

## Twitter As a New Engagement Opportunity. Analysis of the Questions and Answers between the Italian Prime Minister and Citizens

### Twitter com una nova oportunitat de compromís. Anàlisi de les preguntes i respostes entre el Primer Ministre italià i els ciutadans

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*On 23 April 2014, the Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi hosted a one-hour Q&A event on Twitter. Named after the hashtag used to aggregate questions and answers, the #matteorisponde (Matteo responds event generated over 3,000 tweets, created by 2,000 users. The Q&A offered the opportunity to investigate meanings and consequences of the process of distance shortening between citizens and representatives, which characterises social media such as Twitter.*

*The content analysis of the 3,632 Tweets allowed for a classification according to the frame (negative, positive, or neutral); the format (pure question, rhetorical question, position stand, joke, reporting); the macro-theme and the issue. Results showed great divergence between the priorities pointed out by citizens and the issues addressed by the Prime Minister. Simultaneously, the analysis of the Q&A studied citizens'*

*El 23 d'abril de 2014, el primer ministre italià Matteo Renzi va ser durant una hora l'amfitrió d'una trobada de preguntes i respostes a Twitter. El hashtag utilitzat, #matteorisponde ('Matteo respon'), va generar més de 3.000 tuits enviats per 2.000 usuaris. El format Q&A, Preguntes i Respostes, ofereix la possibilitat d'investigar els significats i els resultats del procés d'escurçar distàncies entre els ciutadans i els seus representants, tan característic de mitjans socials com Twitter.*

*Analitzar el contingut de les 3.632 piulades va permetre una classificació a partir de diversos factors: l'enfoc (negatiu, positiu o neutre); la forma (qüestió directa, pregunta retòrica, acord, humor, aportació); el tema general i la problemàtica. Els resultats van mostrar una gran divergència entre les prioritats assenyalades pels ciutadans i els temes abordats pel primer ministre. De l'anàlisi de les preguntes i respostes*

*approaches and confirmed users' self-empowerment attitudes towards the community.*

*Despite the intrinsic limitations of Q&A events such as #matteorisponde, related to the wide discretion left to the respondent to select or ignore queries received, citizens fully embraced the opportunity for dialogue. Their Twitter participation in the public-politician debate represented an important signal of how new web tools can contribute to enriching and enlarging the public space, allowing the intervention of other actors rather than just the traditional elites.*

**Key words:** *disintermediation, Twitter, Social Media, Renzi, grassroots activism, Question & Answer.*

*s'extreu una nova connexió dels ciutadans i es confirma en els usuaris una actitud d'autoempoderament envers la comunitat.*

*Tot i les limitacions pròpies d'esdeveniments com el de #matteorisponde, tenint en compte l'ampli marge de l'interrogat per acceptar o ignorar les consultes rebudes, els ciutadans van aprofitar al màxim l'oportunitat de diàleg. La seva participació a Twitter en el debat públic-polític va representar tot un senyal de com les noves eines de la web poden contribuir a enriquir i ampliar l'espai públic, permetent la participació d'altres actors en lloc de les elits tradicionals.*

**Paraules clau:** *desintermediació, Twitter, mitjans socials, Renzi, activisme de base, preguntes i respostes.*

The diffusion of digital media among political actors contributed transforming their methods for managing communications flows and their public image, thus broadening the range of instruments they can use for campaigning and self-promotion. In turn, such processes contribute renewed interest in the field of political communication. A growing number of researchers have begun investigating the role of social media in reshaping the rules of the communicative exchange among political representatives, journalists, and citizens.

In particular, despite its 'young age', Twitter has attracted the attention of many researchers. Spanning diverse research issues and empirical approaches, researchers have arrived at rather-homogeneous conclusions about the primary usage patterns among different political representatives.<sup>1</sup> Besides differences linked to the various settings analysed, international research tends to highlight the prevalence of a broadcast communication model. These common communication models recall a unidirectional communicative approach, as exemplified by how political actors use microblogs to spread their content and messages (Bruns and Highfield, 2013; Grusell and Nord, 2012; Larsson and Moe, 2012; Bichard and Parmelee, 2012; Small, 2010; Strandberg, 2013; Vergeer, Hermans and Sams, 2011): they use top-down logics to gain visibility on traditional media (Bentivegna, 2015).

Politicians' preference towards such model—in opposition to a conversational approach—is also confirmed in Italy, where the 2013 political campaign showed a downward trend in Twitter usage by leaders of different coalitions (Berlusconi, Bersani, Giannino, Grillo, Ingroia, Monti). Their presence on the platform characterised yet another version of the common one-to-many communication models (Bentivegna and Tesconi, 2014: 117). Similar results also emerged from the 2014 European Parliament elections campaign when only the 14% of the Italian candidates who had a Twitter profile used the '@reply' function (Bentivegna, 2015). Leaving aside the interactive and conversational dimension, this lack of interaction suggests that with microblogs in particular, political representatives seem to use Twitter specifically for visibility and image purposes. However, they 're-adapt' its usage according to traditional communication models.

Within this cross-section, Prime Minister (PM) Matteo Renzi's use of Twitter deserves analysis. Not only had the PM personalised the content of posts using symbols, slogans, and jokes with ease (Rega and Lorusso, 2014), but he also attempted to 'dialogue' with citizens through his official microblog. In fact, on 23 April 2014, Matteo Renzi, recently been appointed head of state (on 22 February 2014), started his first question and answer session with citizens via Twitter. Recalling the internet version of the question and answer sessions conducted by Obama in 2009, Renzi replied live to a selection of questions that users sent via Twitter.

The *#matteorisponde* appointment, which took place only four weeks before the 2014 European elections, is interesting at least for two sets of reasons. First, it represents a communication/participation form that was not intermediated by the leader, who used the microblog to address citizens' questions directly and in real time.

From this point of view, it is useful to analyse the questions that the Premier decided to answer, and those discarded despite their central position within the corpus. Moreover, the live-tweeting event exemplified bottom-up disintermediation initiatives (Diamanti, 2014). These consisted of citizens, students, interest groups, and movements' autonomous attempts to take the floor. Using the platform and the attention given by Renzi, they publically expressed doubts and questions, shared concerns, and presented complaints. Even if the interaction happened only in few cases (only 39 users received a reply), the analysis of messages shared by Renzi allows for better understanding about how traditional concepts of public opinion and public sphere are varying and renovating. Moreover, such change moves from some features of the microblog and its relation's models.

The following chapter reviews the literature on the impact of social media on the public sphere and explains the aims of the research. A third section will present the methodology, and a fourth section will present and discuss results.

## SOCIAL MEDIA BETWEEN HYBRIDIZATION AND A SMALL WORLD

The imposing introduction of social media in the media ecosystem quickly changed how its principle actors communicate and interact. Political representatives can easily and directly communicate with government representatives and voters. For

citizens, schemes to intervene in public discourses also became easier (Ceccarini, 2015). From this perspective, the role that social media plays in favouring grassroots activism and new forms of engagement can be highlighted (Chadwick, 2009). Such practices, even if often embedded in a plurality of issues and transitory activities, point to a renewal in citizens' participation forms in public life (Bennett, 2012; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Dahlgren, 2009).

The idea of (multiple) 'public spheres', characterized by a growing interconnectivity (Boccia Artieri, 2012), seems to fit better with, for example, the current transformations of the communication landscape. Social media's pervasiveness contributes to broadening and multiplying spaces where public opinion is formed, providing citizens the opportunity to get informed, discuss, and participate, and this contributes to the definition of their social and political identity. In this context, Ceccarini (2015) observes that 2.0 web resources 'can be also considered as areas that broaden public space and support discourse, argumentation and counter-argumentation practices' (Ceccarini, 2015: 167-168).

Twitter, with its open-space configuration (without filters or restrictions) populated by traditional elites (journalists, politicians, institutions) and non-elites, and with a combination of heterogeneous communications methods (broadcast and forms of 'mass self-communication'; Castells, 2009) matched with diverse types of content, genders, and forms (Papacharissi and De Fatima Oliveira, 2012), is a sort of hybrid open-space (Bentivegna, 2015; Chadwick, 2013; Hermida, 2010) with particular tensions and dynamics. Twitter's media relevance—it is constantly monitored by journalists and news desks—along with its versatility and easy usage, make it a valuable tool for grassroots actors, activists, and protest movements interested in strengthening their visibility (Bastos, Mercea and Charpentier, 2015).

At the same time, the visibility of discourse interactions on the platform seems to meet citizens' desire for transparency (Bentivegna, 2015). On Twitter, they can follow, analyse, and compare public actors.

The Twittersphere's informal space is equally relevant. Citizens interact in a relaxed and familiar atmosphere, exchanging chats and information as well as collaboration and support. On this topic, a certain resemblance of the platform to Ray Oldenburg's third places<sup>2</sup> was observed (Bentivegna, 2015; Ceccarini, 2015; Chadwick, 2009). Those are the central spaces of expression of informal public life, which are of particular importance in citizens-politics relation.

Indeed, informality empowers citizens in taking the floor on political and public issues, facilitating opinions and exchanges among users who do not know each other or are distant from each other. 'Living' the same place has the effect of lessening distance among people—a small world phenomenon (Bennett, 2012)—making the dialogue with public actors more accessible.

In short, despite the small population on Twitter (just 10% in Italy; Censis 2015), the platform seems to be an important expressive space for citizens (Ceccarini, 2015), as well as a central actor of the media ecosystem who are able to reshape public boundaries and invite interventions from actors who are external to traditional elites.

Moving from these preliminary remarks, the analysis of the questions-answers between the Italian PM and citizens offers the opportunity to study the meanings and consequences of this process of distance shortening. According to this idea,

distant people—in this case, the head of government—become ‘incredibly reachable’ (Bennett, 2012: 28) to the extent of encouraging thousands of users to take the opportunity to interact with the PM publically.

## RESEARCH: BACKGROUND, QUESTIONS, AND METHODOLOGY

A brief summary of research is essential to understanding the political climate in which the Q&A took place and the main topics on the spotlight in Italian public debate at the time.

As he was appointed PM (22 February 2014), Matteo Renzi announced he would start a wide reform plan to change the political, institutional, and constitutional assets of Italy. The plan includes, for example, job market and public administration reforms, electoral law, constitution reforms, tax cuts, and assistance for needy families. Many of these measures have been explicitly discussed during the web Q&A, which—for the Premier—represented an opportunity to discuss and clarify his government’s initiatives without journalists’ contradictions and intermediation.

Having made these observations, the evaluation of issues discussed and of citizens’ participatory methods allowed drawing limits and strengths of the Q&A. Focusing on logics and implications of the event allowed for an exemplification of the model of direct interaction between leaders and citizens. At the same time, the Q&A can also be considered as part of a self-promotion strategy of the PM, idea that will be discussed further.

Specifically, the research questions that guided the investigation developed according to two main analysis directions. First, through the content analysis of tweets with the Q&A hashtag ‘#matteorisponde’ [meaning ‘Matteo replies’], the analysis looked at issues that prompted extensive citizen attention. In parallel, with the aim to report any diversity between the priorities raised by citizens and those established by the PM, the analysis examined the issues that he discussed on both his tweets and the live TV event (the PM was broadcasted while answering questions on Twitter).

The analysis then evaluated citizens’ participation methods along with their attitude towards the PM. In other words, the research tried to understand whether the most common interaction was (1) asking the leader for information or for clarifications about concerns or specific issues (categorised as ‘pure questions’); (2) taking the opportunity to have a dialogue with the PM to express opinions (‘position stands’); (3) using a persuasive or dramatic effect (‘rhetorical questions’); (4) being ironic (‘jokes’); or (5) reporting their participation (‘reporting’) if users were tweeting to promote the event. Concerning the recorded attitudes, each tweet was analysed with the aim to detect a negative frame—criticising the PM or his policies—a positive, or a neutral one.

## DATASET

15,797 tweets (from 7,479 different users) with the official event hashtag #matteorisponde were retrieved between 15 April 2014 (10:11 GMT) and 2 May 2014 (15:48 GMT). Data were collected using an in-house software that interfaces with Twitter

streaming APIs [application programming interfaces]. From the tweet corpus produced on the *#matteorisponde* day (23 April 2014), out of 12.519 total tweets, almost half of them (6,400) were diffused in the first 60 minutes of the event (14:00-15:00).

## CONTENT ANALYSIS

The content analysis was carried out on the corpus of standard tweet and '@replies' (4,172) produced during the event. Three different analysts pre-tested the collection file. The author and another researcher conducted the content analysis after an extensive training phase. Retweets, incomprehensible tweets (written in non-European languages), and those produced by trending topics services were excluded from the analysis.

Before starting the analysis, researchers manually classified the (2,283) tweets according to the user classes identified by Bentivegna and Marchetti (2014), which were re-adapted conforming to the specificity of the research. Based on their profile descriptions, users were categorised as (1) 'citizens'; (2) 'associations/groups'; (3) 'journalists'; (4) 'insiders' (such as scholars, communications and political communications experts, web analysts, consultants, and politicians); (5) 'bloggers'; (6) 'political actors' (committees or individuals with positions in political parties, not simply sympathisers); (7) 'news media' (both traditional and online); and (8) 'others/non-classified'. In 97.9% of cases, it was possible to include users who generated tweets in the above-listed categories. When a profile description was not clear, the non-classified option was selected.

**Table 1. Distribution of categories of users**

(Dataset *#matteorisponde*: 23 April 14.00-15.00 pm; standard tweets and replies)

Categories	N	%
Citizens	2.031	89
Journalists	69	3
Associations/groups	42	1,8
Political actors	31	1,4
Bloggers	27	1,2
News Media	18	0,8
Insiders	17	0,7
Others	48	2,1
Total	2.283	100

Afterwards, tweets were classified according to the frame (negative, positive, or neutral); the approach or format (pure question, rhetorical question, position stand, joke, reporting); and the issue. For the latter grouping, the analysis comprised a short description of the tweet, progressively refining descriptions in categories

(macro-theme and specific issue). In the small number of cases where tweets contained more than one topic, the leading one was considered, assessed in order of appearance, and then given space (in terms words) to each issue that was measured. In the 98.6% of cases, it was possible to include tweets in the above-listed macro-themes (otherwise, the classification 'other' was used). Furthermore, the analysis also considered the tweets (39) that received a reply from Renzi.

## FINDINGS

### ISSUES RAISED BY CITIZENS

The Twitter event with the Premier took place on 23 April 2014 while he was in the building that houses the seat of the central government. The event —aired live on SkyTg24— was attended by users who were largely 'citizens' (Table 1), followed by 'journalists', 'associations/groups', 'political actors', 'bloggers', 'news media', and 'insiders'.

Since citizens constituted the largest group of participants (89%), the analysis exclusively focused on their contributions. They produced 3,632 tweets, of which 69.5% were standard tweets and 30.5% were replies.

Looking at the macro-themes that prompted extensive citizen attention, the object of a large number of tweets (N=540) was the Premier. The analysis of these posts revealed that many users used the *#matteorisponde* event for the purpose of commenting on personal and political characteristics of the PM (credibility, morality, coherence), which are important from both the private and public perspective. Such features can be identified as a specific dimension of 'personalisation' process of politics (Van Aelst and Stanyer, 2011):

@matteo renzi will you be able to keep exporting to Rome the concreteness of local administrator?

When a bath of humility? *#matteorisponde*

['Bath of humility' is an Italian idiomatic expression in which getting immersed in humility means assuming a lower profile].

Continuing with tweets about the Premier, citizens largely embraced the attitude of intervening to be ironic and entertain themselves.

@matteo renzi hi mat, tell us, do you regret having confess you use *Pavesini*\* biscuits rather than *Savoardi*\* to make tiramisu? *#matteorisponde*

[\*two different kinds of biscuits].

Finally, another group of messages about the Premier related to the leader's tastes and preferences, his personal interests, and spare time:

Today is *#worldbookday*... cite a passage of your favourite book *#matteorisponde*

The above considered kind of tweets, along with those asking information about the format of the event (N=234; ‘how does it work?’, ‘when does it start?’ etc.) were not included in the analysis of priorities raised by citizens, as they do not follow specific policies and topics. Figure 1 gives a clear overview of issues of central interest for users. As will be seen, many users’ topics of interest, despite a pervasive presence in the date corpus (with high percentages), remained unanswered from the Premier. In this regard, it is useful to recall issues (presented in chronological order) addressed by the Premier in the 54 minutes of Q&A and in the 39 replies.

**Table 2. Issues addressed by the Italian Premier**

Order	Issue
1	The industrial crisis (Piombino area and Alitalia company)
2	Italian marines (they were held in India while international arbitration proceeding took place over the fatal shooting of two Indian fishermen in 2012)
3	Architecture and reuse
4	Infrastructure
5	Digitalisation
6	Fight against corruption
7	Blocked adoptions of Congolese children by Italian parents
8	Self-employed workers’ taxes
9	Politics and cost-cutting measures
10	Immigration
11	Removal of the Costa Concordia cruise ship
12	Citizenship income
13	The 80 euros bonus
14	Black work
15	Cultural funds
16	Education
17	Public debt
18	Technological innovation
19	Tax evasion
20	The match of the heart [a traditional football game played every year to raise funds for charity]
21	Public managers
22	Institutional reforms
23	Taxes
24	Polemics on politicians’ salary



Considering only the topics selected by the PM, citizens' requests for attention assigned the top place to the macro-theme 'education' (448 tweets; 15.6%), split between tweets about university (323; 72.1%) and school (125; 27.9%). Renzi addressed the latter, which was mentioned by many users interested in the government reform's key-points. Instead, the Premier ignored queries about investments for universities and research. He justified this choice by explaining that the Q&A format did not work with specific questions.<sup>3</sup> However, along with particular requests, such as requests for refinancing grants for specialisation studies in the field of medicine and the stand against entrance exams, the analysis of tweets revealed that there were also wider-ranging instances. They included a defence of the right to education, measures to deal with researchers' lack of job security, and valorisation of culture and research:

@matteorenzi public university lacks of funds...how can we young people not lose hope?  
 #matteorisponde  
 @matteorenzi Matteo don't forget #italianresearch!! When the allocation of large resources for research? Thanks! #matteorisponde

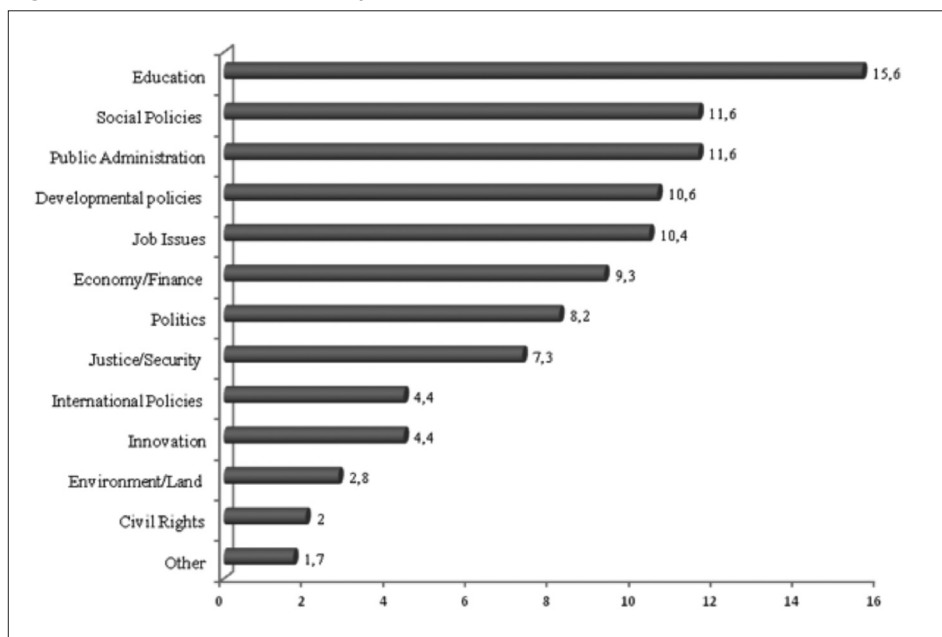
Whereas universities and research were marginalised by Renzi, in spite of their relevance in the corpus, the 'welfare and social policies' (333 tweets; 11.6%)—and within these was the issues of the '80 euros bonus'—were prioritised both by the PM and by citizens. From the Premier's point of view, the #matteorisponde event was an opportunity to promote image and concreteness of his government, which passed a measure adding an 80-euros monthly bonus for low-income earners. During the Q&A event, Renzi discussed and picked this issue five times, and he even discussed it during his final remarks. Similar to the PM, citizens gave priority to the 80 euros bonus, too, as detected from the specific topics of the macro-theme 'social policies'. Indeed, the measure was the main issue of the majority of questions (31.5%), followed by the broader issue of social inclusion and the rights of vulnerable people (27.9%), welfare matters (18.9%), and health (9%).<sup>4</sup>

With the aim to understand citizens' attention towards 'public administration'—the fourth macro-theme in order of importance (331 tweets; 11.5%)—it is necessary to look at its subthemes. Almost half of the messages relate to 'meritocracy' (48.6%) and correlated entries as generational change, transparency and turnover in order to praise those who deserve it, and the recruitment of civil servants appointed from open competitions. The argument was often labelled with the hashtag #merito (#merit), which called to many citizens to intervene and bring their claims to public attention. Yet, the problem remained in the shadows: the PM nor traditional media gave space these users' tweets (there was also no attention given by the a press agency, news, or newspaper article). Along with merit, another large group of tweets asked for general reforms in public administration: streamlining and cost reduction (38.4%), unblocking pay raises (9.7%), and other (1.8%).

Unsurprisingly, the analysis of remaining macro-themes found issues about the spotlight in Italian political and media agendas. Topics were 'developmental

policies' (304 tweets; 10.6%); 'job issues' (299 tweets; 10.4%); and 'economy/finance' (267; 9.3%), most of which regarding fiscal policies. These three themes—a testing ground for the newly appointed government—represent the most crucial issues for the country and controversial topic that interest all voters (De Sio, 2014).

**Fig. 1. Macro-themes raised by citizens**



When it comes to 'developmental policies', calls for investments in favour of industry and entrepreneurship generate the largest number of citizen queries (24%). Following, there are calls for investments in the tourism and culture (24%); in infrastructures (17.8%); and pleas for a general boost for the country (12.5%). With the exception of culture, of which the PM stresses the importance to support use of private funds, other issues remain unanswered. For instance, Renzi just hints at a measure to cut enterprises' taxes.<sup>5</sup>

The clash between bottom-up citizens' requests and those addressed by the PM are similarly visible in discussions about the issue 'work'. This fifth macro-theme is articulated in the following issues: unemployment (40.5%); reforms and Jobs Act [Italian labour market reform](18.1%); labour rights (8.7%); self-employed workers (14%); professional bodies (4%); and other (3.6%).

Unemployment—particularly youth unemployment—represents the most important problem in this area:

*#matteorisponde* is there any chance for us young to find a job and show we are not only *bamboccioni* [stay-at-home big babies]?

A good reason why a young unemployed person shall remain in Italy? *#matteorisponde*

Facing a choir of messages highlighting the problem of youth unemployment and asking reasons as to why remaining in Italy would be worthwhile, the PM gave no answers except for alluding to the previously highlighted decision to cut businesses' taxes in order to indirectly support job security.

Therefore, tweets about labour rights (sick leave, paid leave, safety, etc.) also have a similar destiny of partial exclusion from Renzi's replies.

After 'work' (Fig. 1), the sixth macro-theme is 'economy/finance'. Unsurprisingly, users' queries mainly focus on fiscal policies (74.2%), followed by the state balanced-budget (17.2%); EU monetary and fiscal policies (7.9%); and other (4.8%). Fiscal issues interest citizens the most, but in half of these tweets, users explicitly request tax reduction measures:

*#matteorisponde* is it possible that nothing has been done to reduce, finally, these damned taxes weighing heavily on Italian families?

Looking at the PM's replies about taxes, the choice to address the issue only partially appeared evident. Firstly, he tweeted that he committed himself to reduce taxes for some kinds of users: "I committed myself with self-employed workers, low income citizens, pensioners". Then, he dealt with this topic verbally, but once again, he shifted the matter towards the 80-euros bonus topic: "It isn't possible to keep up with a system in which taxes rise, rise and rise on the basis of mistaken belief of increasing services. The State must give back - this is the rationale of the 80 euros bonus".

There are two further elements of interest. The first one is linked to the 'politics' macro-theme. Despite the limited number of citizens' queries (234 tweets; 8.2%), this subject includes some of the issues that the PM addresses on several occasions (institutional/constitutional reforms, governmental policies, and cutting the costs of politics). The second element refers to the macro-theme of international policies given that the event took place shortly before the European Parliament elections. Despite the imminent elections (24 May 2015), international affairs do not seem to raise the interest of citizens in particular (127 tweets; 4.4%).

Having completed the analysis on themes and issues that prompted mostly citizen attention, it is necessary to recall the presence of the macro-theme 'justice/security' (209 tweets; 7.3%). This comprised legality (56.9%); general reforms (23.9%, to accelerate and streamline the timeframes of the justice system); legalization of soft drugs (12%); justice for unsolved tragedies (4.3%); and other (2.8%).

Finally, 'innovation and digitalization', 'environment and land [use]', and 'civil rights' have not been analysed because of the low percentage of messages having these themes (Fig. 1).

From this investigation, it is already possible to make a distinction between issues that raised citizen requests and those addressed by the PM. Young people's requests remained in the shadow, despite their significant frequency in the dataset. Concerns of university students, unemployed people, and precarious workers seeking encouragement about the future remained unaddressed. Many messages

were themed on unaddressed issues like social inclusion, labour rights, meritocracy, and generational change. On other aspects —particularly measures for tax reduction— the PM replied only partially in comparison to citizen expectations.

### CITIZENS TAKE THE FLOOR IN THE POLITICAL DEBATE: HOW AND WHY?

The opportunity of having the PM ‘at a tweet’ encouraged many citizens took the opportunity to engage publically to get information on certain issues and priorities (‘pure questions’; 66.3%). Although this is the most used approach, the web-date with Renzi opened up to other participation forms, including ‘position stands’ (19%); ‘jokes’ (7.7%), which is distinctive from ironic tweets; ‘rhetorical question’ (4.7%); and ‘reporting’ (2.4%), such as with tweets promoting the event and its content.

Being aware of the high visibility of events like *#matteorisponde*, researchers and academics were identified as those who mainly adopted ‘position stands’. Regarding the topic ‘education’, in fact, after ‘pure questions’ (64.5% of the total), the next highest were ‘position stands’ (31.9%):<sup>6</sup>

*#matteorisponde* In view of 7000 hopeless doctors, don’t tell us to stay serene [expression once used by Renzi]! *#futurelessdoctors*

And nobody talks of *#university*! *#matteorisponde @matteorenzi*

Further examining the ‘position stand’, it is interesting to note that this approach in macro-themes like social policies, development, and justice/legality outlined a self-empowerment attitude. In the 19-20% of tweets (for each of these three themes) taking ‘position stands’, citizens participated in the debate to offer suggestions and proposals on various problems:

*@matteorenzi* Rethink the ‘welfarist’ State. It helps you if you help. Even if you are unemployed, in schools and hospitals. *#matteorisponde*

*@matteorenzi* we don’t love Italy, but the rest of the world does. Let’s totally focus on tourism *#matteorisponde*

Participating in the Q&A through a ‘joke’ is a choice that appeared more frequently on topics with more evident politics personalization, such as tweets about the PM and those with information regarding the format of ‘*matteorisponde*’ (respectively: 35.7% and 31.8%):

It’s official: the *@matteorenzi* of *#matteorisponde* is *@CrozzaTweet* [Italian comedian]  
<http://t.co/Y7vZgYxzTN>

Which comes first, the chicken or the egg *#matteorisponde @matteorenzi*

Nonetheless, it is not news that irony, sarcasm, and humour are representative of ‘rules of the game’ within Twitter (Molyneux, 2014). Given the brevity of messages, the microblog easily becomes grounds for jokes and comic originalities.

In this sense, Twitter represents for users both an opportunity to get informed and discuss politics and provides a break to entertain themselves and participate—in the sense of ‘feeling part of’ an event as much as a temporary community—which echoes the life sharing aspect of hashtag *#matteorisponde*.

The principle that guided citizens to use rhetorical questions is very different. Although it did not constitute a widespread mode (4.7%), the rhetorical question was a useful indicator to mark users’ participation in the Q&A as it captured the controversy that often accompanied messages. Tweets that already had an answer but adopted the artifice of the question to highlight contradictions and weaknesses of certain positions belonged to this type:

I will find work where sooner or later, or do I have to spend the rest of my life on the couch sending CVs? *#matteorisponde @matteorenzi*

The example above refers to the macro-theme ‘work’, in which the ‘rhetorical question’ format reaches a level above the average (10%). On this issue, and in particular on the problem of unemployment, the use of this strategy not only revealed a polemical intent against the PM, but also highlighted a dramatic effect determined by the uncertainty of the job market. In addition, whereas the form ‘joke’ identified tweets with irony, on the ‘work’ issue, as much as on ‘development policies’ and ‘economy/finance’, this style completely disappeared. This important signa shows the seriousness people use to face these ‘valence issues’ (Stokes, 1963, cited in De Sio 2014), which are characterized more as national emergencies rather than as topics about which to make jokes.

The analysis of the tweets orientation (or frames) suggested that the Q&A was seen as a participatory event where citizens debated in an unbiased way several national problems, rather than as an occasion to criticize or argue with the leader. A negative frame was found only in the 14% of tweets compared to 82.8% neutral messages and 3.3% positive. Considering this trend, it is interesting to evaluate which issues present the highest values of criticism or praise. Predictably, tweets on the PM and those regarding the format of *‘matteorisponde’* highlighted that citizens’ partisan participation was divided between supporters and critics (negative frame, respectively: 28% and 20.7%; positive frame: 7% and 11.8%).

Instead, it is less obvious to find a high concentration of negatively oriented tweets for the ‘social policies’ (17.7%) and discover that—squarely in correspondence to the PM’s most hyped initiative (the 80 euros bonus)—there is the highest number of critical interventions:

You swore: the € 80 bonus only financed by cuts. Instead, we will be paying it with more taxes [on] farmers and entrepreneurs. Are you serious? *#matteorisponde*

Apart from these relatively limited problems, quoted examples showed that citizens’ prevailing attitude was to intervene in the Q&A to address a number of issues with the PM. They took the opportunity of the event to attain information and reassurances on concrete problems (as the prevalence of ‘pure questions’

and ‘neutral frame’ suggested). The polemic intent against the PM was found to be rather limited, whereas there was a widespread tendency to consider carefully and cautiously the various issues on the agenda.

## CONCLUSIONS

The systematic study of tweets sent to the PM by the Q&A participants, concurrently with the answers he gave, allowed identifying concerns and central issues of the Italian public debate, days before the European Parliament elections. Unemployment (especially among young people), university funding, social inclusion, labor rights, tax reduction, and meritocracy emerged as top refrains on citizens’ agendas. In fact, participants focused most of their contributions via Twitter on these issues. However, these problems remained in the shadow. Either the selection of topics was accidental or intentional; the Prime Minister did not deal with citizens’ priorities. He chose to address other topics during the 60 minutes of the *#matteorisponde*, picking the 80-euro bonus for low-income workers as main theme.

Furthermore, the research provided an opportunity to consider users’ participation forms. The findings highlighted that citizens’ prevailing attitude was to intervene in the Q&A to query the Prime Minister on a number of issues. Indeed, participants used the digital event to get answers and reassurances on precise topics, as the prevalence of questions and tweets with neutral frame suggested. The critical intention against the PM was found rather secondary, since the number of tweets with negative frame, as well as rhetorical questions with controversial content, was very low.

In addition to the findings of the research, it seems necessary to reflect broadly on the meaning and significance of dialogue initiatives via Twitter promoted by political leaders. It should be noted that events as the online Q&A constitute an opportunity, for the public character, to open a direct channel of communication with a public interested in interacting and asking questions.

The actual implementation of this type of event is a message of openness and readiness for dialogue from the public actor, who responds and decides to face the widespread, bottom-up request to participate.

In a way, the internet is the infrastructure through which these initiatives can take place. On the other hand, the web’s promise of democratization works to activate the appeal to participate. The stronger the bottom-up plea to contribute, the greater the benefit in terms of the public image that the actor will gain from dedicated time to these type of events.

For a politician, opening up to this listening test can be seen as a demonstration of interest in building a direct and horizontal connection with the citizens. However, this could be, at the same time, an effective electoral marketing operation. In this context, it is worth mentioning the emphasis and visibility offered to the question time by all traditional media. In fact, Twitter was the platform that hosted the event, but its narrative developed on many other media—from SkyTg24 live TV to live audio-video connections of main sites and news media and to coverage provi-

ded by television news and newspapers— until recalling the cross-media concept, whose diffusion and narration simultaneously involve more media.

Moreover, the success of this type of event is measured both by citizens' participation level and by the broadness of their media coverage. Even if the *#matteorisponde* event satisfied both instances, the aspect of direct user involvement deserves greater attention. Indeed, participation in the interaction activity via Twitter of the 23 April 2015 event (from 2-3 p.m. GMT) included more than 2000 citizens, who generated more than 3000 messages, of which almost 70% were so-called 'pure questions'. The PM only responded to 39 queries.

Such numbers are already enough to understand that a Twitter Q&A event can hardly function as an instrument of dialogue to foster an open public participation. In addition, discretion left to the respondent to select or ignore queries received, and chance to appeal to the excessive generality or specificity of the topics discussed (as an excuse not to respond), make it simple for those who manage the initiative to steer the conversation at will. In this regard, it is significant to recall the discrepancy between issues discussed by the PM and those that remained unanswered, despite their importance for citizens.

Such intrinsic limitations to forums as the Q&A open a reflection on the need to dismantle a widespread 'rhetoric of disintermediation as a natural state of Twitter' (Boccia Artieri, 2015). At the same time, however, some bottom-up disintermediation drives clearly emerge (Diamanti, 2014): broad participation of citizens in the event; themes; priorities raised (many of which are broad in scope and of national interest); and their participation forms. The latter were intended to offer input and ideas as well as to ask questions. This not only confirmed that users fully grasped the opportunity for dialogue, but also highlighted individual self-empowerment attitudes towards the community.

Therefore, the *#matteorisponde* seemed to citizens as an opportunity to have a say in public debate (Perrin, 2014). From this perspective, the overall effect—with reference to the potential of new web tools—is an enrichment and enlargement of public space because of the intervention of other actors rather than traditional elites.

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## Notes

1 For a summary of studies focused on Twitter and politics, see Jungherr, 2014.

2 Oldenburg distinguishes third places from the family-related first places and work-related second places (Oldenburg, 1991).

3 After such statement, Renzi, facing broader questions on environmental sustainability stated 'I can't answer generic questions. The #matteorisponde works only with specific questions'.

4 The macro-theme 'social policies' also covers topics of adoptions in Congo (6.3%); and other (1.5%).

5 Other issues related to 'development policies' are industrial crisis (10.2%; including those in the Piombino and Sulcis areas), liberalizations (8.9%), and other (2.6%).

6 'Rhetorical questions' counted for the 3.6%.

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