



Research group on “2006 General Elections” From the Networks to the Net Internet and Personal Influence during the Campaign for the 2006 General Elections in Italy

The research program¹ concerns the role of the Internet and of the (techno)social networks in the circulation of political-electoral information and in the processes of influencing political opinion during the Campaign for the 2006 general elections in Italy. The basic hypothesis is that online information, which can strengthen, integrate, replace the information produced by traditional media, reaches some Internet users who then become sources of information for people who don't use this medium and for other Internet users characterised by a more generic and recreational use of the medium (through the same Internet and computer mediated communication systems - chat, email, forum, instant messaging, blog, etc.).

On a theoretical level, this work is rooted in the path undertaken by the recent communication research (Marinelli 2004, Paccagnella 2000, Wellman 2004): careful about the unnumbered everyday possibilities of integration between online and offline experiences, this recent research considers Internet as mature technology of social relation, as well as powerful database of information. This contemporary communication research rethinks the conceptual and methodological instruments developed in order to study “offline” realities, by verifying their descriptive and interpretative potential with the mediated sociality. In fact, our research finds some conceptual and methodological suggestions in the tradition of the studies on personal influence and social networks in the circulation of political-electoral information (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, Gaudet, 1948, Katz, Lazarsfeld, 1955). This suggestions are the points of departure of other questions about the actuality of the two-step flow model of communication (developed in a very simple communication setting, characterized by a limited and privileged diffusion of the media) and about the **mechanism of circulation of political-electoral information through Internet-supported and immediate social networks.**

The research has used a structured questionnaire completed online by 1990 Internet users between the 10th march and 9th april 2006. By aiming to reach a specific

¹ Scientific director: Prof. Mario Morcellini. Research group: Marzia Antenore, Gabriella Fazzi, Laura Iannelli

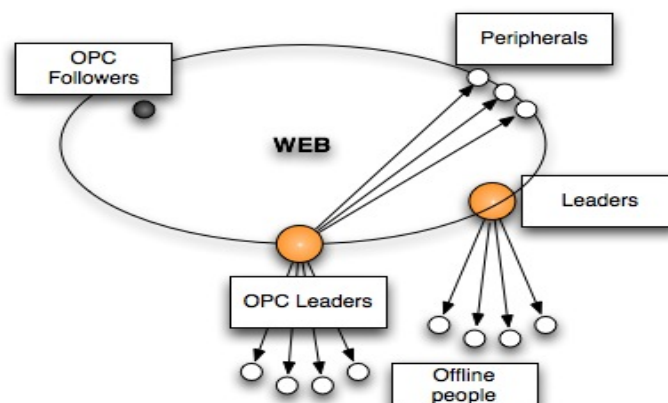


profile of Internet users, the link to the questionnaire has been activated only on online newspapers and periodicals with different political orientation².

In our research hypothesis, and relative operational definitions on the methodological level, we can identify four types of interviewed in the segment of Internet users we reached through the questionnaire: i) the **Leaders** (8,2% of the sample) who are influential towards the no-users thanks to the online information, but who are not engaged in political activities; ii) the **Online Political Citizens Leaders** (15,5%) who are online political activists and who have weaved a network of significant relationships with friends, colleagues and acquaintances, becoming for them a reference point on political themes. Their influence is exercised towards the political opinion of Internet users and no-users; iii) the **Online Political Citizens Followers** (23,2%) who are political activists engaged in online activities but who don't exercise political influence; iv) the **Peripherals** (52,6%) who don't carry out a very intense online political activity and who are not recognized in the role of political leaders.

We have identified these four types of web users and described their profiles with the aim to i) surpass the over-simplified view of the political web users and ii) verify empirically the hypothesis of a more complex model of the flux of online political communication. The circulation of political information from the Internet develops, this is our suggestion, following the model of a multiple-steps flow of (political) communication (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Multiple steps flow of (political) communication model



² L'Unità, La Stampa, Formiche, Punto.Com, Europa, Il Secolo d'Italia, Il Foglio, Il Sole 24 Ore, Prima Comunicazione Online



Thus, the characterization of the political opinion leaders, between the online newspapers and periodicals readers, during a political Campaign, is important on a theoretical level (by thinking a new perspective which doesn't flatten out the critical exercise on interpretative models which are weakened by the complexity of the contemporary communication setting), but is also important for the communication action. The value of the political opinion leadership, held by the political web users during the electoral Campaign, requires the political communication professionals to address their online communication to some targets, the OPC Leaders and the Leaders, which are numerically narrow in comparison with television audiences, but are able to multiply information through a wide network of (techno)social relationships. The objectives, method and results of the research are described in the book edited by Marzia Antenore, Marco Bruno and Patrizia Laurano, *Quel che resta della telepolitica. La campagna elettorale 2006 nell'analisi Mediamonitor*, published by La Biblioteca Pensa Multimedia in 2007 and in M. Antenore, G. Fazzi and L. Iannelli, "Ri-mediare la politica. Gli utenti di Internet e l'influenza personale nella Campagna per le Politiche 2006", in *Giovani Sociologi AIS 2007*, published by Scriptaweb in 2008.