the top-down and bottom-up communication models allowed by social media (Savigny, 2002) and the perceived empowerment experienced by users, as mentioned by 10 of the interviewees, provide an incentive for people to express their opinions more freely. This, clearly, is reflective of Silverstone's conceptualization of mediation (2005), and such different settings of social media allow for increased political communication and social involvement (Kraut et al., 2002, cited in De Zúñiga et al, 2009:558).

Analysing online discussions demonstrates how useful the concept of a public sphere can be for understanding online conversations on interactive media, which enable citizens to 'feel free to express controversial issues in spontaneous interaction' (McDevitt et al., 2003:454). Nevertheless, the application of a Habermasian deliberative democracy model would not be appropriate in the specific context of Italian online political discussions, where conversations are characterised by a high degree of irrationality, passion and aggressiveness across all channels (**Figures 3**

**and 4).** As Hurrell (2005) and Strandberg (2008) argue, anonymous exchanges undermine the ability for truly deliberative discussions to take place (Rosenberry, 2011:17); this is strongly reminiscent of Mouffe's conceptualisation of an agonistic pluralism (Mouffe, 1999) and is reflective of the project's conceptual framework.

A distinction between perceived majority and minority ideas online, combined with social pressures in computer-mediated communication, contribute to the shaping of such an irrational environment. Online users use their 'quasi-statistical' sense (Noelle-Neumann, 1993:216) to understand the preferences of the majority. While in the offline world a 'bandwagon effect' (Lazarsfeld, 196;107-9, cited in Noelle-Neumann, 1993) has shifted votes from the centre-left coalition to Beppe Grillo, as shown in the graph of opinion polls (**Figure 1**), thus triggering a 'last minute swing' (Brennan, 1949), it appears that it is more difficult to determine the majority opinions in the online world, because of the different communication modalities offered by social media. Moreover, the increased diversity allowed by social media, which results in a fragmentation phenomenon (Dahlberg, 2007), poses significant challenges to the formation of an identified majority. As a consequence, individuals willingly form 'echo chambers', narrowly filter the information they receive (Sunstein, 2008), and arguably build smaller climates of opinion.

Having made such considerations, it is possible to further expand the interpretations of the findings, and relate them to each of the four main political leaders of the 2013 elections.

### ***Silvio Berlusconi***

Silvio Berlusconi, the leader of the centre-right coalition, is a controversial leader and, as such, is surrounded by a negative climate of opinion as shown in **Figure 2** (85,3% of negativity, 9,4% of positivity). Nevertheless, he was the leader who gained the strongest support in terms of declared voters online (48,75%). Arguably, a spiral of silence does not exist towards this political figure in the online world, as opposed to the offline world, in which people would not reveal their intention to vote for him during opinion and exit polls, thus triggering the activation of a 'demoscopic' spiral of silence (Natale, 2009), as identified by the experts in opinion polls interviewed.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Information about an "offline" spiral of silence has not been included in the results section, but interview transcripts are available if needed.

***Pier Luigi Bersani***

Like Silvio Berlusconi, Pier Luigi Bersani, the leader of the centre-left coalition, suffers from a strong level of negativity (66,7% negativity, 16,7% positivity). Moreover, the proportion of online declared centre-left voters was surprisingly high, compared to the expectations (23,75%). However, the trends observed for Pier Luigi Bersani are generally less marked than those for Silvio Berlusconi. Such mixed results are partly due to the fact that Bersani is a much less controversial figure than Berlusconi. Further, Bersani benefits from a high level of loyalty to the traditional bi-partisan political structure, and to the party itself. This seems to be slightly different from what was observed in the offline world and in the opinion polls, in which a strong reverse discrepancy between declared and actual votes seem to be the clear signal of a reversed spiral of silence, as stated by half of the interviewees.

***Beppe Grillo***

As a result of the Five Star Movement's Internet and social media presence (Bartlett et al., 2013:14), the expectations prior to the study were that the findings would show a low degree of online negativity for Beppe Grillo, combined with strong support from declared voters on social media. Such assumptions about negativity levels were partially confirmed by the results, where positive and negative posts do not differ as much as for other leaders (53,6% of negative posts, 29% of positive). This is arguably due to the fact that Beppe Grillo benefits from being a new phenomenon and the head of a 'protest' movement (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2013:2). The objective of protest voters can be identified as being to demonstrate rejection of all other parties (Van Der Brug et al., 2000:82), thus suiting the strong anti-political discontent of the Italian electorate.

However, the findings also showed that the level of declared Grillo voters was much lower than expected (21,25%), which is arguably due to two factors. On the one hand, Beppe Grillo is also regarded by the general climate of opinion as a controversial leader, as noted by six interviewees. On the other hand, preferences for traditional parties may be rooted in the established feeling of loyalty towards the bi-partisan political system, which has characterised Italy for the past decades.

As a result, the findings seem to suggest the existence of an online spiral of silence towards this political leader, contrary to what was expected before the study. Nevertheless, this is strongly representative of events in the 'offline' world, in which the extremely large discrepancy between the percentage of declared voters for Beppe

Grillo two weeks before the elections, and the actual percentage of votes in the elections, are reflective of a clear spiral of silence (**Figure 1**).

### ***Mario Monti***

Because of his influence on the 2013 elections, Mario Monti was initially included in the research design. However, most social media posts studied did not provide interesting data about this political figure, and a few interviewees referred to Mario Monti only as a political figure who provoked little online interest. Consequently, the lack of data does not make it possible to infer whether an online spiral of silence was activated towards Mario Monti. Nevertheless, the reverse discrepancy in declared and actual votes (**Figure 1**), together with many of the interviews, suggest that a 'reverse' spiral of silence towards Mario Monti was activated in the 'offline' world.

In general, these mixed results suggest that the spiral of silence phenomenon is highly subject to the specific context where it is observed.

## **LIMITATIONS**

Clearly, this study provides interesting findings, which raise the possibility of discussion about the role of social media. Nevertheless, it is not free of limitations. In the first place, social media cannot be a representative sample of the total population (Lupetti, 2012; Boccia, 2013).

Furthermore, the research was carried out over a limited time period, and only publically available online posts were considered for the purpose of analysis. In addition, the decision to carry out content analysis by employing a totally manual system can allow for extremely reliable and precise findings, but does not allow broader inferences to be made from a larger sample. In this respect, stronger empirical results might have been obtained if a different content analysis technique, such as semi-automated content analysis, had been used (Ceron et al., 2013).

Another methodological limitation lies in the decision to interview experts rather than users. This decision was made for specific reasons (see the Methodology), but interviewing users would have allowed a greater understanding of individuals' willingness to speak out, to emerge from the present study, as this is related to the ideas of anonymity, aggressiveness and conformity.

## **FURTHER AREAS OF RESEARCH**

This leads to a proposal for further areas of research. A larger project could use the platform for discussion allowed by this study to further investigate the impact of the components of the spiral of silence theory on social media, and to operate a comparative analysis within a mass-mediated environment, in order to observe how key variables vary across the two areas of assessment: climate of opinion and willingness to speak out. This could be achieved by building up some 'indexes' of climate of opinion (e.g. negative/positive), based on specific variables, and combining them with 'indexes' of willingness to speak out, thus assessing the specific likelihood for a spiral of silence to occur online, using mathematical formulae.

Moreover, the area of passivity has not been covered by this research, and it is thus suggested that a broader study, aiming to explore what is 'not expressed' online, could explore this further through the employment of different types of methodology.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study has aimed to demonstrate the ways in which Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory, originally developed in a mass-media context, can also be applied to social media. More specifically, the research has shown how the 2013 Italian election can be used as a case study to investigate this phenomenon in a new environment.

In line with Noelle Neumann's original spiral of silence theory, this research has suggested that some specific elements of the theory, such as social pressures and perception of the surrounding climate of opinion, influence users' communicative behaviour within social media (Heney, 2011:12).

The findings of this study support the existing literature on the online form of the spiral of silence by showing how the anonymity afforded by the Internet (Heney, 2011:12) seems to undermine the fear of isolation, thus allowing increased expression of opinions. However, the research has also demonstrated that a spiral of silence may be sensitive to specific contingencies, which may alter the level of an individual's willingness to speak out according to its specific context. While previous studies had illustrated how the form of the theory can change when observed on the web at a general level, observing the specific Italian context shows how previously unresearched features can also emerge.

Furthermore, in line with the literature on political participation, and derived from Noelle-Neumann's theory of public opinion as social control, this study has emphasised the mediated nature of the online spiral of silence. The combination of perceived empowerment, strong negativity and aggressiveness that has emerged from the findings reflects the bottom-up approach made possible by social media, and the increasing readiness of online users to speak out on controversial topics, as opposed to the top-down structures promoted by institutions, in which individuals are passively subject to the influence of mass media (Nusselder, 2013). This dialectical exchange of forces is reflective of the media effect/ritual effect dialectic of Silverstone's conceptualisation of mediation, and supports the widespread criticism of the failure of the original spiral of silence theory to consider the intermediate domain of interpersonal communication.

Moreover, scholars have generally agreed that the web can be seen as a 'public sphere'. The results of the present study have stressed the aggressive, irrational and negative environment that can characterise online discussions, an environment which is embedded within Mouffe's (1999) notion of agonistic pluralism, where an irrational and passionate environment facilitates the exercise of power, contrary to Habermas's ideal conception of the public sphere. This also supports Yun and Park's study of the spiral of silence in computer-mediated communication, which demonstrated that 'online discussion forums are not as ideal as many people think' (Yun & Park, 2011:217).

This study has also made inferences about the existence of a spiral of silence directed towards specific political leaders. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that further research is needed in order to explore the phenomenon in more detail. Such research would require analysis to be made over a longer time period, across multiple channels (possibly with the adoption of semi-automated content analysis), or with the employment of experimental settings, which would limit the bias in results arising from surveys, and which is commonly observed with opinion polls. Nevertheless, this study has contributed to the research on spiral of silence theory, in that it draws on previous research about the willingness of people to speak out about controversial topics online, but extends such research by examining the theory within specific geographical and political contexts. It thus follows that Noelle Neumann's theory is still relevant to the concept of public opinion within social media as it is within mass media, and future research should therefore continue to appreciate the relevance of Noelle-Neumann's work to contemporary politics.

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**APPENDICES**

**Appendix 1. Content Analysis Codebook**

<i>Field area</i>		<i>Name of Variable</i>	<i>Field</i>	<i>Description</i>
		<b>DATE (removed after pilot study)</b>	<i>Date</i>	Date that comment was made
	1	BEFAFTER	<i>Before/After Elections 2013</i>	Is the post made before (before February 24th), during (on February 24th or 25th) or after (after February 26th) the Italian political elections of 2013?
	2	CHANNEL	<i>Channel type</i>	What type of social media site is the comment on (e.g. blog, forum etc.)? - blog - forum (YouTube, Yahoo answers, other): online board for discussion starting from videos, questions - forum (news website): online board form starting from news article - social networking: Destination or platform designed specifically for social networking, where level of anonymity is lower e.g. (Twitter, Facebook, G+, LinkedIn - self explanatory)
<b>Commentator insights</b>		<b>COMMENTATORNAME (removed after pilot study)</b>	<i>Commentator name (if available)</i>	Commentators profile or tag name e.g. @cri_stina_ki would be 'cristinaki'
	3	NICKNAMEYN/ANONYMITY	<i>Commentator name displayed as nickname?</i>	Indicate if commentator name is in form of nickname: - yes - yo (only if full name and surnames are displayed) - n/a
	4	COMMENTOBJ	<i>Commentary objective</i>	Why are people making a comment? - sharing experience - giving advice - seeking advice - republishing material - being insulting - discussing - seeking notice of others - complaining - informing
	5	COMMENTTONE	<i>Commentator's tone</i>	Describe the tone of the post used: - irony - anger - fun - happiness - support - pity - sadness - no particular tone
	6	AGGRESSIVENESS	<i>Peer-to-peer interaction tone</i>	What kind of relationship do we see overall between the two commentators? - aggressive tone - neutral tone - friendly tone -n/a
		<b>GENDER (removed after pilot study)</b>	<i>Gender</i>	Is the commentator male/female? (if this can be source or inferred, then code) - male - female - cannot say
		<b>AGEGROUP (removed after pilot study)</b>	<i>Age group</i>	What age is the commentator? (again, if sourced or inferred select one age bracket from list)

<b>Sharing political ideas</b>	7	IMPLICITEXPLICIT	<i>Explicit/Implicit</i>	Is the commentator showing his political ideas openly? - implicit negative - implicit positive - explicit negative - explicit positive - neutral
	8	IMPLEXPLPOL	<i>Against which political figure?</i>	Which political leader does the commenter support? - Silvio Berlusconi - Pier Luigi Bersani - Beppe Grillo - Mario Monti - More than one - n/a
	9	POLITAFFIL	<i>Political affiliation of commentator</i>	Potential (if inferable) political affiliation of commentator: - Berlusconi - Bersani - Monti - Grillo - Clear political opinion, but no clear connection with political figure - Expressed abstentionism / no preference - n/a
<b>Mentions of political leaders</b>	10	BERLUYN	<i>Silvio Berlusconi mentioned?</i>	Yes/No
	11	BERLUATT	<i>Attitude towards Silvio Berlusconi</i>	How does the commentator perceive the character of Silvio Berlusconi, as inferred from their comments? - v.positive: highly positive opinions shown - positive: if commentators show a positive opinion - n/a: no opinion given - negative: if commentators show a negative opinion - v.negative: highly negative opinions shown - mixed: clearly mixed opinions
	12	GRILLOYN	<i>Beppe Grillo mentioned?</i>	Yes/No
	13	GRILLOATT	<i>Attitude towards Beppe Grillo</i>	How does the commentator perceive the character of Beppe Grillo, as inferred from their comments? - v.positive: highly positive opinions shown - positive: if commentators show a positive opinion - n/a: no opinion given - negative: if commentators show a negative opinion - v.negative: highly negative opinions shown - mixed: clearly mixed opinions
	14	BERSANIYN	<i>Pier Luigi Bersani mentioned?</i>	Yes/No
	15	BERSANIATT	<i>Attitude towards Pier Luigi Bersani</i>	How does the commentator perceive the character of Pier Luigi Bersani, as inferred from their comments? - v.positive: highly positive opinions shown - positive: if commentators show a positive opinion - n/a: no opinion given - negative: if commentators show a negative opinion - v.negative: highly negative opinions shown - mixed: clearly mixed opinions
	16	MONTIYN	<i>Mario Monti mentioned?</i>	Yes/No

	17	MONTIATT	<i>Attitude towards Mario Monti</i>	How does the commentator perceive the character of Mario Monti, as inferred from their comments? - v.positive: highly positive opinions shown - positive: if commentators show an some positive opinion - n/a: no opinion given - negative: if commentators show an some negative opinion - v.negative: highly negative opinions shown - mixed: clearly mixed opinions
<b>Spiral of silence - occurrence analysis</b>		<b>SOSYN (removed after pilot study)</b>	<i>Mentioning the Spiral of silence phenomenon (as phenomenon, not theory)</i>	Is the commentator pointing out directly the phenomenon of spiral of silence? - yes - no - cannot say
		<b>SOSONLINE (removed after pilot study)</b>	<i>Specific link with ONLINE spiral of silence activation</i>	Does the commentator refer indirectly to an online spiral of silence? - yes - no - cannot say
		<b>SOSACCUSTONE (removed after pilot study)</b>	<i>Accusing tone</i>	Is there a comment accusing others of "being silent": - accusing of disappearing - threatening of unfriending - accusing of remaining silent in polls - accusing of being inferior - other - not applicable
		<b>SOSACCUSPOL (removed after pilot study)</b>	<i>Accuse referred to/linked to</i>	Linked with which political figure? - Silvio Berlusconi - Pier Luigi Bersani - Beppe Grillo - Mario Monti - other (code "Other" even if more than one political figures referred to) - not applicable
		<b>SOSREASON (removed after pilot study)</b>	<i>Reason for spiral of silence of accuser</i>	What reason for silence is given by the accuser? - shame - stupidity - inconvenience - low engagement with politics - lack of self-consciousness - indecision/absenteeism - age - no alternative - personal branding on social networks
<b>Opinion Polls</b>		<b>OPPOLLSYN (removed after pilot study)</b>	<i>Opinion polls mentioned</i>	Is the commentator pointing out directly the accuracy of opinion polls? - tes - no - cannot say
		<b>OPPOLLSATT (removed after pilot study)</b>	<i>Attitude towards opinion polls</i>	Comments about opinion polls: - they are accurate - they are biased towards a particular political figure
		<b>OPPOSSACCUSE (removed after pilot study)</b>	<i>Accuser of polls refers to/links to</i>	Linked with which political figure? - Silvio Berlusconi - Pier Luigi Bersani - Beppe Grillo - Mario Monti - other (code "Other" even if more than one political figure is referred to) - n/a
<b>Proxies for politics - football</b>	18	FOOTBALL	<i>Flag</i>	Is content related to football (as a proxy for politics) - yes - no
<b>Proxies for politics - gender issues</b>	19	WOMEN	<i>Flag</i>	Is content related to gender issues (as a proxy for politics) - yes - no

<i>Proxies for politics - scandals</i>	20	SCANDALS	Flag	Is content related to scandals (as a proxy for politics) - yes - no
<i>Proxies for politics - media ownership</i>	21	MEDIAOWNERSHIP	Flag	Is content related to media ownership (as a proxy for politics) - yes - no

**Appendix 2. Inter Coder Reliability calculations for 4 reliability coefficients for nominal data.**

**Variables: 21. Posts analyzed: 41.**

Variable name	Percent Agreement	Scott's Pi	Cohen's Kappa	Krippendorff's Alpha	Agreements	Disagreements	Cases
BEFAFTER	100%	1	1	1	41	0	41
CHANNEL	97.6%	0.963	0.963	0.963	40	1	41
NICKNAMEYN	87.8%	-0.065	0	-0.052	36	5	41
COMMENTOBJ	92.7%	0.846	0.847	0.848	38	3	41
COMMENTTONE	61%	0.486	0.493	0.492	25	16	41
AGGRESSIVITY	78%	0.667	0.669	0.671	32	9	41
IMPLICITEXPLICIT	70.7%	0.368	0.391	0.375	29	12	41
IMPLEXPLPOL	95.1%	0.813	0.814	0.816	39	2	41
POLITAFFIL	97.6%	0.93	0.93	0.931	40	1	41
BERLUYN	97.6%	0.844	0.844	0.846	40	1	41
BERLUATT	82.9%	0.741	0.743	0.744	34	7	41
GRILLOYN	80.5%	0.471	0.478	0.477	33	8	41
GRILLOATT	85.4%	0.514	0.519	0.52	35	6	41
BERSANIYN	92.7%	0.626	0.631	0.63	38	3	41
BERSANIATT	85.4%	0.276	0.283	0.285	35	6	41
MONTIYN	100%	1	1	1	41	0	41
MONTIATT	100%	1	1	1	41	0	41
FOOTBALL	100%	1	1	1	41	0	41
WOMEN	90.2%	0.446	0.446	0.453	37	4	41
SCANDALS	90.2%	0.544	0.554	0.55	37	4	41
MEDIAOWNERSHIP	90.2%	-0.051	-0.038	-0.038	37	4	41
<b>AVERAGE</b>	<b>90%</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-

**Appendix 3. List of Interviewees**

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Category</b>
1	Paolo Segatti	Professor of political science I
2	Giampietro Mazzoleni	Professor of political science II
3	Roberto D'Alimonte	Professor of political science III
4	Stefano Cristante	Expert of public opinion I
5	Ilvo Diamanti	Expert of public opinion II
6	Paolo Natale	Expert of public opinion III
7	Marcello Mari	Social media analytics expert I
8	Emanuela Zaccone	Social media analytics expert II
9	Marco Camisani-Calzolari	Social media analytics expert III
10	Matteo Colle	Blogger/Journalist I
11	Bill Emmott	Blogger/Journalist II
12	Vincenzo Cosenza	Blogger/Journalist III

**Appendix 4. Example of Interviews Extracts for coding (Step 2 from Braun and Clarke, 2006)**

<b>Interviewee name</b>	<b>Interview extract</b>	<b>Coded</b>
Paolo Segatti	Perché non siamo tutti uguali. Se si prende in considerazione seriamente chi esprime le opinioni allora si vede anche l'opinione prevalente.	a) Willingness to speak out b) Hierarchy of opinion
Paolo Segatti	Per sapere questo bisognerebbe sapere cosa ne pensa il contesto IMMEDIATO. In che modo i social media irrompono in questa realtà e la stravolgono non mi è chiaro, però si creano delle comunità, tra l'altro omogenee – c'è chi parla di frammentazione – secondo cui uno condivide.	a) Social Media b) Context c) Communities created
Giampietro Mazzoleni	Secondo me c'è stata, soprattutto nei confronti di Grillo, devo dire, perché l'hanno riconosciuto anche i sondaggisti, perché Grillo faceva un po' paura e quindi dire di essere Grillini, uno si vergognava un po' (pensa), ma era tanta la rabbia, tanta la frustrazione e tanta l'antipolitica che molti colleghi ecco... Molti hanno riconosciuto solo gli ultimi due giorni che avrebbero votato, mmmh avrebbero votato Grillo. E quindi è una spirale del silenzio che si è poi rivelata, come è successo, col 25,9% di Grillo. nessuno, neanche il buon Ilvo Diamanti..	a) Opinion polls b) Beppe Grillo c) Spiral of silence (YES)
Giampietro Mazzoleni	Eh si, certo, questo vale coi personaggi e coi movimenti che, nei media "mainstream", come voi li chiamate, non sono proprio considerati politically correct oppure ok (ride) semplicemente. Quindi nei grandi media Berlusconi, a parte i suoi media, nei media chiamiamoli di centro-sinistra, Berlusconi non è considerato un soggetto "appropriato" alla vita politica".	a) Climate of opinion b) Shame c) media building climate of opinion
Giampietro Mazzoleni	E quindi ecco Berlusconi e anche Grillo, anche Grillo perché è stato criticato moltissimo dalla sinistra, e anche dalla destra, perché aveva questi atteggiamenti un po' bulli che, diciamo, sembravano un po' poco politically correct da sottoscrivere. E quindi ecco, l'intervistatore che mi viene a chiedere se io voto per Grillo no, io gli dico che voto per il centro-sinistra.	a) Shame b) Spiral of silence (YES) c) Silvio Berlusconi d) Beppe Grillo
Giampietro Mazzoleni	È stata anzi inversa, perché uno diceva che	a) Majority

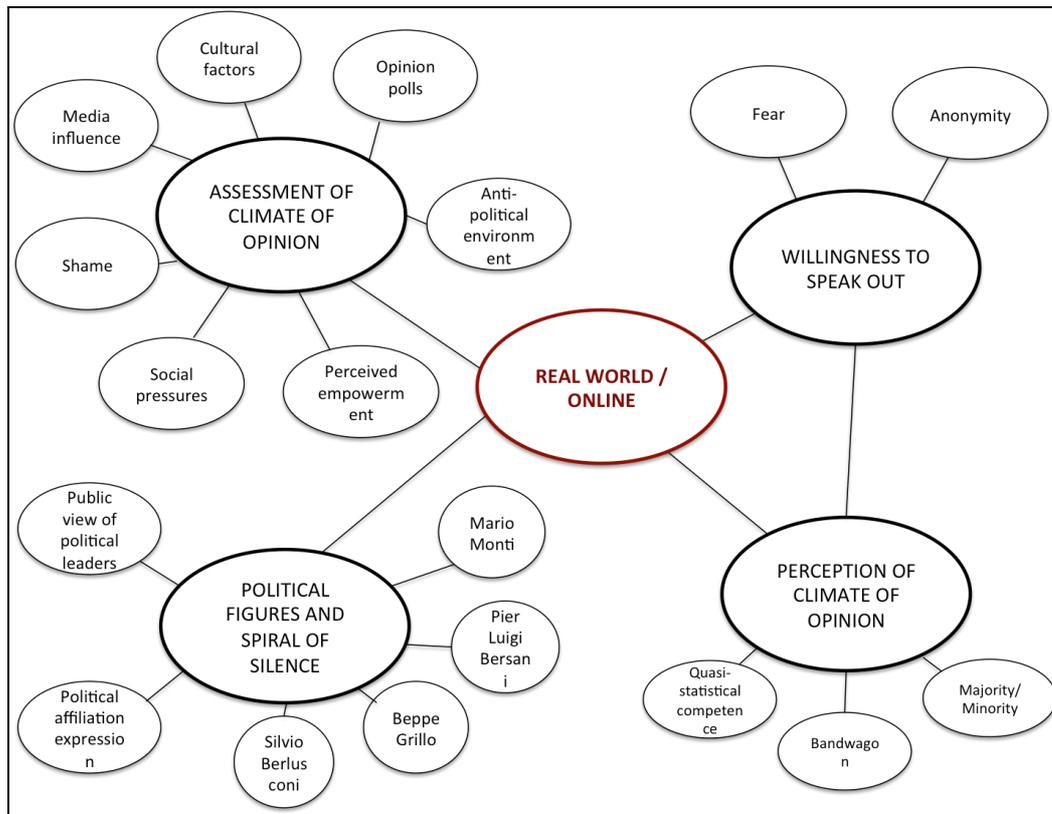
	avrebbe votato Monti, e poi non l'ha fatto. Ma poi bisogna considerare anche l'effetto del "bandwagon": uno si mette a supportare la maggioranza, e Monti non aveva una percentuale alta.	b) Mario Monti c) Spiral of silence (inverse) d) Bandwagon
Giampietro Mazzoleni	Bersani veniva criticato durante la campagna di non fare campagna. E quindi se lei mi avesse chiesto durante i sondaggi se io avrei votato Bersani, e io avessi risposto "no non voto per Bersani", sarei stato sincero (ride). Ecco, non era uno che tirava le folle..	a) Opinion polls b) Pier Luigi Bersani c) Spiral of silence (NO)
Giampietro Mazzoleni	Perché come dice la teoria, il clima d'opinione generale non è favorevole nei loro confronti.	a) Spiral of silence b) Climate of opinion c) Controversial leaders
Ilvo Diamanti	Tecnicamente o teoricamente la spirale del silenzio è un processo che noi definiamo classicamente come bandwagon: sono quelli che trascinano gli orientamenti degli elettori nell'ultima fase, proprio negli ultimi giorni. Normalmente questa è la spiegazione della spirale del silenzio.	a) Spiral of silence b) Bandwagon
Ilvo Diamanti	Cos'è avvenuto, davvero, rispetto, e questo è importante, tra quello che era rivelato e quello che poi si è verificato realmente? Le vere differenze sono tre: 1° una crescita superiore al previsto, anche se non imprevedibile, del MSS 2° un risultato minore rispetto alle previsioni di Monti. 3° ma soprattutto un calo, molto maggiore rispetto al previsto, del PD; preciso: quello che non si attendeva non era il calo del PD, ma la misura in cui questo si è verificato.	a) Opinion polls b) Beppe Grillo c) Pier Luigi Bersani d) Mario Monti
Ilvo Diamanti	Non c'è mai stata una campagna elettorale così televisiva come questa nella storia della seconda repubblica, nonostante internet e i blog, nulla quanto la televisione. Però c'è una cosa interessante: la sua campagna elettorale è segnata dal passaggio da Santoro, quello ha funzionato, ma perché ha funzionato? Perché ha spostato la campagna elettorale dalla rete alla televisione, dalle piazze alla televisione.	a) Traditional media b) social media
Matteo Colle	Uno degli elementi più forti dei media è l'agenda setting. In secondo luogo c'è l'assegnazione del mood e del clima di opinione. Ci sono dei fattori che creano un clima complessivo rispetto a un candidato; in questo momento il clima d'opinione che c'è intorno al movimento cinque stelle è un clima negativo, quindi è evidente che se le devo dare il secondo elemento sull'opinione pubblica, a quel punto il clima di opinione diventa centrale.	a) Media b) climate of opinion c) Beppe Grillo
Matteo Colle	Sui social media bisogna vedere se si può parlare di opinione pubblica; stiamo vivendo un dibattito, ma secondo me da soli i social media non sono opinione pubblica, lo diventano perché gli altri media concorrono a portarli nella discussione pubblica.	a) Social media b) public opinion
Stefano Cristante	In Italia non c'è una particolare attitudine alla dichiarazione di voto per Berlusconi e già questo è un sintomo di spirale del silenzio, però è una spirale del silenzio molto particolare, perché si tratta di una forma di sottrazione di una parte della vecchia maggioranza silenziosa al dibattito.	a) Willingness to speak out b) majority and minority c) spiral of silence d) Silvio Berlusconi
Stefano Cristante	La teoria della spirale del silenzio è riferita non necessariamente ad una minoranza, ma anche ad una maggioranza silenziosa che non si esprime. Il	a) Spiral of silence b) majority c) Beppe Grillo

	<p>qualunquismo non è un qualunquismo non è necessariamente vocante o autodifendentesi. L'effetto è lo stesso perché anche quando c'è un consolidato di società tradizionale che continua a proporsi come settore vincente della società ma parte un altro tipo di azione, per esempio dei movimenti giovanili, che pur mantenendo un livello di minoranza si agitano moltissimo, questo può creare una spirale del silenzio secondaria in cui pur essendo ancora dominante l'opinione precedente, viene intaccata.</p>	
Stefano Cristante	<p>Abbiamo quindi iniziato dal centro destra e dalla vergogna iniziale dove non si capiva chi sarebbe stato il leader, se Alfano o chi per lui, si ha una balcanizzazione che viene poi riunificata dal punto di vista diciamo delle classiche azioni populiste dal capo, cioè da Berlusconi.</p>	<p>a) Shame b) Silvio Berlusconi</p>
Marcello Mari	<p>In Italia chi si interessa di politica è tendenzialmente più attivo sui Social Media rispetto alla media generale degli utenti. Se vogliamo, un distacco maggiore lo abbiamo su Twitter dove sono attivi il 19% di coloro che si interessano di politica, mentre la media generale è del 16%.</p>	<p>a) Social media b) engagement with politics c) demographics</p>
Marcello Mari	<p>In generale gli elettori sono riluttanti a esprimere opinioni politiche quando non protetti da anonimato e da una comunità che condivide le loro stesse opinioni. Ecco quindi che Internet rappresenta sia un posto dove chiunque possa trovare qualcuno che condivide il proprio pensiero, per quanto estremo questo possa essere, che un posto nel quale chiunque possa nascondersi dietro la maschera dell'anonimato.</p> <p>Per gli elettori meno attivi invece, esprimere idee in un forum pubblico diventa sempre più difficile. Dobbiamo sempre ricordare che anche la nostra cerchia di amici e connessioni sui Social Network è sempre da considerare un forum pubblico.</p>	<p>a) Social media b) publicness of internet c) anonymity</p>
Marcello Mari	<p>Un dato molto interessante riguarda anche i cosiddetti influencers, definiti come coloro i quali i propri amici chiedono spesso informazioni riguardo alla politica. Ecco L'Italia è tra i primi paesi al mondo per influencers di politica online con il 22% degli utenti internet che si dichiara tale, anche qui con un picco nel periodo delle elezioni.</p>	<p>a) Influencers b) willingness to speak out c) social pressures</p>
Marcello Mari	<p>Agli italiani online quindi piace esprimere le proprie opinioni politiche.</p>	<p>a) Willingness to speak out b) social media</p>
Marcello Mari	<p>Gli utenti sono più inclini ad esprimere opinioni in ambienti di mentalità ed idee affini alle loro. Questa è l'arma a doppio taglio della rete. Da una parte incoraggia la libera espressione avendo gruppi e comunità affini a qualsiasi tipo di pensiero, dall'altra la inibisce rappresentando un forum di pubblico accesso nel quale l'anonimato non è sempre garantito.</p>	<p>a) Social pressures online</p>
Marcello Mari	<p>Sono stati fatti studi in passato che dimostrano come gli elettori di centro-destra / destra siano più riluttanti a rivelare la propria identità di sostenitori, ma questo è vero online come offline.</p>	<p>a) Berlusconi b) willingness to speak out c) online and offline</p>
Marcello Mari	<p>La particolarità del movimento grillino è quello di essere nato in rete di poter contare su una comunità di sostenitori sicuramente più esperta ed agguerrita nella campagna online, il che inevitabilmente inebisce gli altri elettori</p>	<p>a) Beppe Grillo b) social media</p>

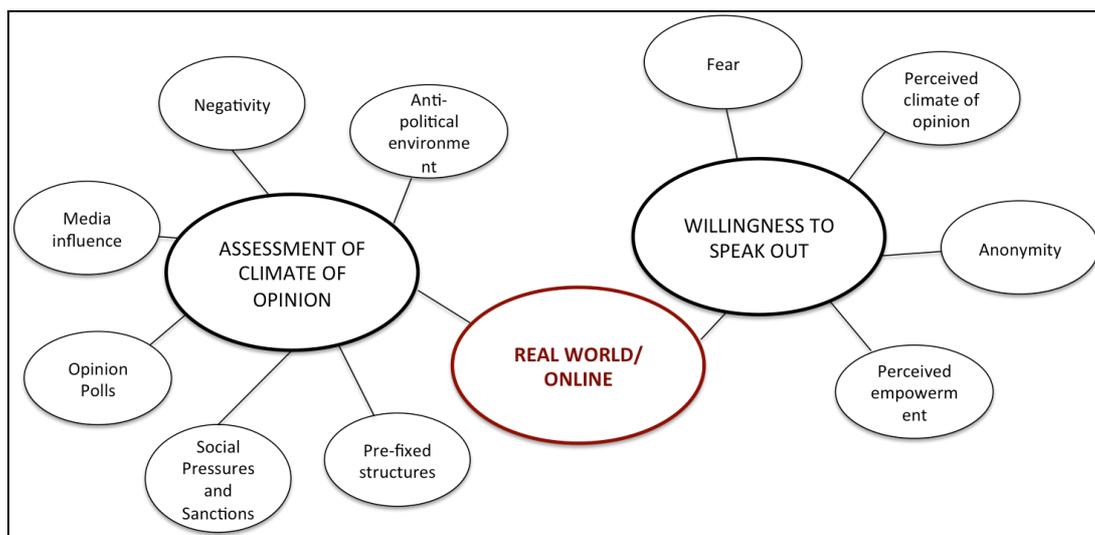
	nell'esprimere le proprie opinioni. Ancora una volta calza a pennello il caso dei 300 spartani.	
Paolo Natale	Qui significa l'incapacità di esprimere una propria adesione quando ci si accorge che questa adesione non è preminente, quindi meno gente esprime la propria adesione, meno questa è gettonata e scelta. La spirale del silenzio demoscopica è l'idea che, a causa di ciò che è socialmente desiderabile, ci sono alcuni elettori che proprio per questo motivo non se la sentono di dichiarare la propria opinione.	a) Willingness to speak out b) social sanctions c) majority d) endoscopic spiral of silence
Paolo Natale	Sì, sicuramente c'è stata una spirale del "non silenzio" e di "clamore" nei confronti dei tre leader – Giannino, Ingroia e Grillo – perché tutti e tre inizialmente erano sovrastimati. Curini ti dirà che in realtà anche i social media dessero Grillo come vincitore.	a) Social media
Roberto D'Alimonte	I sondaggi servono a formare un'opinione pubblica, anzi sono uno strumento molto delicato da questo punto di vista, anche abusato. Perché attraverso i sondaggi si cerca di imporre una certa interpretazione della realtà. Per esempio, lei conosce la parabola di Berlusconi e Forza Italia.	a) Opinion polls b) manipulation c) assessment of climate public opinion d) Silvio Berlusconi
Roberto D'Alimonte	Beh certamente i media, la TV, i giornali fondamentalmente, La TV è ancora il fattore principale, poi i social media, ma nonostante la diffusione dei social media, a mio avviso la TV è il mezzo che più influenza l'opinione pubblica. E detto questo che cos'è l'opinione pubblica, l'OP è l'insieme delle percezioni, delle credenze, a livello di massa.	a) Assessment of climate of opinion b) media exposure c) public opinion
Emanuela Zaccone	I sostenitori del PdL ribattevano che loro non son su twitter; ma è statisticamente improbabile che non ci siano elettori del PdL sul social network.	a) Willingness to speak out b) social media c) Silvio Berlusconi
Emanuela Zaccone	E poi, durante le elezioni tutti sono diventati Grillini. E gli indecisi non ammettevano che avrebbero votato Grillo.	a) Shame b) Silvio Berlusconi c) Beppe Grillo
Emanuela Zaccone	La gente si vergogna perché la motivazione è terra terra, Berlusconi è visto come il male assoluto e non te lo dirà mai nessuno, dall'altra parte il motivo per cui non ti dicono che votano Grillo è che l'unica cosa buona che si può dire è che "io sono di sinistra e voto a sinistra".	
Emanuela Zaccone	La sensazione che ho io è che la gente lo voglia insultare perché è una cosa che va fatta. Se c'è qualcosa di denigratorio è pieno di gente che si accanisce contro la figura di Silvio Berlusconi, tanto su Twitter quanto su Facebook.	a) Negativity b) social media c) Silvio Berlusconi
Marco Camisani Calzolari	Online ci sono meccanismi, dei fenomeni tipo sul fatto che i primi commenti, se negativi rispetto ad un pensiero attraggono altri commenti negativi, rispetto ad elementi positivi che attraggono gli elementi positivi, e gli altri stanno zitti. È un fenomeno manipolabile e tutto questo, a differenza del bar, è più facilmente manipolabile, sono molti oggi quelli ben organizzati per andare a creare questo effetto, quando tu scrivi qualcosa ti mangiano in trenta e la percezione di chiunque legga viene alterata.	a) Social media b) negativity c) perception d) aggressiveness
Marco Camisani Calzolari	Fino a quando succede all'interno del social media stesso però non ha molto peso, rispetto alla vita offline, purtroppo.	a) Social media
Marco Camisani Calzolari	Berlusconi non ha un esercito come quello di Grillo, non ha un team dedicato a svolgere dei movimenti "psico-sociali" e di ingegneria sociale.	a) Manipulation b) Opinion formation

Bill Emmott	I sondaggi possono dare risultati sbagliati, specialmente se c'è una percezione negativa nei confronti di un certo partito politico.	a) Opinion polls b) Climate of opinion
Bill Emmott	In Italia una spirale del silenzio si è creata nei confronti di Beppe Grillo., senz'altro, durante le ultime elezioni. Dalla mia ultima esperienza risulta che molte persone si vergognavano di votare Beppe Grillo, perché il suo partito è di rivolta, è sovvertivo, e quindi era un caso speciale. La domanda è se è applicabile anche ad un caso come quello di Silvio Berlusconi, e non penso che sia applicabile nei confronti di Silvio Berlusconi. Silvio Berlusconi aveva un'immagine pubblica negativa, è vero, ma aveva anche un partito ben organizzato, un controllo dei mass media, una campagna politica strategica, la proposta dell'IMU fatta in un momento giusto. Quindi, la crescita negli ultimi giorni della campagna è spiegabile secondo i canoni tradizionali della comunicazione politica.	a) Spiral of silence b) Beppe Grillo c) Silvio Berlusconi d) Negative climate of opinion e) shame
Bill Emmott	La gente da una parte ha un senso di DISLOYALTY, e quindi non sono più leali al loro partito. In secondo luogo, la gente vedeva il M5S come un partito negativo, che poteva creare un po' di imbarazzo. Il terzo fattore è l'antipolitica.	a) Disloyalty b) anti-politics c) negative climate of opinion d) embarrassment
Bill Emmott	Di fatto c'è stata una gran parte degli elettori di sinistra che poi hanno votato per Grillo, ma non lo dicevano. Bersani è stato amplificato dalla lealtà al partito.	a) Pier Luigi Bersani b) Willingness to speak out
Vincenzo Cosenza	Analizzando i social durante le elezioni abbiamo osservato che i volumi di conversazione rispondevano molto a quella che è l'agenda politica raccontata dai mass media.	a) Agenda-setting
Vincenzo Cosenza	Per capire la reale intenzione di voto abbiamo aggiunto anche un'analisi del mood, per capire se associato ad un nome c'era un sentimento positivo o negativo.	a) Climate of opinion - negative and positive b) Social media c) opinion polls (online)

**Appendix 5. Interviews Thematic map (Step 3 from Braun and Clarke, 2006)**



**Appendix 6. Reviewed Interviews Thematic map (Step 4 from Braun and Clarke, 2006)**



**Appendix 7. Aligned of Themes (Step 5 from Braun and Clarke, 2006)**

Assessment of climate of opinion												
	<u>Paolo Segatti</u>	<u>Giampietro Mazzoleni</u>	<u>Roberto D'Alimonte</u>	<u>Stefano Cristante</u>	<u>Ilvo Diamanti</u>	<u>Paolo Natale</u>	<u>Marcello Mari</u>	<u>Emanuela Zaccone</u>	<u>Marco Camisani-Calzolari</u>	<u>Matteo Colle</u>	<u>Bill Emmott</u>	<u>Vincenzo Cosenza</u>
<u>SUB-THEMES/CATEGORY</u>	<u>Professor I</u>	<u>Professor II</u>	<u>Professor III</u>	<u>Expert of public opinion I</u>	<u>Expert of public opinion II</u>	<u>Expert of public opinion III</u>	<u>Social media analytics expert I</u>	<u>Social media analytics expert II</u>	<u>Social media analytics expert III</u>	<u>Blogger I</u>	<u>Blogger II</u>	<u>Blogger III</u>
<b>Negativity (Anti-political environment)</b>	<b>Anti-political environment</b> - climate of opinion in Italy is that of anti-politics.	<b>Anti-political environment</b> - A lot of anger and frustration and anti-politics have moved many votes towards	n/a	<b>Confusion</b> - it's a spiral of confusion, with even internal fights within political parties.	<b>Anti-political environment</b> - Climate of opinion is hostile to political parties. There is confusion.	n/a	<b>Anti-political environment</b> - climate of opinion in Italy is that of anti-politics.	n/a	n/a	n/a	<b>Anti-political environment</b> - this has strongly facilitate the Five Stars Movement.	n/a
<b>Negativity (shame)</b>	n/a	<b>Controversial figures</b> - they create shame to express support towards them - Grillo's votes from center-left.	<b>Controversial figures</b> - they create shame to express support towards them.	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	<b>Controversial figures</b> - they create shame to express support towards them - Grillo's votes from center-left.	<b>Accuses or unpopular</b> - as main reasons for being ashamed about expressing ideas - online and offline.	n/a	<b>Controversial figures</b> - they create shame to express support towards them - Grillo's votes from center-left.	<b>Online voting intentions</b> - It appears that Silvio Berlusconi's voters show less their intention to vote for him, as compared to Beppe Grillo's supporters.
<b>Media Exposure (Opinion polls)</b>	n/a	<b>Wrong opinion polls</b> - they wrongly predicted Grillo's votes and did not influence opinion towards him.	<b>Building climate of opinion</b> - opinion polls can build public opinion and they can be easily manipulated.	n/a	<b>Wrong opinion polls</b> - surprise of 5SM, lower results for center-left and Monti.	<b>Demoscopic opinion polls</b> - there is always a grey area, an area of people who remain silent.	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	<b>Wrong opinion polls</b> - especially due to negative perception towards specific part.	n/a
	<u>Paolo Segatti</u>	<u>Giampietro Mazzoleni</u>	<u>Roberto D'Alimonte</u>	<u>Stefano Cristante</u>	<u>Ilvo Diamanti</u>	<u>Paolo Natale</u>	<u>Marcello Mari</u>	<u>Emanuela Zaccone</u>	<u>Marco Camisani-Calzolari</u>	<u>Matteo Colle</u>	<u>Bill Emmott</u>	<u>Vincenzo Cosenza</u>

<b>Media Exposure (Media influence)</b>	<b>Construction of immediate context</b> - it goes through the media	<b>Inappropriateness</b> - In media that do not belong to him, Berlusconi considered as "not appropriate".	<b>Reflection on mass media</b> - Beppe Grillo diligently gets mirrored in mass media, even if he acts on social media mainly.	n/a	<b>Quasi-statistical competence II</b> - people who are unsure about voting get information about trends from media.	n/a	<b>Manipulation of social media</b> - it is very easy to do campaigns online, and monitor voters' behavior. Grillo is successful in this.	n/a	<b>Traditional communication</b> - these tools are more listened to than social media - even if volume much lower.	<b>Agenda setting</b> - traditional media have agenda setting role in building climate of opinion.	<b>Mass media manipulation</b> - Silvio Berlusconi very good at manipulating his media.	<b>Agenda setting</b> - traditional media have agenda setting role in building climate of opinion.
<b>Media Exposure (Social media manipulation)</b>	n/a	n/a	n/a	<b>Manipulation of social media</b> - it is very easy to do campaigns online, and monitor voters' behavior.	<b>Traditional media:</b> there have never been such a TV-based elections as this one before.	n/a	n/a	n/a	<b>Social engineering</b> - Beppe Grillo has built an army to be active online and manipulate public opinion.	<b>Social media building climate of opinion</b> - only up to a point, you must combine with traditional media.	n/a	n/a
<b>Media Exposure (Cultural factors)</b>	n/a	n/a	<b>Berlusconi's influence over electorate</b> - he is good at playing on cultural factors affecting his electors.	<b>Populism</b> - typical feature of Silvio Berlusconi which is good at grasping cultural sides of Italian voters.	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	<b>Berlusconi's and "the average Italian"</b> - Berlusconi's political proposal enters voters' experiences and lives.	<b>Berlusconi's and "the average Italian"</b> - Berlusconi's political proposal enters voters' experiences and lives.	n/a
	<u>Paolo Segatti</u>	<u>Giampietro Mazzoleni</u>	<u>Roberto D'Alimonte</u>	<u>Stefano Cristante</u>	<u>Ilvo Diamanti</u>	<u>Paolo Natale</u>	<u>Marcello Mari</u>	<u>Emanuela Zaccone</u>	<u>Marco Camisani-Calzolari</u>	<u>Matteo Colle</u>	<u>Bill Emmott</u>	<u>Vincenzo Cosenza</u>

<b>Media Exposure (Pre-fixed structures)</b>	<b>Hierarchical expression of opinion</b> - pre-fixed structures make specific opinions more relevant	n/a	n/a	<b>A secondary spiral</b> - created when you have a pre-determined climate of opinion, but suddenly new protest movements who are in a minority.	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>Social pressures</b>	<b>Opinion changes</b> - those who are more subject to changing opinions are the most exposed, and least aware.	<b>Politically correct</b> - Controversial political figures make people be silent about their support for them.	n/a	<b>Embarrassment</b> - idea that center-left leader Bersani could behave in embarrassing way.	<b>Undecided voters</b> - they look for social approval and until then remain silent.	<b>"Demoscopic" spiral of silence</b> - not declaring your opinion, because it's not socially desirable.	<b>Influencers</b> - Italy is the first country in the world with "Political influencers" online (22%).	<b>Need for aggressivity</b> - it is seen as almost "necessary" to insult Berlusconi online when something controversial happens.	n/a	<b>Online public sphere</b> - online you have replication of rationality and deliberation of public places as bars.	n/a	<b>Contextuality</b> - Some channels, such as YouTube, are more de-contextualized and thus facilitate aggressiveness and less attachment of personality.
<b>Social pressures</b>	<b>Interpersonal relations</b> - these relations matter, it's a mistake to think that we leave like atoms, on our own.	n/a	n/a	<b>Quasi-statistical competence</b> - In Italy people are able to get an idea of who is going to win.	<b>Quasi-statistical competence II</b> - people who are unsure about voting get information about trends also from people around them.	n/a	n/a	<b>Undecided voters</b> - they did not come to a decision till the end, when they finally decided to vote for Beppe Grillo.	n/a	n/a	<b>Embarrassment</b> - idea that center-left leader Bersani could behave in embarrassing way.	n/a
	<b>Paolo Segatti</b>	<b>Giampietro Mazzoleni</b>	<b>Roberto D'Alimonte</b>	<b>Stefano Cristante</b>	<b>Ilvo Diamanti</b>	<b>Paolo Natale</b>	<b>Marcello Mari</b>	<b>Emanuela Zaccone</b>	<b>Marco Camisani-Calzolari</b>	<b>Matteo Colle</b>	<b>Bill Emmott</b>	<b>Vincenzo Cosenza</b>

<b>Social pressures</b>	<b>Dominant climate of opinion</b> - the spiral of silence is created against those who are against the climate of opinion.	<b>Bandwagon effect</b> - majority not supportive of Mario Monti - This created a reverse spiral of silence towards him.	<b>Impersonality</b> - social media are more impersonal.	<b>Silent Majority</b> - Berlusconi voters are silent despite being an old majority.	<b>Bandwagon</b> - people follow the idea of the majority and what they think will win - this generates silence.	n/a	n/a	<b>Negative and positive parties</b> - it appears to be good to vote for center-left, and bad (thus you hide) to vote for center-right.	<b>Negative and positive</b> - research have shown how negative comments follow negative posts, and positive comments positive posts. The other group, accordingly, remains	<b>Influence online</b> - people are influenced by what shared by friends online and may show more interest towards the topic shared.	<b>Disloyalty</b> - some people still loyal to their traditional party (center-left), yet many have abandoned such loyalty and voted for Beppe Grillo.	<b>Influence</b> - influence changes according to the channel you consider.
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Willingness to speak out												
	<u>Paolo Segatti</u>	<u>Giampietro Mazzoleni</u>	<u>Roberto D'Alimonte</u>	<u>Stefano Cristante</u>	<u>Ilvo Diamanti</u>	<u>Paolo Natale</u>	<u>Marcello Mari</u>	<u>Emanuela Zaccone</u>	<u>Marco Camisani-Calzolari</u>	<u>Matteo Colle</u>	<u>Bill Emmott</u>	<u>Vincenzo Cosenza</u>
<u>SUB-THEMES/CATEGORY</u>	<u>Professor I</u>	<u>Professor II</u>	<u>Professor III</u>	<u>Expert of public opinion I</u>	<u>Expert of public opinion II</u>	<u>Expert of public opinion III</u>	<u>Social media analytics expert I</u>	<u>Social media analytics expert II</u>	<u>Social media analytics expert III</u>	<u>Blogger I</u>	<u>Blogger III</u>	<u>Blogger IV</u>
<b>Perceived empowerment</b>	<b>Immediate context</b> - effects on behaviors and willingness to speak out are always situated in a specific context.	n/a	<b>Negative climate of opinion</b> - climate of opinion towards Silvio Berlusconi is very negative, and this make people hide their intention to vote for him.		<b>Trends</b> - people try and get information from the media and the social relationships around them about the political trends going on.	<b>A spiral of "non silence"</b> - much clamor coming by protest groups, such as those by Grillo, Ingroia and Giannino.	<b>Two sides of internet</b> - it allows to express your opinion, but also hide yourself behind anonymity.	<b>Negative climate of opinion</b> - climate of opinion towards Silvio Berlusconi is very negative, and this make people hide their intention to vote for him.	n/a	<b>Negative climate of opinion</b> - climate of opinion towards Beppe Grillo is very negative right now.	<b>Negative climate of opinion</b> - climate of opinion towards Silvio Berlusconi is negative, yet he has a well-organized party, a good control over mass media, a strategic political campaign.	<b>Conversation volumes</b> - The analysis of the volumes of conversations on social media actually resembles what is happening in the offline world through mass media agenda-setting

<b>Perceived empowerment</b>	<b>Echo chambers</b> - with social media you have the creation of homogeneous communities.	<b>Freedom of expression</b> - Internet helps to share opinions.	<b>Social media and public opinion</b> - they contribute to building climate of opinion but they are still not representative.	<b>Facebook</b> - social networks as Facebook make communication much easier.	n/a	n/a	n/a	<b>Twitter moving votes</b> - Twitter cannot move voting trends.	<b>Online VS offline</b> - People feel empowered to have a say, but this now always listened in offline world.	<b>Delivery/reception of message</b> - Message is delivered and perceived in different ways - there is always discrepancy. And so is opinion.	<b>Negative climate of opinion</b> - climate of opinion towards Beppe Grillo is very negative right now.	n/a
	<b>Paolo Segatti</b>	<b>Giampietro Mazzoleni</b>	<b>Roberto D'Alimonte</b>	<b>Stefano Cristante</b>	<b>Ilvo Diamanti</b>	<b>Paolo Natale</b>	<b>Marcello Mari</b>	<b>Emanuela Zaccone</b>	<b>Marco Camisani-Calzolari</b>	<b>Matteo Colle</b>	<b>Bill Emmott</b>	<b>Vincenzo Cosenza</b>
<b>Perceived empowerment</b>	n/a	<b>Social media audience building</b> - Amount of followers and retweets can build certain fan base.	<b>Communication via social networks</b> - it's more impersonal, but more manageable.	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	<b>Fake profiles</b> - Berlusconi does not have a Twitter profile, and all newspapers were talking about the fact that some "fake" profiles were made - of a not-existing	<b>Dialectical relationship</b> - public opinion is being formed with object and subject, where both have strength still.	n/a	n/a
<b>Perceived empowerment</b>	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	<b>Sharing activities</b> - if something is shared, may not mean that it's politically agreed on. But if it's retweeted, research has shown that yes.	n/a	n/a

<b>Perceived empowerment</b>	n/a	n/a		n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	<b>Quick propagation of ideas</b> - social media facilitate quicker and easier sharing of ideas.	n/a	n/a
	<b>Paolo Segatti</b>	<b>Giampietro Mazzoleni</b>	<b>Roberto D'Alimonte</b>	<b>Stefano Cristante</b>	<b>Ilvo Diamanti</b>	<b>Paolo Natale</b>	<b>Marcello Mari</b>	<b>Emanuela Zaccone</b>	<b>Marco Camisani-Calzolari</b>	<b>Matteo Colle</b>	<b>Bill Emmott</b>	<b>Vincenzo Cosenza</b>
<b>Fear</b>	<b>Fear of expression</b> - Voters who are afraid of expressing their opinion.	<b>Follower effect</b> - people are more likely to be follower and remain silent, if they fear of expressing opinion.	n/a	n/a	<b>Fear of extreme</b> - Voters fear social blame and they not express their opinion, particularly towards extreme personalities.	<b>Fear as inability</b> - Inability to express opinion caused by understanding that such adhesion is not the prominent one.	<b>Online and offline</b> - people may be afraid of expressing their opinions both online and offline. What is key is the anonymity level of the channel.	<b>Lack of presence on social media</b> - Berlusconi supporters may not be using the net.	n/a	<b>Less fear</b> - online people fear less to express opinions and be judged.	n/a	<b>Lack of presence on social media</b> - Berlusconi supporters may not be using the net.
<b>Fear</b>	<b>Shiness</b> - spiral of silence refers to shy voters	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	
<b>Anonymity</b>	n/a	<b>Showing off</b> - Social media enable expression of opinion, rather than having people hiding themselves.	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	<b>Anonymity</b> - this is key to the sharing of political information online.	<b>Personality online</b> - on Facebook and Twitter the user enter with his own personality, you have name and surname, and there is a feeling of "not saying things".	<b>Social VS traditional</b> - There is more activity and expression opinion online, but unfortunately this does not really influence public opinion and institutions.	<b>Goffman's "face"</b> - if you show your face, as you do with Twitter and Facebook, you behave in a different way from when you do not show your name online.	n/a	<b>Personality online</b> - on Facebook and Twitter the user enter with his own personality, you enter as a person that belongs to a social network.

<b>Anonymity</b>	n/a	<b>Anonymity facilitates expression</b> - on social media you can find Anti-Berlusconians who really are like that.	n/a	<b>Expression of opinion</b> - people are anonymous and there is less need to hide things.	n/a	<b>Anonymity</b> - It also depends on the blog you consider and the settings that allow you to make the comment.						
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### Appendix 8. Themes and sub-themes covered - summary

Assessment of climate of opinion												
	<u>Paolo Segatti</u>	<u>Giampietro Mazzoleni</u>	<u>Roberto D'Alimonte</u>	<u>Stefano Cristante</u>	<u>Ilvo Diamanti</u>	<u>Paolo Natale</u>	<u>Marcello Mari</u>	<u>Emanuela Zaccone</u>	<u>Marco Camisani-Calzolari</u>	<u>Matteo Colle</u>	<u>Bill Emmott</u>	<u>Vincenzo Cosenza</u>
SUB-THEMES	Professor I	Professor II	Professor III	Expert of public opinion I	Expert of public opinion II	Expert of public opinion III	Social media analytics expert I	Social media analytics expert II	Social media analytics expert III	Blogger I	Blogger II	Blogger III
<b>Negativity</b>	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x		x	
<b>Exposure</b>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
<b>Social pressures</b>	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

Willingness to speak out												
	<u>Paolo Segatti</u>	<u>Giampietro Mazzoleni</u>	<u>Roberto D'Alimonte</u>	<u>Stefano Cristante</u>	<u>Ilvo Diamanti</u>	<u>Paolo Natale</u>	<u>Marcello Mari</u>	<u>Emanuela Zaccone</u>	<u>Marco Camisani-Calzolari</u>	<u>Matteo Colle</u>	<u>Bill Emmott</u>	<u>Vincenzo Cosenza</u>
SUB-THEMES	Professor I	Professor II	Professor III	Expert of public opinion I	Expert of public opinion II	Expert of public opinion III	Social media analytics expert I	Social media analytics expert II	Social media analytics expert III	Blogger I	Blogger II	Blogger III
<b>Perceived empowerment</b>	x		x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x

Fear	x	x			x	x	x	x		x		x
Anonymity		x					x	x	x	x		x

**Appendix 9. SPSS Output for chi-squared calculation**

**Case Processing Summary**

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Channel type * Level of aggressiveness	356	87,50%	51	12,50%	407	100,00%

**Channel type \* Level of aggressiveness Crosstabulation**

% within Channel type

		Level of aggressiveness			Total
		Friendly	Neutral	Aggressive	
Channel type	Blog	12,90%	41,90%	45,20%	100,00%
	Forum (YouTube, Yahoo answers etc)	26,10%	19,90%	54,00%	100,00%
	Forum (News website)	4,80%	19,00%	76,20%	100,00%
	Social network (Twitter, Facebook)	43,90%	24,60%	31,60%	100,00%
Total		25,30%	22,50%	52,20%	100,00%

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	<b>32,629<sup>a</sup></b>	6	<b>0</b>
Likelihood Ratio	34,366	6	0
N of Valid Cases	356		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 6,97.

**Case Processing Summary**

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Channel type * Level of aggressiveness	356	87,50%	51	12,50%	407	100,00%

**Channel type \* Level of aggressiveness Crosstabulation**

		Level of aggressiveness			Total	
		Friendly	Neutral	Aggressive		
Channel type	Blog	% of Total	1,10%	3,70%	3,90%	8,70%
		Std. Residual	-1,4	2,3	-0,5	
	Forum (YouTube, Yahoo answers etc)	% of Total	16,60%	12,60%	34,30%	63,50%
		Std. Residual	0,2	-0,8	0,4	

Forum (News website)	% of Total	0,60%	2,20%	9,00%	11,80%
	Std. Residual	-2,6	-0,5	2,1	
Social network (Twitter, Facebook)	% of Total	7,00%	3,90%	5,10%	16,00%
	Std. Residual	2,8	0,3	-2,2	
Total	% of Total	25,30%	22,50%	52,20%	100,00%

**Chi-Square Tests**

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	<b>32,629<sup>a</sup></b>	6	<b>0</b>
Likelihood Ratio	34,366	6	0
N of Valid Cases	356		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 6,97.

**Case Processing Summary**

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Channel type * Level of aggressiveness * Before/After Elections 2013	356	87,50%	51	12,50%	407	100,00%

**Channel type \* Level of aggressiveness \* Before/After Elections 2013 Crosstabulation**

Before/After Elections 2013			Level of aggressiveness			Total		
			Friendly	Neutral	Aggressive			
After (from 26/02/2013)	Channel type	Blog	% within Channel type	17,40%	30,40%	52,20%	100,00%	
			Std. Residual	-1,1	1,2	0,1		
	Channel type	Forum (YouTube, Yahoo answers etc)	% within Channel type	27,90%	17,90%	54,20%	100,00%	
			Std. Residual	-0,4	-0,6	0,6		
	Channel type	Forum (News website)	% within Channel type	8,30%	41,70%	50,00%	100,00%	
			Std. Residual	-1,3	1,7	0		
	Channel type	Social network (Twitter, Facebook)	% within Channel type	52,90%	14,70%	32,40%	100,00%	
			Std. Residual	2,5	-0,7	-1,5		
	Total		% within Channel type	29,40%	19,80%	50,80%	100,00%	
	Before (until 23/02/2013)	Channel type	Blog	% within Channel type	0,00%	75,00%	25,00%	100,00%
				Std. Residual	-0,9	1,9	-1,1	
		Channel type	Forum (YouTube, Yahoo answers etc)	% within Channel type	12,00%	48,00%	40,00%	100,00%
				Std. Residual	0,2	1,1	-1	
		Channel type	Forum (News website)	% within Channel type	3,30%	10,00%	86,70%	100,00%
			Std. Residual	-1,2	-2,3	2,4		
Channel type		Social network (Twitter, Facebook)	% within Channel type	25,00%	40,00%	35,00%	100,00%	
			Std. Residual	1,9	0,4	-1,2		
Total		% within Channel type	10,80%	34,90%	54,20%	100,00%		

During (24-25/02/2013)	Channel type	Forum (YouTube, Yahoo answers etc)	% within Channel type	27,30%	4,50%	68,20%	100,00%
			Std. Residual	-0,4	-0,6	0,5	
	Social network (Twitter, Facebook)	% within Channel type	66,70%	33,30%	0,00%	100,00%	
			Std. Residual	1,1	1,6	-1,3	
	Total		% within Channel type	32,00%	8,00%	60,00%	100,00%

**Chi-Square Tests**

Before/After Elections 2013		Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)
After (from 26/02/2013)	Pearson Chi-Square	<b>17,162<sup>a</sup></b>	6	<b>0,009</b>	0,008
	Likelihood Ratio	16,336	6	0,012	0,017
	Fisher's Exact Test	15,826			0,011
	N of Valid Cases	248			
Before (until 23/02/2013)	Pearson Chi-Square	<b>25,918<sup>b</sup></b>	6	<b>0,000</b>	0,000
	Likelihood Ratio	27,134	6	0,000	0,000
	Fisher's Exact Test	24,545			0,000
	N of Valid Cases	83			
During (24-25/02/2013)	Pearson Chi-Square	<b>6,061<sup>c</sup></b>	2	<b>0,048</b>	0,059
	Likelihood Ratio	6,576	2	0,037	0,059
	Fisher's Exact Test	5,989			0,059

N of Valid Cases	25			
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- a. 3 cells (25,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 2,37.
- b. 6 cells (50,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is ,87.
- c. 4 cells (66,7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is ,24.

**Case Processing Summary**

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Channel type * Level of aggressiveness * Before/After Elections 2013	356	87,50%	51	12,50%	407	100,00%

**Channel type \* Level of aggressiveness \* Before/After Elections 2013 Crosstabulation**

% of Total

Before/After Elections 2013		Level of aggressiveness	
		Friendly	Neutral
After (from 26/02/2013)	Channel type		
	Blog	1,60%	2,80%
	Forum (YouTube, Yahoo answers etc)	20,20%	12,90%
	Forum (News website)	0,40%	2,00%

		Social network (Twitter, Facebook)	7,30%	2,00%
	Total		29,40%	19,80%
Before (until 23/02/2013)	Channel type	Blog		7,20%
		Forum (YouTube, Yahoo answers etc)	3,60%	14,50%
		Forum (News website)	1,20%	3,60%
		Social network (Twitter, Facebook)	6,00%	9,60%
	Total		10,80%	34,90%
During (24-25/02/2013)	Channel type	Forum (YouTube, Yahoo answers etc)	24,00%	4,00%
		Social network (Twitter, Facebook)	8,00%	4,00%
		Total	32,00%	8,00%

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