Posting for Consensus, Sharing Consensus. The Case of Migrants on Facebook, Ideological Views and Echo Chambers

Marianna Lya Zummo

Abstract
This study analyses posts and comments on a popular social network (Facebook) in order to investigate how web-users take advantage of participative platforms to post ideologically-driven comments, and how the exchanges create echo chambers. In particular, the study addresses populism expressed in online debates concerning migrants and used as a pretext to show group identities and ideologies. Facebook is thus taken as an example and considered a participatory platform (Boyd 2014) of political (populist) activism and the milieu for consensus-finding. The dialogic structure of comments is studied within Conversation Analysis adapted to online written texts (Antaki *et al.* 2005; Giles *et al.* 2015) as participative writings. The content of the posts is studied according to the proximisation theory (Cap 2013; 2017), to show how political/public actors seek legitimation by addressing virtual external threats. As a result, the paper increases our understanding of the participatory framework as the ground where opposing groups interact and where people build a personal confirmation niche (Quattrociocchi and Vicini 2016), which represents a relevant barrier to a critical discourse attitude.

1. Social media interactions as political debates

The relationship between social media use and participation in civic and political life has been subject to intense analysis and has already been assessed by research (Gerbaudo 2014). The general perception is that social media represent new democratic platforms that assure people their individual voice is heard. The people at large are using social platforms to share ideas and political positioning statements in a post-democratic dimension (Crouch 2000). In this cultural scenario, the web is thought to carry partial responsibility for the reinvigoration and the spread of some of today's political (i.e. populist) discourses.

Due to economic and social tension, both left-wing and right-wing variants of populism are currently on the rise in many countries. Despite the massive interest paid to populism, the term is still difficult to define since it has emerged in different ideologically-driven forms, across different countries and in different periods. Broadly speaking, society is seen as being composed of two antagonistic groups, the people and the elite (Mudde 2004: 543). The dichotomy US-THEM (Wodak 2015) is the ground where populism proposes itself as an ideology and a discursive style, offering world-views concerned with conflictual group/category polarisations. Social networks, which provide easy and fast access to political news and comments, are the perfect stage for these opposing groups to take action, with political debates that inflame social media boards.

The use of social networks for political reasons is a relatively new area of research (Gerbaudo 2014). In this paper, I propose that interactional online analysis (Antaki and Vareyda 2005), together with proximisation theory (Cap 2013; 2017), can be useful frameworks for understanding multi-party exchanges, where values are expressed interactively. Considering the dimension of the passive readership, these debates are seen as political activism aiming to enrol like-minded groups-of-thought already selected by confirmation bias (Quattrociocchi and Vicini 2016). In particular, the study addresses populism as expressed in online debates concerning the case of migrants. To this end, after first reviewing key ideas in the use of social media for political means, I introduce the theoretical constructs of sequence analysis and proximisation, and finally, I discuss how social networks contribute to forming echo chambers.

2. Previous studies on social networks and politics

Political communication is framed both in offline and online contexts, with individual differences and diversity in media consumption practices. Together with differences in terms of time spent each day online compared to that spent using traditional forms of media, and of variation between countries and age of users, online settings seem to increase concern about the declining quality of news and political information. Online contexts in fact seem to show an increasing relativism as well as fragmentation of information and polarisation

of points of view, probably due to a more active participation by users. This study is based on the assumption that social networks have created new opportunities for multi-way dialogues, where those who are usually recipients of political messages become addressers and build meanings in cooperative processes.

Recently, research has shown the internet to be a powerful tool that has been able to bridge the gap between politicians and citizens in terms of access to information, increasing levels of closeness (Leonzi, Ciofalo, Di Stefano 2015: 3). The party systems are adapting to a new speed of political communication and to the atomising of readership, which instantly reads debate coverage in massive numbers, encouraging individual judgement. Many scholars critique the use of the internet for democratic political debates as it is assumed only the well-educated take advantage of its technological possibilities (Norris 2001) or because participation is seen as pointless with no political outcomes in the real world (Shulman 2005). However, Aalberg *et al.* (2016) claim the proliferation of social media has provided new spaces for political voices to be heard and to interact with openness, directness and interactivity. The communicational process is bi-directional: politicians, who have remodelled their social image and rely on emotional narratives to foster users' engagement; and the public, which has found in the platform an alternative way to express dissent, sarcasm, or belonging. Both right- and left-wing spokesmen have started using social media to emphasise self-determination, advocate for the people, criticise the elite, reject others and invoke a promised land (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, Büchel 2016: 1109), in what Mudde (2004) has described as the mainstream in the politics of Western democracies, seeking votes more than offering an ideology.

Engesser *et al.* (2016) have studied how politicians in different countries use Facebook and Twitter for populist purposes, using statements that are similar across national boundaries even when they relate to different topics. Both left-wing and right-wing representatives speak out against economic or political elites. The rhetoric of populism is based on harsh criticism of the elite, while taking sides with the 'ordinary people'. Similarly, Aalberg *et al.* (2016) have examined the effects that populist messages have on the public and how it engages with populist communication. The scholars focused on certain characteristics that they saw as a

combination of support for right-wing populism, political cynicism, and anti-immigrant attitudes. Regarding the latter, in particular, Wodak (2015) claims that protecting the borders and the people is one of the epitomes of populist rhetoric, which she calls the politics of exclusion. The strategy is based on the fallacy of sameness, the idea that one nation is a culturally homogeneous community and it addresses otherness focusing on threatening differences. These themes and purposes are included in users' messages when they engage in micro-debates and incite public reaction. Whereas scholars observe online communities as a crowd "searching at the same time for news and identity by means of frame stories" (Antonini 2015: 92), social media contributors address communities as a crowd of users looking for a sense of belonging with shared emotions (Gerbaudo 2014). The internet user is the common man, the ordinary hard-working citizen, "victimised by an unfair political and economic establishment" (Gerbaudo 2014: 14), the ideal addressee/addresser of populist rhetoric, who uses social platforms with the aim of participating in political debates in a dimension characterised by boredom, frustration and disillusionment (Crouch 2000) and subject to the appeal of online connectivity and interactivity.

Facebook in particular is an effective communication tool because of its structure and functions: "likes", comments and share options encourage interactivity and network building. If interactivity is a means of informal digital mass democracy (Gerbaudo 2014), on the other hand research has also evidenced online users are more often exposed to complexity, since content seems to go beyond true-false, or verifiable-falsifiable (Quattrociocchi and Vicini 2016). The possibility of commenting openly and freely, protected by anonymity, ostensibly allows for a democratisation of information and opinion sharing. However, social networks influence our exposure to newsfeed since the nature of the newsfeed depends on what one's friends share. Krasodomski-Jones (2016) measured the existence of an echo-chamber effect among established political groups in the UK (Conservative, Labour, UKIP and SNP), and Quattrociocchi, Scala and Sunstein (2016) analysed how Italian and American Facebook users relate to conspiracy theories and narratives selected by confirmation bias, forming polarised groups. The notions of echo chambers and confirmation bias emerge as web users tend to participate in online debates only with communities sharing

the same narratives (echo chambers), looking for and interpreting information in a way that confirms their own theories and beliefs, with little consideration for alternative options (confirmation bias), thus compromising critical thinking.

3. Theoretical framework

Facebook is based on user participation, considering that text commenting practices are a voluntary action that allows for the co-creation of participatory exchanges (Boyd 2014). Contributions may come from readers (active participants or lurkers), likers (those who positively mark or acknowledge a post), or commenters (those who actively take part in the exchange). One can conceivably read a post, like it and then elaborate on one's reasons for liking the content, forming three different actions. In particular, Boyd (2014) classified participants as constructive (positive or negative) commenters or disruptive commenters distinguishable as haters, trolls or spammers. While constructive comments are intended to start, respond or continue conversation, disruptive comments aim to antagonise other users.

Starting from these considerations, my research questions are how do web-users take advantage of the participative platform to post ideologically-driven comments, and what strategies do web users use to boost support for their comments. Following these aims, and in order to study social interaction data, it is necessary to take into account the structure of such interaction (who speaks to whom), temporal dynamics (when they speak), and content (what is said). Consequently, Conversation Analysis (CA), a traditional spoken analysis approach, is applied in this study to computer-mediated interactions (Giles *et al.* 2015), since it may be used for the analysis of computer-mediated (synchronous and asynchronous) interactions that are understood as having a conversation-like nature, and are accordingly studied as a combination of sequences. Digital turn-taking and sequential features, however, cannot be compared with face-to-face conversations (Giles *et al.* 2015) and must be analysed considering the digital context (Antaki *et al.* 2005; Giles *et al.* 2015), with the focus on its participants, the sequential organisation of each post and the topics. In particular, data concern users' exchanges on the topic of migrants on the

UK Independence Party (UKIP) Facebook page, with polarised positions based on ideology. I examine these in the perspective of proximisation, a discursive strategy to present events "as directly affecting the addressees, usually in a negative or threatening way" (Cap 2010: 119). The model shows how political/public actors seek legitimation by presenting virtual external threats and by using spatial, temporal and axiological facets. The spatial aspect involves showing the adversaries (ODs) as physically endangering the speaker and the addressee (IDCs), the temporal aspect deals with showing the events as historic and of central significance in the momentum, thus in need of an immediate response. The axiological proximisation involves ideological clashes (e.g. values) between the ODs and the IDCs. The polarisation of groups is critical in populist frames and in digital contexts it may lead to the development of echo chambers. If a claim is made by one user and is repeated, exaggerated or distorted by like-minded participants, it will ultimately reinforce the community's belief system, forming echo chambers (Quattrociocchi and Vicini 2016).

By focusing on the use of online open access message boards aimed at sharing political views, the research assesses the value of social media interactions for political communication, and studies how the nature of social networks contributes to forming echo chambers.

4. Data and methods

The dataset is composed of 572 comments posted on 24 March by readers of the UKIP Facebook message board on a video posted by the owner of the page. The comments became an unmoderated public discussion. The video received its first comment only five minutes after the original post and at the time the data were collected the feedback was still continuing, in an asynchronous written conversation. The video shows an interview with the current UKIP leader Paul Nuttall, in which he defended comments he made after the Westminster terror attack, and for which he had been accused of demonising and marginalising Muslims. The asynchronous discussion was selected for analysis for three reasons, the first being that it occurs on the Facebook page of one of the most controversial parties in the UK. The second was that it was the first post containing the word 'refugees' in order of appearance (this

study dealt originally with refugee discourse). Thirdly, although it starts out as a focused discussion on a well-defined topic, within a few replies it decentralises from its original purpose, revealing dynamics of topic degeneration. In addition, at time of collection, the post displayed two thousand reactions (including likes, loves and angry faces), 634 shares and 572 comments, most of them with internal exchanges that amounted to 367 replies.

I used digital conversation analysis to study interactions, concentrating in particular on issues related to sequentiality, addressing, and accountability (see Table 1 as a sample of sequence analysis).

TABLE 1

Sequence in comment exchange between participants (referred to by initials): date and time, addressing, action, positioning toward main topic under discussion, number of people who liked the post

Date	Addressing	Main Action	Pro /Against	Likes
24/03 12:33	TB>BOARD READERS	Opening topic, addressing all	pro	354
24/03 07:47	JDJ> TB	questioning TB, addressing by 'you'	-	0
24/03 09:17	TB>JDJ	Answering JDJ, addressing by 'you'	pro	24
24/03 10:25	MH>group	Answering JDJ	pro	29
24/03 10:25	AR>MH	Addressing MH	pro	6

In-text references to exchange show the participant's tag, the date and hour of comment, the number of replies (R) and the number of likes (L) s/he gets (as in: SH_24.03_1233 (R36L432)) and when necessary the addressing (as in "TB talking to JDJ", which results in TB>JDJ). The actions may be opening topic (user starts discussing about a new theme, as in example 8), writing on the board following an initiated thread (without addressing, as in example 18), writing a comment to someone (when the message is openly directed to someone indicated by addressivity–the practice used in a chat to identify the intended addressee by name, as in example 11), replying

to someone (when a user answers an open/inferred question, as in example 14), questioning (posing a question, often for rhetorical reasons and sarcasm, as in example 16). Comments and replies were also studied using a proximisation model to analyse how the topic developed into populist rhetoric and to determine how comments referred to otherness as a threat.

The thread is hypothesised to be an echo chamber, where a polarised community confirms its existing idea by selecting information that confirms that belief (confirmation bias). Accordingly, the posts confirming the community's standpoints are thus the ones that should get more attention, and should consequently be more shared/liked/commented. Since the social network does not show comments chronologically but according to the activity they produce, the most liked and commented posts appear in the first positions and are presumably the most appreciated ("liked") and commented by other users who start reading the thread. Those posts showing information or opinions that are not coherent with the polarised community's ideological frame would not get much attention. To show this, I classified comments as being either of a constructive (starting, responding or continuing conversation) or of a disruptive nature. Likes and shares were also counted, to reveal the extent of the digital involvement and/or sense of belonging by acknowledgement.

The number of postings were tabulated, and a tally was kept of the number of participants who posted multiple messages. Replies, likes and shares were counted, and the interactions for each comment and individual reply were read.

As Table 2 shows, user n.1 (a UKIP supporter) got 35 replies, 432 likes and 631 shares. Other UKIP supporters (n. 3, 4 and 5) gained attention (likes) probably because they criticised user n. 2. This latter participant questioned the community's ideological frame and for this reason did not get any support.

In addition, comments were analysed to see whether threats or particular claims made by one participant were repeated by likeminded users in their exaggerated, distorted or repeated (echoed) forms during the exchange (see Table 3).

The analysis of publicly available data obtained for research purposes leads to ethical challenges. Because it is a new field of research, and despite many rules of conduct (the Association of

Internet Researchers' guidelines, among others), there are no widely accepted protocols for how researchers should collect, analyse and present publicly posted comments ethically (Krasodomski-Jones 2016). In this study, although there is a generally low expectation of privacy for those who post publicly on social networks, usernames and pictures are removed and only parts of posts were used to show supporting data.

TABLE 2
Distribution of replies (R), likes (L), shares (S) according to users' (U) positions toward main community's ideological framework (supporting UKIP themes, p, and against them, a)

U	day	time	nature	action	P/a Ukip	R	L	S
1	24.3	12:33	constructive	Opening thread	p	35	432	631
2		12:41	disruptive	Answers 1, contradicts	a	2		
3		12:42	disruptive	Answers 2, flaming	p		11	
4		12:48	disruptive	Answers 2, flaming	p		10	
5		13:15	constructive	Answers 1, agrees	p		29	

5. Themes and dialogic structure in a multi-participative setting

In terms of sequential organisation, Facebook comments can be studied in the same way as those on forum threads. The interaction starts when people comment about different issues. Although the data were selected because of their content dealing with refugees, it soon became apparent that the theme is confused with talk about immigrants. So refugees and immigrants become synonymous, and immigrants are also understood as immigrants who follow the Islamic religion (see examples 1, 2 and 3):

1) [...] because Britain was rich that we should take in ALL the refugees!! Oh yeah, Britain is rich and that's why one of our police men was murdered outside Parliament because of police cuts and inadequate money! Once they become in a majority they feel they should have Sharia here [...]

2) [...] refugees attacking women or demanding sharia law [...]
3) [...] the folks [...] frightened to walk the streets because refugees coming from war torn countries think they're gonna take it over [...]

The interaction starts with the responses to these comments, which display interactional turns, pairs, and conversational tools (i.e. addressivity). The number of participants in each exchange varies (with the highest figure being 32 participants and the lowest 4) and topics under discussion in the threads are not necessarily linked to the main theme of the post. The interactional event is made up of comments that respond to previous posts or of contents added in a conversation continuum.

4) GS_24.03_1436(L16): Rubbish IJ ... There was plenty of sympathy for Jo Cox. UKIP suspended all activity out of respect to her family & friends. Nobody wants to see an MP murdered. Although it'd be nice to see Blair locked-up.
5) SR_24.03_1523(L3): French dont care -- thats why they kick em out. We are too soft.
6) CR_24.03_1552(L24): You ukip supporters are to blame, you are all racist Neanderthal bigots.
7) CW_24.03_1624(L13): CR leftism is a serious disease. Thank goodness it's not contagious.
fr

The reply is construed as a sequence within a structure that is similar to the question/answer adjacency pair format. The addressing helps detect adjacency pairs, as in 11 and 12 (which address the thread initiator, "SH") and 14 (which addresses one participant of the exchange, "GC"), or 10 (which is used to express a different polarised general addressee, "Folk like you"). Participants choose when to write their comments, identifying or creating a virtual space for their turn. The time lag between messages may vary considerably, from very short (i.e. minutes) to very long (i.e. days), but this does not influence the turn structures.

8) SH_24.03_1233(R36L432): [...]
9) [...]
10) JB_24.03_1242(L11): Folk like you are notorious scammers [...]
11) JS_24.03_1248(L9): SH, I personally know of four English people that [...] cannot stay. [...]

12) GC_24.03_1315(L29): Exactly SH. [...] Absolutely agree with you and the misplaced lack of logic and fairness of our current immigration system is a disgrace [...]

13) GM_24.03_1315(L3): Exactly it's so wrong

14) GW_24.03_1334(L9): GC unfortunately you are correct ...there is no logic or fairness in this country unless of course its into MPS pockets or their close board room friends.

15) [...]

16) EM_26.03_1415(L0): How can we comment since you do not give the reasons for her exclusion?

The first commenter (SH) talks about his personal situation: being married to a Christian Filipino woman. He complains that his wife cannot stay in the UK but "non english speaking immigrants from all over the shop can". The comment ends with a direct challenge: "answer that one!". He obtains 432 likes and 36 replying posts, each starting new threads. Responses are displayed below the initiating post in the order in which they are received. The first reply is a question to which he replies. Since there are only two participants, addressing is unnecessary but when a third participant enters the exchange, addressing becomes necessary. From this moment on, reply control, generally used to respond to the previous post, is used to take part in the exchange, not necessarily replying to one comment in particular, but supporting, challenging and even offending one of the participants. In this multi-directional exchange, however, nobody feels like an individual user and often comments show exclusive plural pronouns addressed to self-identification as a group ("How can we comment since you do not give the reasons for her exclusion?", EM>SH).

Accountability, the reason why a user is entitled to take part in the discussion, mostly relates to life experience that supports their opinion, as in the following excerpts:

17. DP_24.03_1304(L107R12): [...] I come from the Midlands and some parts of Coventry, Leicester and Birmingham are now entirely muslim districts, not through fear of racism BUT so they can re-create the same hole many left [...]. People I know work with many asians and know some lied about [...] that not only is against our law but they also then get additional benefits [...]

18. TL_24.03_1545(L7): I'm from Bolton and it's exactly the same here as the towns you mention. [...]

19. CW_25.03_0219(L5): DP, I've had a Muslim friend for 20 years who has lived in England for 50 years, originally from Pakistan [...] They don't want to integrate, they want Sharia and I got this from the horse's mouth.

Participants refer to themselves with a group entity, as already shown by the use of the first plural *we*. The sense of belonging becomes more apparent when discussing with other-minded participants, who are referred to as *trolls*. By definition, a troll is a person who makes a deliberately offensive or provocative online comment using personal insults and abusive language (Herring *et al.* 2011). Here the labelling is used whenever a disruptive comment occurs, as in the following:

EW>JMG_24.03_2115(L0): The huge problem is the "culture" you knuckle dragging turds are discussing isn't British culture. It's a scenario where a group of ill educated failures are too stupid to understand how a lone criminal doesn't represent the action of millions [...] JMG, utterly disgusting, racist scum like you [...]
CW>JMG_25.03_0606(L0): JMG, don't worry J., nasty troll EW, is well known on our UKIP page.

The most important activity that takes place in the forum seems to be supporting like-minded commenters and attacking other participants, using sarcasm and aggressive language. However, these comments also carry populist rhetoric (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, Büchel 2016). The third thread starts by dealing with immigration and refugees (used interchangeably) but it rapidly moves on to immigration within the UK borders and Islamic dominance, creating two opposing groups US/THEM, with different (i.e. polarised) values and behaviours:

DP_25.03_0219(L5): I have said for a number of years they have a game plan and if that takes a 100 years, 500 years it's domination. And we are to ignorant to think war is fought like that any more [...] Islam is a threat and I'm concerned for our children's future.
CW_25.03_1423(L3): DP, I believe they have a game plan too as they are creating havoc, death and destruction across the world. [...]
JW_24.03_1239 (L128): [...] If you hide your women behind masks, if you make areas in the UK no go areas because of peoples fears, if Islam doesnt renounce these murderers for what they are ... then people wont fit it, get along, or become part of our very British way of life ... Its time Muslims

started to except us British as people who live here now, we are not the foreigners this is our country and we are very proud of who we are [...] LBH_24.03_18.50 (L7): They are savages and have no place in this country. They don't fit in with us because they know nothing of civility. They shouldn't be allowed to come here n carry on like they did in their country. In fairness, it would be kinder n safer for everyone if they were all returned home. Only those that have integrated n are willing to abide by our laws n traditions should be allowed to stay [...]

By describing Muslims as barbarians, invading the UK in a silent war *(they are creating havoc, death and destruction)*, and labelling them as *savages* who *know nothing of civility* and *want Sharia* (see ex. 2), users move the topic to a different level. The immigrant is seldom from other groups (Somalians and East-Europeans), and the most recurrent theme is the UK as a *little Island* who needs *UKIP and Nigel into number 10*! (CW_25.03_1639). Users express their frustration about a situation that is not under control and is ill-managed by corrupt politicians who belong to elites. As in populist discourses, users play on people's fears, with migrants embodying all that is perceived as frightening. They represent an alarming 'otherness', associated with social, economic and political disorder. The influx of immigrants has helped populists to find a new way to reach voters, raising suspicions about institutional choices and claiming the right to protect national cultural identities. Although the current leader, Paul Nuttal, has users' support, participants invoke Nigel Farage, the former leader who helped lead Great Britain out of the European Community (TG_25.03_1239 (Lo): Charly we want Nigel: (JW_25.03_0633 (Lo): Go nigel). Some commenters talk directly to him, exhorting him to come back, as if in a direct exchange with him (AE_24.03_1856 (Lo): [...] Come back Nigel; DH_25.03_1157 (Lo): [...] come back Nigel).

6. Fear and social anxiety in social network discourse

Proximisation is a legitimisation strategy in political interventionist discourse involving THEM ("bad") and US ("good") opposition. The strategy is based on presenting THEIR action or ideologies as increasingly close and threatening to US, using temporal, spatial and axiological parameters (Cap 2017). The fear this evokes legitimises pre-emptive responses developing a security discourse. The

constant construction of danger both in physical and social terms is opposed, in our data, to the civilised world threatened by violent barbarians imposing THEIR (religious, ethical, moral) law by force. The following examples show what happened in reply to a user who had posted alternative (i.e. more cautious) opinions in relation to Islamic values and behaviour:

If you hide your women behind masks, if you make areas in the UK no go areas because of peoples fears, if Islam doesnt renounce these murderers for what they are ... then people wont fit it, get along, or become part of *our* very British way of life ... Its time Muslims started to except *us* British as people who live here now, *we* are not the foreigners this is *our* country and *we* are very proud of who *we* are [...], its *our* country, fit in ....

He is correct, *they* do "not" integrate and mostly due to the dark ages beliefs on sex, marriage, faith and MOSTLY overlooked CAST, *their* social class system... Brutal. [...] the invasion continues.

DP, I believe *they* have a game plan too as *they* are creating havoc, death and destruction across the world. *They* are killing Christians and Africans [...]. *They* are causing death and destruction across Europe and now in Britain they are mowing down *our* citizens, tourists and police officers and now *we* have contorted, mangled bodies lying dead or injured on the streets of *our* capital city [...]. *They* are doing the same in Australia [...]. In Sweden, Germany, Holland, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Britain *they* have been raping and murdering too [...]. *They* have raped, tortured, drugged, beaten up and prostituted one million of our little Christian English girls aged 9 - 14 in every town and city of *England*, just as *they* mass raped the Yazidis and Christians in the Middle East [...]. *They* have caused death and destruction in Iraq and Syria and in Russia and China too and many other countries across the globe. [...] Islam is a *huge threat* to *our* people, especially children and women, *our* country and *our* Western civilisation. [...] May and her cronies are doing nothing to stop it [...] When we write the truth the same old lefties come out of their sick holes to tell us we are racists, bigots and xenophobes but the truth is the truth and no lefty can deny the truth [...]. You say you are concerned for our children's future, you are not alone in saying this as many have said they fear for the future of their children and grandchildren in a country which in twenty years' time could be Shariah, sadly. Our forefathers who died in two world wars to save us and our country will be stirring in their graves wondering what on earth they died for.

Time is represented as a conquered past, a present in peril, and a future of certain violence, already affecting the whole globe and approaching the Island (Australia, Europe, England, spatial axis). The opposition between US and THEM regards values, space (my country), society, and cultural identity. Any possible integration is excluded, and civilisation is opposed to "Medieval beliefs". THEY are negatively represented as invaders, rapists, bearers of death and destruction, who have occupied the rest of the world and are slowly invading the island. British people are in danger, cultural issues of masculine predominance lead to sexual assaults, an "invasion" that needs to be stopped. Despite this, the US is unable to take action, because they are internally opposed by "May and her cronies" and by the "same old lefties". The discursive construction of fear, involving an external threat (bad THEM) and a home group (the good US), is marked by a territorial and ideological opposition with an "Other" invading the space of "US" (Cap 2017). Although the impact is remarkably determined by the Other, it is in some ways fostered by US, namely, the politicians and those among US who "suffer from Leftism disease" (populist rhetoric). This conceptual metaphor is important since a disease is something (external) that grows inside US (affecting particular cells), menacing the whole (body, community). Using this concept, the invasion is construed as nearest, in terms of time, space and ideological positions and involves both the Other and US. There remains the concern and frustration for the values that the forefathers have died for. Legitimisation in these posts draws on fear-generating images and does not involve an elaborate argument. The comments evidence a "here and now" (Cap 2017: 79) that is geographically and geopolitically threatening for social and personal safety and thus needs an immediate response in terms of specific policies (a British Bill of Rights, individual aggressions, deportation, etc.).

7. The thread as an echo chamber

An echo chamber is a polarised community formed of users who select information in accordance with their system of beliefs. It is a sort of echo-system in which the truth value of information is not salient, and what matters is whether the information fits with one's narrative. This paper hypothesises that a social network setting favours the

echo chamber factor, wherein users tend only to assimilate claims that confirm their point of view and ignore apparent refutations. Thus, every utterance potentially influences and reinforces both the participant's ideas and those of the passive users (who are not involved but read the comments). These comments create echo chambers in terms of polarisation (constructive and disruptive comments) and selection of information. Of the total number of participants, 17.3% are not-like-minded users and post disruptive comments, whereas "likes" (the positive evaluation of a particular comment) are used (93%) for posts that explicitly support the ideas of the page. In addition, in an echo chamber, a word/idea will be repeated several times, reinforcing an individual's opinion, which becomes his truth, confirmed by others. This process eventually leads to the construction of a position based on hearsay, prejudices or facts that are taken for granted because they have been reinforced by repetition, without any other views to compare them with. Research has shown that conversation and turn-taking is influenced by the word/idea reverberation, with the first speaker influencing the second in the type and time of the utterance (Guo *et al.* 2015). Similarly, comments tend to follow this line: post 3 starts with a plea for (violent) actions, to which a user replies that "a good start would be to implement the new British Bill of Rights, so people from another country who are planning attacks can be shipped back to their country of origin" (assuming terrorists are always an external menace).

Studying the comments (Table 3), the notion of Bill of Rights (B) is repeated several times and associated with an escalation of conservative attitudes, which eventually leads to ethnophobic comments discussing, among other things, deportation (D) and islamophobia (I). Only four posts (D6, I21, I31, I39) openly disagree with the mainstream belief of the group, but they are not taken into consideration and only serve to increase the aggressiveness of users responding to them. The exchange eventually becomes an echo chamber, discussing the new Bill of Right as a real fact.

LL_24.03_1249 (L12): [...] We were promised a British Bill of Rights by Cameron, should have known better than to believe that pathetic specimen. LyL_24.03_1319 (L12): MH, I think we should push for this British Bill of Rights [...]

[Further posts discussing the Mayor of London and about deporting him]
FA_24.03_1756 (L4): The guy was born and bred in England where would you deport him too? The British bill of rights was going to lesson our rights as well... I personally don't want that.
HT_24.03_1811 (L0): [...] and why would a tailored Brit CHR... lessen our rights?
FA_24.03_1850 (L4): [...] With the British bill of rights it will be a watered down version of our human rights so everyone will lose out somewhere.
[More posts on deportation and terrorism]
MH_24.03_1938 (L29): [...] so a good start would be to implement the new British bill of rights quickly, so we can get these people who are from another country planning attacks removed and shipped back to whichever location they arrived from.
CW_24.03.2057 (L1): Germany deports German-born terrorists to [...]. We need to dust off and reinvigorate the Foreign Enlistment Act 1870 also.

TABLE 3
Comment number and distribution of comment topics (B:Bill of rights; D: Deportation; I:Islamophobia) within the sequence. The "-topic" indicates a different polarisation.

Comment n. 3	B		
Comment n. 4		D	
Comment n. 6		-D	
Comment n. 8	B		
Comment n. 13		D	
Comment n. 14		D	
Comment n. 15	B		
Comment n. 17	B		
Comment n. 18		D	
Comment n. 19			I
Comment n. 20			I
Comment n. 21			- I
Comment n. 24		D	
Comment n. 27			I
Comment n. 28		D	
Comment n. 29	B		
Comment n. 30			I
Comment n. 31			- I
Comment n. 32	B		
Comment n. 35		D	
Comment n. 38			- I
Comment n. 39			I
Comment n. 42			I

Users first talk about having been promised a British Bill of Rights, then discuss the theme as something possible, argue with those against it, eventually give it as something already existing ("to *implement the new* British bill of rights") and a first step to other actions ("We need to dust off and reinvigorate the Foreign Enlistment Act 1870 *also*").

8. Conclusions

Social networks have occupied a space in the political arena that satisfies people's need to be heard. As a result, political (i.e. populist) communication has moved online, addressing popular topics, and reaching high levels of consensus, spreading aggressive and highly emotive messages (i.e. fear). While the problem of refugees is discussed as a political and social issue by the most diverse actors, on the Facebook page of a populist party the theme is mixed up with a discussion about immigrants, with the words refugee and immigrant used interchangeably, and with the immigrant assumed to be of Islamic religion. The theme of immigration is re-elaborated, producing uncertainty and anxiety as well as xenophobia and hatred (Cap 2017), focusing on the fallacy of sameness, which imagines one nation as a culturally homogeneous community, and addressing otherness by emphasising threatening differences (Wodak 2015), which eventually cause social disorder.

In this paper, Facebook comments are considered not simply as a linear succession of utterances but as a discourse, since they show an inter-dependence (Herring 1999). Turn-taking and topic development enhance users' enjoyment and disrupted turn adjacency (messages that appear chronologically as unconnected utterances) are managed conversationally by users and restored as pairs. The exchange display clues point to participative network building, where like-minded people discuss the issue of immigration, offering their narratives and/or opinions, and showing support. When disruptive comments occur, their authors are addressed as trolls, and responded to with verbal hostility and aggression. In addition, although politicians do not participate in these exchanges, they are addressed ("come back, Nigel [Farage]!") in a (fictitious) two-way user-politician exchange. The system of liking builds a polarised group, with non-likeminded people dismissed as trolls. Posting

the same opinions results in maximum consensus and agreement between poster and users. Alternatives are rarely tested and thus echo chambers develop.

With social networking providing a context in which individual users become nodes within the network, the potential in terms of distributing information is vast; a many-to-many politically oriented communication. Therefore, it is essential to study media ecology (wide audience, capitalisation of emotions etc.) in relation to those political currents (e.g. populism) that leverage the new opportunities and affordances of social media. This paper has provided an example of how immigration discourse is employed by common users of a social network, showing how online message boards are concerned with public communication, and how they involve discursive strategies that legitimise actions in populist perspectives.

References

AALBERG, TORIL, ESSER FRANK, CARSTEN REINEMANN, JESPER STRÖMBÄCK, CLAES DE VREESE (eds), 2017, *Populist Political Communication in Europe,* Routledge, New York.

ANTAKI, CHARLES, ARDÉVOL, ELISENDA, NÚNEZ, FRANCESC AND VAYREDA, AGNES, 2005, "For She Who Knows Who She Is": Managing Accountability in Online Forum Messages", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 11 (1), pp. 114-32.

ANTONINI, ERICA, 2015, "New trends in power and communication: features and cruxes of Italian 'Five Star Movement' in power and communication: media, politics and institutions in times of crisis", in S. Leonzi, G. Ciofalo, and A. Di Stefano (eds), *Power and Communication*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge, pp. 83-98.

BOYD, MICHAEL, 2014, "Participation and recontextualization in new media: political discourse analysis and YouTube", in B. Kaal, I. Maks, and A. Van Elfrinkhof (eds), *From Text to Political Position: Text Analysis Across Disciplines,* John Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 245-68.

CAP, PIOTR, 2010, "Proximizing Objects, Proximizing Values: Towards an Axiological Contribution to the Discourse of Legtimization", in U. Okulska, and P. Cap (eds), *Perspectives in Politics and Discourse,* John Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 119-42.

CAP, PIOTR, 2013, *Proximization: The Pragmatics of Symbolic Distance Crossing,* John Benjamins, Amsterdam.

CAP, PIOTR, 2017, *The Language of Fear: Communicating Threat in Public Discourse,* Palgrave, Basingstoke.

CROUCH, COLIN, 2000, *Coping with Post Democracy,* Fabian Society Pamphlet, London.

ENGESSER, SVEN, ERNST, NICOLE, ESSER, FRANK, BÜCHEL, FLORIN, 2016, "Populism and social media: how politicians spread a fragmented ideology", *Information, Communication & Society* 20 (8), pp. 1-18.

GERBAUDO, PAOLO, 2014, "Populism 2.0: Social media activism, the generic internet user and interactive direct democracy", in D. Trottier and C. Fuchs (eds), *Social Media, Politics and the State: Protests, Revolutions, Riots, Crime and Policing in the Age of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube,* Taylor and Francis, Oxford, pp. 67-87.

GILES, DAVID, STOMMEL, WYKE, PAULUS, TRENA, LESTER, JESSICA N., REED, DARREN, 2015, "The Microanalysis of the Online Data: Methodological Developments", *Discourse, Context & Media* 7, pp. 45-51.

GUO, FANGJIAN, BLUNDELL, CHARLES, WALLACH, HANNA, HELLER, KATHERINE, 2015, "The Bayesian Echo-Chamber: Modeling Social Influence via Linguistic Accommodation", Proceedings of the 18th International Conference on Artificial Intelligence and Statistics (AISTATS) 2015, San Diego (CA). *JMLR: W&CP,* 38, Retrieved at http://proceedings.mlr.press/v38/guo15.pdf

HERRING, SUSAN, 1999, "Interactional Coherence in Cmc", *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication* 4 (4).

HERRING, SUSAN, JOB-SLUDER, KIRK, SCHCKLER REBECCA, AND BARAB SASHA, 2011, "Searching for Safety Online: Managing 'Trolling' in a Feminist Forum", *The Information Society* 18 (5), pp. 371-84.

KRASODOMSKI-JONES, ALEX, 2016, "Talking to ourselves? Political debate online and the echo-chamber effect", Demos, London, available at https://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Echo-Chambers-final-version.pdf

LEONZI, SILVIA, CIOFALO, GIOVANNI, DI STEFANO, ANTONIO, 2015, *Power and Communication*, Cambridge Scholar Publishing, Cambridge.

MUDDE, CAS, 2004, "The Populist Zeitgeist", *Government and Opposition* 39 (3), pp. 542-63.

NORRIS, PIPPA, 2001, *Digital divide: Civic engagement, information poverty, and the Internet worldwide*, C.U.P., Cambridge.

QUATTROCIOCCHI, WALTER and VICINI, ANTONELLA, 2016, *Misinformation: Guida alla società dell'informazione e della credulità*. FrancoAngeli, Milano.

QUATTROCIOCCHI, WALTER, SCALA, ANTONIO, SUNSTEIN, CASS R., 2016, "Echo Chambers on Facebook", Discussion Paper No. 877, 09/2016, Harvard Law School, Cambridge, available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=2795110.

SHULMAN, STUART W., 2005, "The Internet still might (but probably won't) change everything: Stakeholder views on the future of electronic rulemaking," *I/S: A Journal of Law and Policy for the Information Society* 1 (1), pp. 111-45.

WODAK, RUTH, 2015, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean,* Sage, London.