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The features, impact and legacy of Berlusconi's campaigning techniques, language and style

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This essay empirically evaluates three aspects of Berlusconi's legacy for Italian political communication: his pioneering of political marketing and modern electioneering; his ability to appropriate and popularise his particular rhetorical formulae; and his approach to increasingly relevant digital media. Berlusconi skilfully imported professional televised-centric campaigning in Italy, opening a wide competitive gap that his centre-left opponents took two decades to close. He also managed deeply to influence political discourse by spreading his signature catchphrases among most journalists and politicians, including his opponents. He was, however, less innovative, and generally outperformed by his main competitors, in the use of digital media to inform and engage voters. These findings suggest that Berlusconi's impact on Italian political communication has been massive, but his legacy may be less lasting to the extent that media and electioneering are evolving towards models that differ from those dominated by Berlusconi.

Keywords: media and politics in Italy; election campaigns; political discourse; Internet politics; Silvio Berlusconi

> The Council of Ministers held on 15th of June 2013 has approved the 'Decree of Action': a law-decree with urgent measures to revive the economy, 'because Italians who want to do things can rejuvenate our country', as explained by Prime Minister Enrico Letta. (Italian Government press release, 21 August 2013)

> We can't go on like this. And so ... it is inevitable that the President of the Republic is forced to take to the field again. (Massimo Giannini, La Repubblica, 6 September 2013)

Oscar Wilde once claimed that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. The two examples above provide a testament that, despite all the criticism that has been directed towards Silvio Berlusconi's language, style and communication over the two decades in which he has competed in Italian politics, even his critics, perhaps unconsciously, often adopt phrases and metaphors characteristic of his public discourse. In the first statement cited above, Enrico Letta, a leading member of the *Partito Democratico* (PD – Democratic Party) and the Prime Minister of a unity government that included both the centre left and the centre right, called the first significant act of his new executive the 'Decree of Action'. This phrase echoed Berlusconi's definition of his own fourth government (2008–2011) as the 'Government of Action'. In the second statement, Massimo Giannini, deputy editor of Berlusconi's arch-rival newspaper *la Repubblica*, used the

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phrase 'taking to the field' to describe President Giorgio Napolitano's intervention in the controversy that ensued after Berlusconi threatened to withdraw support for the Letta government after a final criminal conviction was issued against him. Famously, 'taking to the field' is how Berlusconi described his decision to found his party *Forza Italia* (FI – Go Italy) when he first ran in the 1994 general elections. Thus, in both examples, high-profile representatives of the centre-left political and media establishment used words and metaphors that echoed Berlusconi's rallying cries.

In this article, I will analyse Berlusconi's impact and legacy on Italian political communication by looking at three different domains: the use of modern campaigning techniques, especially centred on television; the spread among Italian journalists and politicians of Berlusconi's language, which in turn conveys distinctive metaphors and narratives; and Berlusconi's use of the Internet, an important platform that is contributing to changes in the political communication environment and may thus be relevant in evaluating how enduring Berlusconi's legacy can be. Whereas the analysis of the first two aspects highlights that Berlusconi had a massive impact as a master of televised campaigning and as a creator and appropriator of political language, he has been less inclined towards digital media, where his impact has therefore been negligible. Taken together, these findings suggest that Berlusconi's legacy should be contextualised within a particular era of political communication, which scholars describe as 'modern campaigning', and which may become less salient over time.

Berlusconi as a pioneer of modern campaigning in Italy

Over the last two decades, comparative research has revealed that political communication has developed across the Western world as a response to social, cultural, political and technological transformations (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999). In particular, Norris (2000) classifies campaigns as *premodern*, *modern* and *postmodern*. Premodern campaigns were characterised by party-centred communication (partisan press, literature distribution, door-to-door canvassing), which meant that the main effect of campaigns was to reinforce pre-existing attitudes and mobilise voters through selective exposure to propaganda. Modern campaigns were marked by the advent of television and mass communication, which, together with the weakening of party attachments and organisations, gave way to candidate-centred politics, the shifting of party priorities from recruiting members to winning votes (Panebianco 1988), professionalised campaigns centred on 'catch-all' appeals, and the development of an 'audience democracy' where citizens are bystanders to televised spectacles more than participants (Manin 1997). Finally, postmodern campaigns are characterised by the multiplication of media channels and the consequent increase in the volume of content available to the public, but also by fragmentation of the news audience and greater scope for selective exposure. In this context, the effects of mass-media messages have been seen as declining compared with the previous era (Bennett and Iyengar 2008), whereas horizontal and dialogic forms of communication acquire a new significance, resulting in a revival of door-to-door canvassing (Nielsen 2012), often augmented by data-intensive techniques that help in engineering interpersonal communication and mobilisation (Vaccari 2013a).

Whereas most European democracies began to develop features of modern campaigning in the 1960s, Italian electioneering did not experience a transition from the premodern to the modern era until the early 1980s, when party leaders began using television to bypass party structures and build relationships with voters (Marletti and Roncarolo 2000). The first televised political advertisements appeared in the general election of 1983, but political ads had a marginal impact on campaigns until the 1994 election (Pezzini 2001). In turn, the media started

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shifting the focus of their coverage from politics and ideology to policy and personality (Mazzoleni 1992; Roncarolo and Marini 1997, 80). By contrast, relationships between voters and parties weakened dramatically: membership in parties as a percentage of the electorate went from almost 10% in 1980 to 5.5% in 2007 (van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012). The commercialisation of Italian media, led by Berlusconi as an entrepreneur, substantially contributed to these developments.

When, at the beginning of the 1990s, the party system that had characterised Italian politics for almost five decades collapsed under bribery scandals, Berlusconi rose to power by skilfully employing the techniques of modern campaigning. His party, FI, was rooted in the organisational structure of his advertising agency (Hopkin and Paolucci 1999) and aimed primarily to achieve and manage media exposure (Calise 1996). Berlusconi announced his entrance into electoral politics with a speech from his house that was videotaped and sent to all broadcasting networks, thus bypassing journalistic questioning – an unprecedented news-management decision in Italy. In the same election, he waged a massive television advertisement campaign, with most of the commercials aired on his own networks and complemented by endorsements by media and sports personalities. The 1994 campaign also saw the first live televised debate between the leaders of the two coalitions, which was broadcast on the Berlusconi-owned *Canale 5* station. In the 2001 general election, Berlusconi first outpaced the competition by launching an unprecedented mass advertising campaign through large-scale billboards, then mailed a glossy magazine-like autobiographic pamphlet titled 'An Italian Story' to all Italian families, and finally appeared in one of the most popular televised talk shows, '*Porta a Porta*', to sign a five-pledge, focus-group-tested 'Contract with Italians', modelled after the US Republicans' 1994 'Contract with America'. On that occasion, the programme was watched by 38.5% of the public, about double its ordinary share (Balassone 2013). Berlusconi's 2006 campaign was based on constant presence on any available televised outlet, from national to local, from political talk shows to entertainment programmes (Campus 2006). During the second televised debate against his opponent, Romano Prodi, he turned around a lacklustre performance by making a last-minute announcement that an unpopular tax on houses would be abolished, if he won the elections. Looking straight into the camera and talking directly to viewers, he addressed them thus: 'You have heard it right, we will get rid of this tax.' In the run-up to the 2008 campaign, Berlusconi constructed a seemingly *impromptu* media event when he got out of his car in the centre of Milan and gave a passionate speech about the need to found a new centre-right party, the *Popolo della Libertà* (PDL – People of Freedom). This theatrical performance, combined with its unusual context and its seeming spontaneity, was perfectly designed to attract media coverage. Similarly, Berlusconi's 2013 'comeback' campaign was entirely fought on television, as he demanded to be invited to every possible news programme, talk show, and entertainment feature, including a theatrical 'duel' performance vis-à-vis one of his journalistic arch-nemeses, Michele Santoro.

The case of the 2013 showdown with Santoro is an important example of how Berlusconi's employment of modern techniques was met by the Italian media system, which is characterised by weak journalistic professionalism and high involvement of journalists in political advocacy (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 102–103, 113–114). As Italian journalists interpret their role as either partisan trumpeters or officiators of mediated ceremonies, politicians have developed tactics to bypass journalistic mediation by 'going public' in direct addresses to the audience through earned media exposure (Roncarolo 2002, 151–153) without being held accountable for their statements. Many Italian journalists have found no better way to respond than to offer the same deferential treatment to most politicians or to relish their partisan role by openly claiming

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that objectivity and fairness in reporting are myths that cannot be achieved in real life – a point that ended up legitimising Berlusconi's argument that his political use of the media he owns is just a fair counter-balance to hostility from left-leaning journalists.

In all the campaigns he waged, Berlusconi skilfully handled tools such as marketing, branding, image-making, public opinion research, advertising and news management. As the centre-left was still rooted in the mass-party organisational model and in a pedagogic approach to political communication (Vaccari 2011), it struggled in the new campaign environment. Although Berlusconi's approach to communication is commonly criticised for its lack of substance, honesty and citizen involvement, achieving mass-mediated visibility has become an obsession for all Italian party leaders while party organisations have continued to weaken across the political spectrum. When, in 2001, Berlusconi plastered the walls of Italian cities with huge posters, the centre-left followed suit and this type of advertisement has since become habitual in Italian elections. Yet, a tendency persists in the centre-left establishment to criticise Berlusconi's use of modern campaigning techniques as part and parcel of his politics and policies rather than as a set of tools that, in theory, could be deployed as effectively to communicate progressive as to communicate conservative positions. This conflation of the messenger, the message and the medium is well exemplified by Pierluigi Bersani, who led the PD from 2009 until shortly after the 2013 elections. When pressed to mention specific policy proposals that voters could associate with his party, Bersani often eluded the question by claiming that he did not want to follow Berlusconi's electoral recipe of making promises to voters. The cornerstone of Bersani's 2013 campaign was a complicated critique of 'personal parties', in which he argued that if parties become dependent on their leaders – one of the key features of modern campaigning and contemporary politics in most Western democracies (Poguntke and Webb 2005) – leaders' unchecked power might weaken democracies' ability to change course when necessary. In 2011, Bersani claimed that 'communication is to politics like finance is to economics', a statement that, given the bad reputation that finance has enjoyed since the 2007–2008 global economic collapse, was a rather unflattering assessment of the value of communication. Bersani's successor, Matteo Renzi, has openly embraced modern techniques (Bordignon 2014), and has often been criticised by the progressive party and media establishments precisely for doing so. Even the new challenger to the established party system, the *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S – Five Star Movement), has demonised television and mass communication as part of the political 'elite' and advocated a rather idealised notion of 'Internet democracy' (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013).

In sum, whereas in other competitive party systems the losers usually try to steal a page from the winners' electioneering script in order to get back into government, in Italy most centre-left politicians have not felt comfortable using Berlusconi's script and, as a result, they have been less successful in deploying the modern campaigning toolkit. For two main reasons, Berlusconi may have contributed to this development: his conflict of interests, which led many of his opponents to identify communication as an unfair playing field, and the fact that his leadership of centre-right parties often bordered on their ownership, which provided a distorted portrayal of leadership compared with contemporary democracies, where leaders can be challenged and defeated if they fail to deliver (McDonnell 2013).

Comparative research, however, suggests that Berlusconi did not invent the techniques he used, and that their effects have not necessarily endangered the functioning of democracy in the Western world. Political marketing techniques were commonplace across Western democracies by the time FI was founded (Lees-Marshment, Rudd and Strömbäck 2011). While Berlusconi may be considered an exceptional politician in terms of his personality, incentives and conduct (Jones 2009), his style as a campaigner and communicator is not without comparison across

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Western democracies, and can be seen as an adaptive response to the mediatisation of politics (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999). For instance, Campus (2010a, 2010b) has identified similarities between Berlusconi and other conservative politicians, such as French and US presidents Charles De Gaulle, Nicolas Sarkozy and Ronald Reagan, in the use of television as a tool of political communication. Moreover, Ventura (2012) has argued that the storytelling techniques employed by Berlusconi and Sarkozy provide examples of how leaders build narratives to strengthen relationships with voters. The same can be said for the display of politicians' personal lives, a tendency termed 'intimisation' by Stanyer (2013).

Berlusconi as a political Wordsmith

Employing effective campaigning tactics has thus been crucial for Berlusconi's electoral success and an important part of his impact on Italian politics. Equally important has been his ability to define the language with which issues have been discussed in the public sphere throughout the 20 years of his political career.

Various scholars have discussed Berlusconi's rhetoric and style (see e.g. Giansante 2011) in the context of broader transformations of political rhetoric in Italy. Campus (2002) emphasises the role of dreams and journeys and the centrality of leaders – all crucial in Berlusconi's rhetoric – in Italian political communication. Croci (2001) suggests that Italian political language has shifted from from '*politichese*', the politicians' language, to '*gentese*', the people's language. From a comparative perspective, Campus (2010a) highlights the spread of 'anti-political' rhetoric as a campaigning and governing tool, and Mancini (2011) argues that politicians increasingly rely on imagery from the world of consumption and use their own lifestyles to signal their policy stances and create public personas that voters can identify with. To a large extent, Berlusconi did not cause these linguistic and cultural shifts as a politician (although he may have played a significant part in their development as the master of commercial television in Italy), but he has skilfully employed them as opportunities to both differentiate himself from other politicians and to leave a mark on public discourse.

To shed light on these phenomena, I conducted a content analysis of all the articles that appeared in the national editions of *la Repubblica* and *La Stampa*, two of the three leading Italian newspapers, from 1 January 1984 until 30 September 2013.[1] Although many more Italians get their political information from television than get it from newspapers (Legnante 2007), analysing the press offers various advantages: first, newspapers provide a large amount of content, in terms of both the quantity of articles and their length, thus making it possible to shed light on issues that do not necessarily emerge in the brief sound bites that are a common feature of television programmes; second, since Italian newspapers have historically catered to elites rather than the general public (Hallin and Mancini 2004), analysing them makes it possible to test the extent to which Berlusconi's language penetrated elite discourse; finally, unlike television news broadcasts, newspaper archives are readily accessible and searchable using relevant keywords.

My analysis will focus on five phrases that can be considered representative of five signature issues that Berlusconi pursued during his time as a political leader:

- The *campaigning* domain is represented by the words '*scendere in campo*' (taking to the field, as a verb, in Italian) and '*discesa in campo*' (taking to the field, as a noun), which are the phrases that Berlusconi used in the videotaped speech in which he announced his candidacy in 1994, and has repeated ever since when referring to his political project.

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- The *tax* domain, arguably Berlusconi's key policy issue, is represented by the words '*mani nelle tasche*' (hands in the pockets), which Berlusconi uses as a metaphor for the State's fiscal demands, generally in the phrase 'putting [someone's] hands in Italians' pockets'.
- The *justice* domain, another crucial issue for Berlusconi in light of his controversial dealings with the judiciary as a defendant in criminal trials and aspiring reformer, is represented by the words '*toghe rosse*' (red robes), an expression used by Berlusconi and his allies to condemn, for their allegedly political motives, the magistrates who prosecuted him.
- The *political* domain is represented by the words '*teatrino della politica*' (the political circus), a phrase that Berlusconi has used to discredit what he often describes as the self-absorbed and self-referential political class – a staple of his 'anti-political' rhetoric (Campus 2010a).
- The *reform* domain is represented by the word '*inciucio*' (a slang word from Southern Italy, which could be translated as 'dodgy compromise'), a pejorative term that was often used by politicians, journalists and commentators to condemn the occasions on which parties from both right and left were (or were considering) reaching compromises on institutional reforms. The failure of these reforms was in no small part due to the fact that commentators and dissenting politicians, often but not only from the left, denounced most proposed (attempts at) compromise between the two main political blocs as 'deals with the devil' where some of Berlusconi's personal interests (mostly, justice and broadcasting) would be sacrificed in exchange for systemic reforms.

The keywords I selected have characterised public debate on key Berlusconi-related issues for the two decades of his political career. More broadly, the narratives and metaphors underlying them are all part and parcel of Berlusconi's framing of these subjects. For instance, 'taking to the field' not only evokes Berlusconi's well-known success as the owner of A.C. Milan football team, but it also suggests a vision of politics as electoral confrontation that had been generally lacking in Italy's pre-1994 consensus system and that the new alternation-based system made paramount. As a result, even the word '*inciucio*', which most chronicles attribute to one of Berlusconi's rivals, Massimo D'Alema, implies an adversarial notion of politics where bipartisan compromises that advance the public interest are inherently suspicious. The expression also encompasses distrust of politicians, parties and institutions, which has constituted one of the key features of Berlusconi's rhetoric.

The data have been collected through archive searches of the aforementioned phrases for each year from 1984 until 2012 and for the first nine months of 2013. Articles focusing on sports, show-business, entertainment and local affairs were discarded, whereas articles focusing on politics, culture, business, the economy and general news were included. This choice makes it possible to track the spread of the keywords to domains other than the strictly political, while at the same time excluding the realms in which the phrases originated and are routinely used irrespective of politics or Berlusconi (for instance, sports for 'taking to the field') or where news articles may focus on Berlusconi's businesses (such as stories about televised entertainment programmes). I decided whether to include an article in the dataset on the basis of all the information provided by the archives as a result of the keyword queries (heading, subheading, section, and page number); when such information was not sufficient to assess whether an article was relevant, I retrieved its full text to make a final judgement. A total of 8565 articles in *la Repubblica* and 6181 articles in *La Stampa* matched these criteria and were thus included in the analysis.[2] Table 1 shows the average yearly frequencies of the five keywords aggregated by

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parliamentary legislatures: 1984–1986, 1987–1991, 1992–1993 (when the '*Tangentopoli*' corruption scandal was uncovered and most parties dissolved); 1994–1995 (during which the first Berlusconi government was in power); 1996–2000[3], 2001–2005 (the second and third Berlusconi governments); 2006–2007, 2008–2011 (the fourth Berlusconi government), and 2012–2013 (when Berlusconi's government was dissolved amid financial turmoil, the technocratic Monti government came into power, and the 2013 campaign was waged, leading to no clear winners and a unity government presided over by PD deputy leader Enrico Letta and briefly supported by Berlusconi's party).

To interpret the results, let us first look at the last two columns of Table 1, which show the yearly average number of articles containing the five keywords before and after Berlusconi's entrance into politics. For both newspapers, the frequency of articles that include the words 'taking to the field' nearly doubles, and it increases even more with regard to all the remaining keywords. Indeed, 'taking to the field', the phrase that most commentators associate with Berlusconi's political entrepreneurship, is the only one that was somewhat present in mainstream Italian public discourse before Berlusconi's political career began. Between 1987 and 1991, when Berlusconi was nowhere near becoming a politician, it could be found in 103 articles per year in *la Repubblica* and 58 in *La Stampa*. Usage of the phrase continued growing in 1992 and 1993 and only a small number of the stories referred to rumours in late 1993 that Berlusconi was considering a career in politics. These findings show that Berlusconi did not invent all the linguistic formulae that have become staples of his rhetoric, but at times creatively appropriated phrases that had already become popular and were consistent with his message and narrative. In the case of the 'field' analogy, politics was already undergoing a process of popularisation which involved, among other things, the use of sport metaphors to describe political endeavours. Berlusconi, however, was able to forge a link between an already popular metaphor and his own narrative, which was uniquely fit to take advantage of such imagery given his success as a football club owner and the new style of political competition that he advocated. Both before and after 1994, the entrance into politics of any aspiring leader was often defined by Italian journalists and politicians as 'taking to the field', but after Berlusconi marked his intervention with those words, which he then constantly repeated to commemorate that moment and describe his subsequent campaigns, the term came to be identified with him and evoked the narrative of his project. A telling sign of this phenomenon is that, when Prime Minister Mario Monti decided to field a list named after himself in the 2013 general election, he pointedly noted that he and his candidates were 'ascending to politics' rather than 'taking to (or "going down" [*scendere*]) to the field', a linguistic distinction Monti hoped would position his project in contrast rather than in analogy to Berlusconi's.

Other keywords essentially only appeared from 1994 onwards and have shown a rather consistent presence in newspaper articles since then: 'hands in the pockets' and 'red robes', the words capturing Berlusconi's signature policy issues, became a constant presence after FI was founded, with about 10 and 20 articles per year mentioning them in each newspaper respectively. 'The political circus' also grew substantially after 1994, with about 10 mentions in each newspaper per year, while '*inciucio*' (dodgy compromise) went from absence to about 30 mentions per year in both *la Repubblica* and *La Stampa*.

Although all keywords appeared in the two newspapers rather consistently over time, their presence also varied depending on the political context and, in particular, Berlusconi's initiatives, signalling that most of these phrases were reported as being used by him. For instance, the frequency of 'red robes' was much higher during the years in which Berlusconi was in government and repeatedly attempted to overhaul various aspects of the judicial system,

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Table 1. Average yearly frequencies of news stories mentioning five keywords in *la Repubblica* and *La Stampa*, 1 April 1984–30 September 2013 (aggregated by parliamentary legislature).

la Repubblica	1984–1986	1987–1991	1992–1993	1994–1995	1996–2000	2001–2005	2006–2007	2008–2011	2012–2013	Pre–1994	Post–1994
Scendere + discesa in campo (taking to the field)	30	103	141	153	100	142	140	151	163	89	136
Mani nelle tasche (hands in the pockets)	0	1	4	2	0	8	12	26	10	2	10
Toghe rosse (red robes)	0	1	2	12	7	31	22	21	17	1	19
Teatrino della politica (the political circus)	0	1	2	5	11	17	10	13	9	1	12
Inciucio (dodgy compromise)	0	0	0	0	40	15	41	31	58	0	30
La Stampa	1984–1986	1987–1991	1992–1993	1994–1995	1996–2000	2001–2005	2006–2007	2008–2011	2012–2013	Pre–1994	Post–1994
Scendere + discesa in campo (taking to the field)	25	58	78	143	96	78	129	71	99	52	95
Mani nelle tasche (hands in the pockets)	1	3	5	4	2	7	10	19	6	3	8
Toghe rosse (red robes)	1	0	0	19	10	22	17	19	18	1	17
Teatrino della politica (the political circus)	0	0	1	7	11	8	12	9	5	0	9
Inciucio (dodgy compromise)	0	0	0	4	52	18	50	23	49	0	32

including granting the Prime Minister immunity from prosecutions and trials. Mentions of 'hands in the pockets' were especially numerous during the fourth Berlusconi government (2008–2011), which was marred by intense conflict over taxation once market confidence in Italy's public finances plummeted and the government was put under intense pressure to reduce the deficit. The word '*inciucio*' was featured more frequently when Berlusconi was not Prime Minister and demanded that the left give his party a role in the drafting of institutional reforms.

The data presented here have clear limitations, chief among them the fact that the number of articles included in the dataset (almost 15,000) made it impossible to conduct a more thorough content analysis investigating, for instance, whether the framing of these issues evolved through time and how Berlusconi's positions were represented. However, the evidence suggests that political discourse in Italy changed markedly once Berlusconi ventured into it. A set of keywords that have come to be identified with either Berlusconi himself, his policies or his political style have had a remarkably stable presence in Italian newspapers, an indication that they have entered mainstream political discourse and are not likely to be abandoned any time soon. Indeed, looking at the period 2012–2013, when Berlusconi was arguably in the weakest political and electoral position of his career, the frequency of many of the keywords included in the analysis increased rather than decreasing.[4] Thus, the legacy of Berlusconi on Italian political language, and on the metaphors and narratives that such language evokes, seems likely to endure.

Berlusconi and the Internet: can you teach an old dog new tricks?

So far, I have looked for evidence of Berlusconi's legacy in fields of political communication where such legacy was most likely to be strong in light of his personal talents and resources. Legacies, however, are a function not only of success in a domain that is relevant when their initiator is active, but also of the continuing relevance of that domain. As suggested in the first part of this article, political communication across Western democracies has evolved in ways that may diminish the importance of some of the tools and tactics in whose use Berlusconi excelled, bringing other styles and platforms to greater prominence instead. In the era of so-called postmodern campaigns, which according to Norris (2000) are gradually replacing modern ones across Western democracies, television is still relevant, but digital media and professionally organised field operations have acquired greater importance than they had in the preceding era. As media systems across the world become increasingly 'hybrid' (Chadwick 2013), with older and newer media and their respective logics merging and transforming each other, political actors adapt and update their styles and strategies of campaigning. The question of Berlusconi's legacy, therefore, involves, among other things, the extent to which his style of political communication is well suited to face this challenging era of change.

One way to address this topic is to assess how Berlusconi and his parties have approached one of the channels that are central to contemporary developments in political communication: the Internet. As a successful media entrepreneur who pioneered innovations in content production and delivery, Berlusconi could be expected to be at ease with communication change as much as anyone else among his political competitors. However, it is also possible that the dominance that Berlusconi achieved on television and in the mass media, documented in the previous two sections, may have made him and his political organisations less inclined to invest and experiment in digital media. Moreover, the demographic traits of the majority of Internet users in Italy (especially the fact that they are younger and more highly educated), as well as the

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political characteristics of those Internet users who engage with politics online (who are highly interested and involved in politics, see Vaccari 2013b) have been under-represented in Berlusconi's electoral coalition (Diamanti 2009).

To test these competing expectations, I present empirical data on the extent to which Berlusconi's parties have used the Internet to communicate with voters by comparison with their main competitors as well as all other Italian parties. The measure I employ is a set of additive indices of the number of features on Italian parties' websites during the last three general elections (2006, 2008, and 2013) and European parliamentary elections (2009). This analysis was conducted on the basis of a standardised coding scheme that for each website assessed the presence or absence of a total of 57 features. Based on a combination of latent trait analysis and a meta-analysis of coding frames employed by seven relevant studies in the field (see Vaccari 2013b), these variables are divided into three groups, each representing a relevant dimension of online political communication: *information*, which entails the one-way distribution of static political messages (for instance, party manifestos, leaders' biographies, pages targeting specific demographic groups, and videos); *participation*, which encompasses tools that promote users' engagement and resource mobilisation, both online and offline (such as social networking platforms, volunteer recruitment tools, and blogs); and *delivery*, which involves all aspects related to presentation, usability, accessibility, and freshness of content (such as foreign-language translations, internal search engines, and interactive maps). Table 2 shows the values of the indices for Berlusconi's parties (FI in 2006, the PDL in the remaining years) by comparison with the main centre-left party (the *Democratici di Sinistra*, [DS – Democrats of the Left] in 2006 and the PD in the remaining years) and with the average of all the party websites studied in each election. The higher the values for a website, the more features it offers in a given year in the specific domain measured by the index. Therefore, if Berlusconi's party's website has higher values than its centre-left counterparts on, say, the participation index, this indicates that it offered more features that achieved the goal of engaging its users in a given year.

Results indicate that Berlusconi's online political communication did not match the performance of its offline counterpart. In all four elections analysed here, the website of Berlusconi's party performed at a substantially lower level than that of the main party of the left,

Table 2. Indices of information, participation and delivery for party websites during national elections, 2006–2013.

Year	Party	Information	Participation	Delivery	Total
2006	DS	19	17	14	50
	FI	16	14	15	45
	All (n = 27)	12	9	11	31
2008	PD	21	20	16	56
	PDL	17	10	14	41
	All (n = 17)	12	11	11	34
2009	PD	13	17	16	45
	PDL	12	11	14	36
	All (n = 16)	12	11	11	34
2013	PD	18	18	16	52
	PDL	14	9	7	30
	All (n = 31)	11	10	9	30

Note: The highest possible values for each index were 26 (information), 23 (participation), 21 (delivery), and 70 (total). See Vaccari 2013b for details.

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especially in terms of participatory functions. These are arguably the most relevant and specific to online communication. Most citizens who visit a campaign website are already committed to that party or candidate, and therefore the most fruitful way to take advantage of such visit is to turn it into a step towards greater participation (Bimber and Davis 2003). Moreover, whereas in 2006 and, to a lesser extent, 2008 the websites of FI and the PDL outperformed the rest of the field (though notably, again, less so with regard to participation than the other two domains), in 2009 and 2013 Berlusconi's party website was substantially on a par with the average of those of the other parties. This result is surprising because research has demonstrated that parties with greater electoral strength and financial resources also tend to have richer websites (Vaccari 2013b). Berlusconi's party, having always been one of the most voted for and better financed, should have thus been expected to offer substantially more functions on its website than most of the competition. It should also be considered that Italian party websites were the ones offering the fewest functions in a seven-country international comparison of the period 2006–2010 (Vaccari 2013b, 95–96), which implies that Berlusconi's online presence has been rather weak by international standards as well.

The poor performance of Berlusconi's party's websites indicates that his legacy in political communication may be weaker in those areas where innovation has been more pronounced. Precisely the pace of technological and social change that characterises digital media, however, may open up new possibilities to reverse this trend. While institutional websites are still relevant channels of party communication, social media such as Facebook and Twitter have greater potential because they allow politicians to engage with larger numbers of users as part of their everyday lives and networks of social relationships. Research is not yet available to make it possible fully to evaluate Berlusconi's performance in this domain. As of 2013, his strategy was to build a presence on Facebook, by far the most popular platform in Italy, while neglecting Twitter, which has a smaller user base. Yet, even on Facebook Berlusconi's popularity, measured in terms of the number of 'fans' of his page at the time of writing, is lower than that of Beppe Grillo and Matteo Renzi. On Twitter, Berlusconi was the most mentioned politician during the 2013 campaign, but most users who talked about the election on Twitter were politically progressive (Vaccari et al. 2013). While social media may offer Berlusconi an opportunity to enhance his online communication, he has by no means been at the forefront of their uptake for the purposes of campaigning.

In sum, to the extent that Berlusconi's legacy in Italian political communication will depend on how his trademark methods, style and language will spread and remain relevant in a media environment that is profoundly changing, it is still unclear whether he and his party are sufficiently equipped and committed effectively to engage with the new challenges and opportunities brought about by digital media. Evidence from other countries shows that it is not enough to invest resources in new tools and technologies, as their impact depends on many other factors related to the candidate and the organisation of the campaign (Vaccari 2010), as well as the incentives provided by the institutional rules of the game (Anstead & Chadwick 2009). The fact that Internet access and skills have been less widely distributed among the Italian population compared with the rest of Europe – a fact that could at least in part be explained by consciously crafted policies by Berlusconi himself during his tenure in government – may contribute to reducing the pace of change, but there are already signs – most notably, the success of Beppe Grillo's M5S in using the Internet and social media for organisation, community building and message distribution (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013) – that political communication in Italy is developing patterns of postmodern campaigning and hybridisation that constitute only peripheral elements in Berlusconi's style.

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Conclusions

Taken together, the findings reported in this article suggest that Berlusconi has been more a skilful adopter of tools, techniques and styles that were already being developed elsewhere than a genuine innovator. While he was the first successfully to import modern campaigning in Italy, he did so at a time when these techniques had already been tried and tested in many other Western democracies. His preference for tactical appropriation rather than wholehearted innovation is most clearly revealed by his reluctant approach to the digital media. The domain where Berlusconi's innovative drive has emerged most clearly is that of political language, where he was able to popularise many expressions and metaphors of his own making, although even in this domain we saw that his signature phrase – 'taking to the field' – had already been widely used before 1994 and was thus taken over rather than created by Berlusconi. The data presented here also allow us to evaluate the impact and to provide a preliminary estimate of the legacy of Berlusconi to Italy's political communication.

As far as *impact* is concerned, it is hard to underestimate the significance of Berlusconi's role as a political communication entrepreneur. Berlusconi pioneered television-centred modern campaigning techniques that had long before become popular in other Western democracies but had yet to become widespread in Italy in the 1990s. He was also remarkably successful in populating Italian political discourse with phrases, metaphors and narratives that are implicitly or explicitly associated with himself and his style of political leadership. The centre-right leader, however, has had much less of an impact in the domain of digital media, where his party's efforts have generally lagged behind those of his competitors, also paling by comparison with similar parties in other democracies.

An empirically founded assessment of Berlusconi's *legacy* must start from the observation that, before he entered politics, Italian parties had only tentatively adopted the television-centred, professional mode of political communication that he based his campaigns on, and he can be credited with bringing Italy up to speed with other Western democracies in this regard. However, in spite of Berlusconi's impact as a pioneer of modern communication techniques, most of his political opponents have maintained a very critical stance towards his communication techniques. Others took some steps in the same direction as Berlusconi but in a much less decisive way – for instance, in the public display of their private lives (Campus and Ventura 2013) or in adopting a superficial, packaging-oriented reduction of political marketing (Cosenza 2012; Grandi and Vaccari 2013). By contrast, Berlusconi's rivals, together with most journalists and commentators, have by and large adopted language and metaphors that he has popularised in Italian political discourse. That said, the most critical question for Berlusconi's legacy involves the extent to which the Italian system of political communication will be transformed as a result of the hybridisation of media and the development of a postmodern, less television-centric model of electioneering. Berlusconi has not been particularly engaged with the digital media and seems more at ease with the communication tools and styles that were key to his success both as an entrepreneur and as a politician. The changes in televised, mass-mediated campaigning introduced by Berlusconi will undoubtedly remain in place for the foreseeable future as far as those domains are concerned, but a new layer of alternative techniques and methods are being superimposed upon them, forcing them to adapt and reducing their centrality. The extent to which this happens will depend on how these transformations – which never occur in a linear way and through wholesale adoption – develop empirically in Italy. The endurance and relevance of Berlusconi's legacy in Italian political communication are thus likely to be thrown into question by the massive ongoing transformations in the ways in which citizens,

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the media and politicians interact and perform their roles. As the *maestro* of television, Berlusconi's fingerprints are all over contemporary Italian political communication, but they may be washed away – slowly, to be sure – by new tides of change, adaptation and disruption.

Notes

1. The data were retrieved from the publicly accessible online archives of the two newspapers: http://ricerca.repubblica.it/ (*la Repubblica*) and http://www.archiviolastampa.it/ (*La Stampa*, for articles published until 2006) and http://archivio.lastampa.it (after 2006). Because the goal of this analysis is to compare political language before and during the Berlusconi era, I did not include the newspaper with the largest circulation, *Corriere della Sera*, because its archive (http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/) only allows searches from 1992 onwards.
2. To ensure that these figures are not driven by the number of articles published or archived in each year, I randomly chose a day of the year and then counted the number of articles that each newspaper published on that day each year, selecting only those stories that dealt with the topics among which I assessed the presence of Berlusconi-related keywords. Although the number of articles published by each newspaper varied by year (*la Repubblica* published on average 81 stories per day throughout the period, with a standard deviation of 25, and *La Stampa* published on average 76 stories per day, with a standard deviation of 9), there is no evidence that the number of archived articles increased systematically over time. In the pre-Berlusconi era between 1984 and 1993, both *la Repubblica*'s and *La Stampa*'s online archives return an average of 81 relevant articles per day. In the Berlusconi era between 1994 and 2013, the number of articles returned by *la Repubblica*'s archive is substantially identical (82), whereas for *La Stampa* it declines to 72, although unfortunately the archive was accessible only for the years until 2006 when I performed this control.
3. The online archive of *la Repubblica* contains substantially fewer items for the year 1996 than for all the other years. Readers should be aware that the figures for this year underestimate the actual number of articles published.
4. It should also be noted that the dataset included only articles that were published until 30 September 2013. As a result, the values for years 2012–2013 most likely underestimate the frequencies of the keywords for that period.

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