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## Political hashtag publics and counter-visibility: A case study of #fertilityday in Italy

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**Abstract.** In 2016 the Italian health ministry launched the ‘Fertility Day’ campaign, aimed at tackling Italy’s low birth rate. Under the accusation of delivering sexist and racist messages, the campaign became a trending topic on Twitter, and a protest was launched to be held during Fertility Day. By applying a combination of digital methods and visual content analysis to the #fertilityday Twitter stream, this paper contributes to existing research on the deliberative strength of political hashtag publics, with a particular focus on their power structures, communication patterns and visual content use. Findings on gatekeeping dynamics downsize optimistic views on the democratizing potential of Twitter’s socio-technical infrastructure as they point to the emergence of online satirical media and ‘tweetstars’ –along with mainstream news media– as main producers of spreadable content, with ordinary users only surfacing when traditional media elites and new satirical actors lack or lose interest in the debate. Results confirm that political hashtag publics follow acute event communication patterns, with users highly engaged in retweeting and referencing external material and visual content playing a key role in these gatewatching practices. The transient counter-visibility — or critical stance — of tweets with user-manipulated images, however, also suggests that the

deliberative potential of these publics is not easily sustainable over time.

**Keywords:** gatekeeping, hashtag publics, public sphere, Twitter, visual data.

## **Introduction**

At the end of July 2016, the Italian health minister Beatrice Lorenzin launched a campaign to promote a national 'Fertility Day', to be held on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September. According to the Ministry of Health (2015a), Fertility Day should "draw attention to the topic of fertility and its protection", with the goal being "to discover the Prestige of Maternity". To support the initiative, the Ministerial National Plan described fertility as an "essential need for both the couple and society", stressing on Italy's low birth rate (Ministry of Health, 2015b). At the end of August 2016, the hashtag #fertilityday became a trending topic on Twitter, with mainstream newspapers giving wide coverage to the vibrant discussion (Coppolaro-Nowell, 2016) and the "angry response" (Payton, 2016) emerging on social media. This discussion was particularly fuelled by a set of posters, shared by the Fertility Day official social media account, that used slogans like: "Fertility is a common good", "Beauty knows no age. Fertility does", "Hurry up! Don't wait for the stork". The then Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and other politicians dissociated themselves from the campaign, that was accused of disregarding problems like precarious jobs, increasing economic inequalities, and the lack of public nurseries (Il Tempo, 2016). As a response, an offline protest was launched to be held during Fertility Day (Vazzana, 2016). On the 1st of September, the health minister recalled the original posters and launched a set of new ones where healthy lifestyles were represented by smiling white people, while bad lifestyles were embodied by black youths smoking marijuana. This shift in the campaign was met by a new wave of critiques. In October 2016,

the Italian Senate deliberated around the experience of the first Fertility Day and decided to rename the 22nd September as the ‘Day of Reproductive Health’.

By applying a combination of digital methods and visual content analysis, this paper focuses on the discursive work in the #fertilityday Twitter stream during the different phases of the campaign as this offers an interesting case study for at least three reasons. First, it provides the opportunity to test whether Twitter’s socio-technical infrastructure has democratizing potential in enabling a variety of actors to come to prominence in the gatekeeping of a political issue-based Twitter stream (Bastos, Raimundo, & Travitzki, 2013; Bennett, Segerberg, & Walker, 2014; Hermida, 2015; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015, 2016; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Tremayne, 2014). Second, it allows us to investigate the communication patterns of a political “ad-hoc issue public” (Bruns & Burgess, 2011) or “hashtag public” (Rambukkana, 2015), that is, a Twitter community forming in response to an emerging issue or event (Bruns & Burgess, 2011, p. 7; see also Yardi & boyd, 2010) with political relevance. In fact, little research has so far focused on the communication patterns of publics forming around hashtags that refer to a political issue/event (Bruns, Moon, Avijit, & Münch, 2016; Giglietto & Lee, 2017). Finally, the #fertilityday case study allows us to assess the extent to which counter-visibility – often performed online through the manipulation of official images to send oppositional messages (Cammaerts, 2007; Deuze, 2010) – becomes “spreadable” (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013) on social media. By focusing on the content of tweets sharing user-manipulated images in the #fertilityday Twitter stream, we can test to what extent publics emerging around political event hashtags can turn into “networked counterpublics” (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015), enhancing the circulation of counternarratives, critical opinions, and oppositional interpretations that strive to influence institutionalised politics.

The article shows that Twitter does offer potential for the emergence of non-elite members of political hashtag publics but primarily when the issue being discussed has no or decreasing news value. That is, ordinary users emerge on the platform when media outlets – in particular traditional news media and new online satirical media – leave it. The #fertilityday hashtag public showed communication patterns in line with those described in previous research interested in the discursive work of Twitter publics forming around acute and political events, with users engaging in “gatewatching” (Bruns, 2005) practices, rather than “communal audiencing” (Fiske, 1992, cited in Bruns et al., 2016). The high “spreadability” (Jenkins, 2006) of visual tweets and the overall counter-visuality of user-manipulated images in these tweets also point to the deliberative potential of Twitter visual content. Findings, however, show that both spreadability and deliberative potential are not easily sustainable over time.

### ***Twitter and public sphere 2.0: The emergence of new gatekeepers?***

A vast and multidisciplinary scholarship has investigated the role the Internet plays in weakening or enhancing the power imbalances in the production of hegemonic discourses, in the control of the means of production of symbolic forms, and in the definition of the norms of cultural production and circulation (Carpentier, 2011; Iannelli, 2016). Rethinking Habermas’ classic study (1962) of media and the public sphere, scholars have focused on online discursive actions around public issues and the construction of a critical public opinion that strives to influence institutionalised or protest politics (Barnidge 2016; Benkler, Roberts, Faris, Solow-Niederman, & Etling, 2015; Dahlgren, 2006; Papacharissi, 2010).

Twitter, in particular, has been object of a vast range of studies on public sphere 2.0 and power dynamics in discursive practices (Bastos et al., 2013). Research has shown that Twitter’s socio-technical infrastructure enables the coming to prominence of traditionally non-elite actors, who, on the platform, can engage in successful content curation and framing

dynamics (Hermida, 2015; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015, 2016; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Vicari, 2017). This points to Twitter's potential for broadcasting and gatekeeping of user-generated or user-selected content that specifically happens via mechanisms that are platform-bound, namely, expressed via the use of conversational (i.e., @, RT, and via) and tagging (i.e., #) markers. Jackson and Foucault Welles (2015, 2016), for instance, used the concept of "Twitter broadcast networks", to describe the hub-and-spoke structures emerging in Twitter conversational streams. According to the authors, Twitter broadcast networks generate conversational space for minority viewpoints and in so doing they allow the emergence of "networked counterpublics", that is, subaltern counterpublics (Fraser, 1990) that formulate and voice oppositional interpretations.

While the work cited so far sheds light on the positive aspects of social media use in relation to formal and informal political participation, a different research strand has also depicted social media as pseudo and manufactured public spheres (Fuchs, 2014). Studies have underlined the risks of ghettoisation and polarisation of opinions among like-minded individuals in different web platforms (Sunstein, 2001; Pariser, 2011) while political and media elites have been described as still dominating the contemporary political news cycles, even if in a more inclusive environment (Chadwick, 2013).

Work specifically focused on the Italian Twittersphere highlights that politically charged Twitter content shows a strong dependence on the issues discussed in TV political talk-shows (Iannelli & Giglietto, 2015), with Twitter political engagement being however strongly associated to more demanding online political activities like campaigning for a political candidate or attending political events (Vaccari et al., 2015). In other words, on the one hand, old media have a strong influence on the political agenda of the Italian Twittersphere but users who engage in political Twitter streams do not simply participate in 'slacktivist' action.

Research has, however, so far overlooked the dynamics underlying content curation in political Twitter streams, that is, who becomes influential and why in the discussion of specific political events or issues. Hence, to understand whether non-elites are empowered actors in the discursive dynamics of the Italian Twittersphere, this study addresses the following research question: RQ1. How did actor power relations develop through different crucial points of the #fertilityday Twitter stream?

### ***Twitter hashtag publics: The communication practices***

Twitter has reinvigorated research on “performative” publics (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998), that is, research on publics’ agency in the production of contents and meanings in online discursive spaces. The concept of publics (boyd, 2010; Livingstone, 2005) describes people who do not consume passively the media but are involved in communication practices and spaces that are socially visible. Twitter hashtags – tagging markers originally used to classify messages and make them searchable – enable the formation of “hashtag publics”, that is, Twitter communities forming in response to an issue or event (see Rambukkana, 2015). Bruns and Highfield (2016) add that hashtag publics form in relation to “short-term aspects” that motivate public debate on a specific topic, resulting in “ad-hoc issue publics”. Social media research has explored very different types of issue publics emerging on Twitter: Yardi and boyd’s (2010) work, for instance, analysed the issue public developing in response to the shooting of late-term abortion doctor Tiller in the US, while Pearce and colleagues (2014) investigated the issue public emerging with the publication of the 2013 IPCC Working Group 1 Report, “a critical event in the societal debate about climate change”. With the aim of identifying patterns in the communication practices of issue publics forming around different hashtags, Bruns et al. (2016) conducted a comparative analysis of different hashtagged Twitter streams. Their work shows that “acute event hashtags” and “media event

hashtags” give rise to ad hoc issue publics showing different communication patterns. On the one hand, acute event hashtag’s communication is characterized by a high proportion of both retweets and URL tweets, with users highly engaged in “gatewatching” practices, that is, spreading existing content and adding new, external material. Media event hashtag’s publics use considerably fewer URL tweets or retweets, rather showing signs of “communal audiencing” (Fiske, 1992, cited in Bruns et al., 2016).

Bruns et al.’s (2016) work also shows that political event hashtags seem to bolster the emergence of issue publics very similar to those forming around acute event hashtags, with their communication practices being centred on sharing and adding content via retweets and URL tweets, i.e., gatewatching dynamics. Given that to date, with few exceptions (Giglietto & Lee, 2017), little research has focused on the communication patterns of publics forming around hashtags that are expressions of political issues, we formulated the following research question: RQ2. Can we identify specific communication patterns in the #fertilityday hashtag public? How, if at all, did they change over time?

### ***Counter-visibility in Twitter hashtag publics: The deliberative potential of user-manipulated images***

According to scholarship on digital participatory culture (e.g. Jenkins, 2006; Cammaerts, 2007), user-manipulated images spread with unprecedented scale and visibility through social media, making public commentary more vibrant, particularly during electoral campaigns or protests. Jenkins (2006) stressed on citizens’ increasing skills of media manipulation to represent and circulate critical and/or marginalised opinions of activists and active citizens. He aligned this “photoshop for democracy” to the tactics of grassroots resistance described by what Dery (1993) called “culture jamming”, namely, the DIY media and their strategies for gathering consensus through the manipulation of signs (e.g., media hacking, terror art, and

semiological guerrilla tactics).

Counter-visuality, that is, the political jamming of visual imageries, can be a tactic in protest communication (Deuze, 2010; Gray, 2012; Iannelli, 2016) and seems to enable conflicting issues and critical positions to spread on the Internet and other media (Jenkins et al., 2013).

Similar tactics are associated with the speedy circulation of memes (Tay, 2014). Memes, that is, multimodal artefacts that mix visual and textual elements and are constantly transformed by online users (Shifman, 2014), do show potential to spread virally in certain digital cultures and to express oppositional ideas and points of view. Milner (2013), for instance, showed that in the OWS movement memes enhanced “pop polivocality” and broadened public spheres on websites like reddit, Tumblr, and 4chan, by enhancing the formation of engaged citizenship.

The counter-visuality of memes also resulted in a powerful tactic to disseminate oppositional grassroots ideas on Facebook for Australian Aboriginal activists (Frazer & Carlson, 2017).

User-manipulated images on social media, and particularly on Twitter, can then take a critical or a neutral stance (De Cock & Pedraza, 2018; Shifman, 2013; Tay, 2014; Wikstrom, 2014), that is, they can express counter-visuality and advance politically engaged critiques or mock without delivering an argument. More specifically, critical images can express ‘phatic criticism’ – when their content delivers a negative attitude without a supporting argument – or ‘poetic criticism’ – when their content focuses on aesthetic or artistic beauty (Jakobson, 1960, see also Shifman, 2013; Miller, 2008). They can dispute the cultural models that emerge in language and codes of dominant messages (particularly in relation to genre, race, religion, and lifestyles). This is in line with the ideologically-thin communication that scholars have pointed out in contemporary flexible activism, less defined around traditional parties and richer in terms of individual identities and lifestyle narratives (Bennett, 2003; Giddens, 1991; Melucci, 1980). Finally, user-manipulated images can dispute elements of

institutionalised politics (Patterson 1980), like policies, political actors or institutions. Tay (2014), for instance, investigated the use of memes to provide humoristic exaggerations of politicians' character traits (e.g., personal character, personality, intelligence, competency). User-manipulated images with a neutral stance can rather mock without disapproval or represent real-time marketing attempts to gain visibility and strategically promote branded content (De Cock & Pizarro Pedraza, 2018).

Leveraging on this scenario, we can hypothesize a significant presence and “spreadability” (Jenkins et al., 2013) in the user-manipulated visual content produced by the #fertilityday hashtag public, that is, a higher presence of retweeting practices in visual tweets which appropriated, manipulated and reproduced the official campaign. To understand whether user-manipulated official campaign images were employed to take a critical stance towards the campaign, and what arguments and perspectives supported this criticism over time, we need to identify the communicative functions of (visual) tweets. Hence, by focusing on the discursive work produced by the #fertilityday hashtag public, this study explores dynamics of counter-visuality via the following research questions: RQ3 Did tweets containing user-manipulated visual content show elements of spreadability? RQ4 What communication functions characterised the tweets with user-manipulated images in the #fertilityday Twitter stream? How, if at all, did they change over time?

### **Data and methods**

To build a Twitter dataset relevant to the #fertilityday hashtag public, we used the Discovertext Sifter application—which relies on GNIP service for firehose access to Twitter data. We launched a historical search based on the following query: “#fertilityday since:25/07/2016 until:22/10/2016”. Since our aim was to focus entirely on the Italian public, we excluded the 5,955 tweets in the results that were in a language different from Italian. The

final dataset is then populated by 158,528 tweets. Figure 1 shows the longitudinal distribution of the dataset and the composition of its tweets.

Figure 1 about here

To investigate the evolution of the #fertilityday hashtag public, we identified key dates in the development of the Fertility Day institutional campaign and defined the following 5 phases:

Table 1 about here

Drawing upon work by a number of scholars (see, among the others, Bastos et al., 2013; Bruns, 2005; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Vicari, 2017) we investigated gatekeeping dynamics and power roles in the hashtag public (RQ1) by tracking the use of conversational markers (i.e., via<sup>1</sup>, @ and RT). In particular, we identified users who were most frequently viaed, mentioned or retweeted during the five phases of the campaign. Adapting former coding schemes (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013), the 10 top viaed, mentioned or retweeted tweeters in each phase of the campaign were coded according to the categories provided in Table 2<sup>ii</sup>.

Table 2 about here

To provide a longitudinal exploration of the communication practices characterizing the #fertilityday hashtag public (RQ2), we drew upon work by Bruns and Stieglitz (2012) and Bruns et al. (2016) and identified:

- the number of tweets and unique users contributing to the hashtag dataset in each phase;
- the percentages of retweets and genuine mention @user and via @user (i.e., mention @user and via @user that are not retweets) in each phase;
- the percentages of tweets that contain URLs to images and external sources in each phase.

Finally, to explore spreadability, communicative functions and targets of criticism in user-

manipulated images of the official campaign (RQ3 e RQ4), we developed a content analysis of visual content (Bell, 2001). This method allowed us to investigate the symbolic quality of tweets containing user-manipulated images, taking into account the cultural context of their visual and textual elements (Rose, 2001). Texts in our sample are represented by (a) the message tweeted with the image, (b) the added hashtags and (c) the text contained within the image (e.g., screenshots of textual content, such as Facebook posts).

To design our sample for visual content analysis, we identified all URL tweets containing images (41,974), traced those that were retweeted at least once (4,402) and isolated those retweeted more than average in each phase (762).

Tweets with broken links or linking to private profiles or videos<sup>iii</sup> were excluded from the final sample, that resulted in 713 tweets. Out of these, 114 contained user-manipulated images, that is, images presenting (at least) one of the following elements:

- original images of the campaign with modified headlines;
- original images of the campaign with modified visuals;
- original images of the campaign with modified visuals and headlines;
- images recalling the design of the original campaign (such as lettering, colours or disposition of the elements within the frame).

The 114 tweets with user-manipulated images were categorised on the basis of their critical or neutral stance, their communicative function and their target (Table 3). Tweets with a critical stance (Shifman, 2013) were categorised as having phatic, poetic, political or cultural function. Content with phatic function (Jakobson, 1960; Miller, 2008) expresses disapproval toward the Fertility Day without defining a specific target (such as the image of a middle finger published by a TV star). Tweets with poetic function (Jakobson, 1960) criticize the communicative aspects of the campaign and the professionals who designed it. Tweets with

political function target the formal politics, that is, policy issues, political actors or institutions (Patterson, 1980; Tay, 2014). Tweets with cultural function dispute the cultural issues emerging in the campaign's messages (Bennett, 2003; Giddens, 1991; Melucci, 1980). Tweets lacking a critical stance were categorised as having one of the following communicative functions: the promotion of a corporate brand or the delivery of fun through jokes (De Cock & Pizarro Pedraza, 2018).

Table 3 about here

The sampled images were coded by two of the authors. To test inter-coder reliability, the coders first independently coded 100 URL tweets with images that were not included in the sample. Overall, percentage agreement for all coding categories was within an acceptable range, with the vast majority at or above 86%. Disagreements were discussed and solved before starting the actual coding.

### **#fertilityday gatekeeping dynamics and actors**

Previous research focused on power dynamics in Twitter discursive work has shown that the platform's socio-technical infrastructure can enable traditionally non-elite actors to come to prominence as key gatekeepers (Bastos et al., 2013; Bruns, 2005; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Vicari, 2017). Our analysis of the #fertilityday Twitter stream, however, shows a more complex scenario.

Table 4 shows the Twitter handles of the 10 top gatekeepers for each conversational marker with at least 3 retweets, mentions or vias in each phase of the Fertility Day campaign<sup>iv</sup>. Figure 2 provides an overall mapping of the same gatekeepers on the basis of their user category, with percentages referring to the number of times each user category was viaed, mentioned or retweeted.

Table 4 about here

Figure 2 about here

Looking at Figure 2 it becomes evident that the three conversational markers brought to prominence different actors, generating very different gatekeeping dynamics. In particular, the *via* conversational marker was primarily used to spread content produced by mainstream news media (e.g., @repubblicait) and, partially, on social media platforms (e.g., @youtube), with activist actors (e.g., @fikasicula) only becoming prominent in phase 3. In fact, the limited use of this marker primarily enhanced the emergence of traditional gatekeepers (i.e., news media), only opening up opportunities for non-elites – namely activists and ordinary tweeters – when the Fertility Day counter-event was in the planning and when the official campaign had low news value.

Mentioning practices were the most stable in the stream, with more than 77% of the mentions among the top @ gatekeepers going to political actors in all five phases of the campaign. In particular, the official accounts of the health minister and of the Ministry of Health remained top gatekeepers across all five phases, while Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and the campaign's official account were among the top @ gatekeepers across the last four phases. Mainstream news media (e.g., @LaStampa) were mentioned in all the last four phases while talk shows (e.g., OmnibusLa7), Youtube and satirical media (e.g., @welikechopin) appeared as @ gatekeepers at different moments of the campaign. This indicates that the @ conversational marker primarily worked as a 'targeting device' to draw attention to and from the main political actors considered responsible for the campaign.

Finally, retweeting was the most common gatekeeping practice in the #fertilityday stream (see Table 5). In particular, past the launching phase of the campaign, media outlets produced more viral content than political actors, with online-only satirical media (e.g., @lercionotizie) and satirical tweetstars (e.g., @iddio) actually producing most of the "spreadable" (Jenkins, 2013) – here retweeted – content in the debate, followed by traditional news media. Ordinary users,

or non-elites, only emerged at the launch and in the aftermath of the Fertility Day event.

In line with Chadwick's work on the hybrid construction of political news (2013), these findings highlight the standing power of traditional media elites in social media conversations activated around political issues. In particular, they show that in political hashtag publics traditional news media can dominate via and retweet dynamics, while political actors are likely to be at the centre of mentioning practices as targets of personalised tweets. We also notice, however, the new centrality of online satirical media and tweetstars in producing highly spreadable content. This seems to suggest that the interplay between "pleasure-driven play and (arguably) genuine political discourse" (Tay, 2014, p. 46), beyond being a central element of contemporary political engagement (Jenkins, 2006), is being appropriated by online professional or semi-professional figures (e.g., tweetstars) able to influence the debate of political hashtag publics. Ordinary users, or "non-elite actors" (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015), however, only emerge in via and retweet dynamics when traditional media elites and new satirical media lack or lose interest in the debate. Overall, this analysis suggests that Twitter's socio-technical infrastructure does allow the emergence of different actors but traditionally powerful ones along with new satirical media are the most likely to produce spreadable content in via and retweet practices.

These results also show that by collapsing gatekeeping practices generated via different markers – as done in previous research (see among the others, Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Vicari, 2017) – we cannot fully grasp the gatekeeping role (e.g., producer of spreadable content, target of personalised tweets) played by the different actors of hashtag publics.

### **#fertilityday communication patterns**

In their 2016 work on hashtag publics' communication patterns, Bruns and colleagues distinguish between media events and acute events, with the former seeing a higher portion of

original over retweeted messages and the latter showing opposite features, along with higher percentages of URL tweets. On the basis of metrics relevant to different politically oriented hashtag publics, the authors specifically define political events as a subcategory of acute events (2016, p. 8). To analyse the communication patterns in the #fertilityday hashtag public, we then explored the practices of viaing, mentioning, retweeting and adding external content (i.e., URL tweets) in each of the five phases described above (Table 3).

Table 5 about here

Data in Table 5 clearly show that the #fertilityday hashtag public developed along the lines of what Bruns and colleagues (2012, 2016) define as an acute event as in each phase of the dataset more than 60% of the tweets use a conversational marker (i.e., RT, @ or via) and more than 35% are URL tweets. During the first phase the use of conversational markers was less prominent and URL tweets were more common than in the following phases probably due to the fact that then most tweets were posted by institutional accounts that shared information on the campaign in the form of visual and external sources.

Overall, these results also align with Giglietto and Lee's (2017) work on the #JeNeSuisPasCharlie hashtag public, as they highlight the relevance of URL tweets in hashtagged Twitter streams where political expression is a central discursive element. What is, however, particularly relevant and certainly accentuated here is the role of URL tweets containing images as in all five phases more than 24% of the tweets contain visual content<sup>v</sup>. To trace the possible emergence of counter-visibility in the #fertilityday Twitter stream – or the jamming of visual content for political purposes (Cammaerts, 2007; Iannelli, 2016) – the following section will focus on stance, target and content of tweets where users appropriated, manipulated and reproduced the campaign's posters.

### **#fertilityday counter-visibility**

The exploration of retweeting practices in the #fertilityday Twitter stream shows that URL tweets with images were more retweeted – hence more “spreadable” (Jenkins et al., 2013) – than other types of tweets (i.e., tweets containing text only and URL tweets linking to external sources) (Figure 3).

Figure 3 about here

More specifically, URL tweets with user-manipulated images (i.e., 16% of the sample) reached their peak of spreadability (i.e., an average of 47 retweets) – and surpassed that of other visual content – in phase 2, with the publication of the first campaign’s posters.

Overall, a significant majority (62.4%) of tweets containing user-manipulated images did employ counter-visuality, with their main targets of criticism being politics (28.1%) and the cultural issues emerging in the campaign’s message (19.3%). Phatic criticism (7%) and poetic criticism (6.1%) played a more marginal role (Table 6).

More specifically, criticism towards politics mainly drew attention to the lack of public intervention to support young families (13.2%) via implementing policies to reduce unemployment and poverty, fund public nurseries, promote sexual education programs, and improve public healthcare. Less significant was the presence of user-manipulated images that exploited the Fertility Day initiative to attack political alliances in the multi-party government (6.1%), to question the health minister’s character traits through humoristic exaggerations (Tay, 2014) (6.1%), or to mobilize an offline protest against the initiative (2.6%).

User-manipulated images with a critical stance toward the representation of cultural issues mainly targeted the representation of women promoted by the Fertility Day campaign, the idea of maternity as a duty, and/or that the state should intervene in relation to reproductive choices (11.4%). Followed criticism towards the association between race and healthy lifestyle (4.4%), the lifestyles promoted by the campaign (2.6%) and the catholic influence on the representation

of family or reproduction (0.9%).

One out of three user-manipulated images was used to entertain without expressing disapproval (De Cock & Pizarro Pedraza, 2018) ('fun' function, 32.5%), with a very small percentage (7%) being used to promote a corporate brand by exploiting the trending hashtag.

Table 6 about here

As shown in Figure 4, a longitudinal mapping of the communication functions discussed above shows that user-manipulated images gradually lost their critical stance (i.e., phatic, poetic, cultural and political criticism). In fact, the overall user-manipulated visual with a critical stance went from 67.3% in phase 2 to 45.5% in phase 5, being gradually replaced by politically disengaged content (i.e., promotional and fun content).

Figure 4 about here

Overall, these findings indicate that, by sabotaging the campaign posters to express and share criticism, the #fertilityday hashtag public activated a form of "photoshop for democracy" (Jenkins, 2006), putting increasing pressure on the health minister to recall the campaign. This deliberative phase, however, was short-lived as over time tweets with user-manipulated images turned uncritical and lost spreadability. Our results, then, align with existing research asserting the potential of counter-visuality to spread (Jenkins et al., 2013) oppositional views (Cammaerts, 2007; Deuze, 2010; Iannelli, 2016; Tay, 2014; Shifman, 2014), particularly in relation to policy issues (Patterson, 1980) and lifestyle politics (Giddens, 1991). They, however, also suggest that this deliberative strength may be difficult to sustain over time, leading us to question the extent to which political hashtag publics may concretely turn into "networked counterpublics" (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015) able to influence institutionalised politics on the longer term.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

Research on hashtag publics (see Rambukkana, 2015) shows that Twitter users engaged in an emerging issue or event exploit the platform's socio-technical infrastructure and conversational markers to produce and share content via non-traditional gatekeeping dynamics (Bastos et al., 2013; Bruns, 2005; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Vicari, 2017) and following specific communication practices (Bruns and Stieglitz, 2012; Bruns et al., 2016). Different studies have pointed to the way these dynamics often favour the emergence of non-elite, ordinary users, enabling the coming to prominence of minority and oppositional views (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015) and enhancing democratizing processes (Iannelli, 2016). By analysing the life of the Italian #fertilityday Twitter stream our study advances a threefold contribution to existing research on hashtag publics.

First, as regards the development of discursive power dynamics in hashtag publics (RQ1), our findings confirm that the use of Twitter conversational markers enables the emergence of diverse gatekeepers (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Vicari, 2016), but also point to the need to distinguish among the gatekeeping dynamics generated via different conversational markers. This study shows that in political hashtag publics traditional news media play a central role in via and retweet dynamics, while political actors are likely to be at the centre of mentioning practices as targets of personalised messages. Findings also point to the centrality of online satirical media and tweetstars as gatekeepers of highly spreadable content in retweet dynamics. This indicates that political humour, while becoming a central element of contemporary political participation (Jenkins, 2006), is partially being appropriated by new professional and semi-professional online figures able to influence wider political hashtag publics. Ordinary users, or "non-elite actors" (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015), on the other hand, only tend to slightly emerge in via and retweet dynamics when traditional media elites and new online satirical media lack or lose interest in the debate. This certainly

indicates that overly optimistic views on Twitter's democratizing potential should be carefully tested against the actual power dynamics underlying the discursive work on the platform.

Second, in line with previous findings (Bruns et al., 2016; Giglietto and Lee, 2017), the communication practices in each phase of the #fertilityday stream (RQ2) suggest that Twitter political events work similarly to acute events, with users highly engaged in spreading existing content and adding external material. Our study, however, also shows that visual content can be a central element in the discursive work of political hashtag publics, pointing to the need to incorporate its investigation in future analyses of hashtag publics' communication practices.

Finally, in line with scholarship on digital participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2013; Cammaerts, 2007), this paper highlights that in political hashtag publics users-manipulated visual content shows elements of spreadability (RQ3) and can be functional to express criticism, and bolster policy change (RQ4). This deliberative effort, however, may be short-lived, with counter-visuality gradually turning into entertainment as an end in itself, and preventing the formation of durable "networked counterpublics" (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015).

Ultimately, our investigation contributes to developing methods for empirical inquiry into public sphere 2.0 and hashtag publics, providing a multi-level framework that looks at actors, practices, and content of deliberative processes over time.

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<sup>i</sup> The via marker appears in tweets automatically generated when clicking on a web page's share button. This feature enables the introduction of an online source and its contents in the Twittersphere. For a detailed discussion of RT, mention, and via conventions, see Meraz and Papacharissi (2013: 140)

<sup>ii</sup> In this study 'satirical tweetstars' are Twitter users who meet the following criteria: 1) they have more than 70,000 followers; 2) they are active daily and 3) they use their Twitter account primarily to produce satirical content around news stories.

<sup>iii</sup> In line with Tay (2014, p. 49), we only focused on still images because their creation requires little technical skills and they are consumable in short periods of time, with both features encouraging wider use and dissemination.

<sup>iv</sup> The article reports original Twitter handles of organizations, public figures, journalists and news editors. For privacy reasons, Twitter handles of ordinary users were replaced with pseudonyms.

<sup>v</sup> By way of comparison, in Giglietto and Lee's analysis, tweets with images only account for 10% of the dataset (2017, p. 7).

Phase	Time frame	Description
1	25/07-30/08	social media launch of the Fertility Day institutional campaign
2	31/08-01/09	publication of new posters promoting the institutional campaign and first participatory peak in the #fertilityday hashtag public
3	02/09-20/09	waiting for Fertility Day
4	21/09-22/09	publication of new posters, Fertility Day, street protest, and second participatory peak in the #fertilityday hashtag public
5	23/09-22/10	aftermath of Fertility Day

Table 1: Phases in the formation and development of the #fertilityday hashtag public

Category	Subcategory	Example
News media	Legacy news media	@repubblicait
	Online-only news media	@valigiablu
	Press agency	@agenziansa
	News media professional	@ciropellegrino, @robertosaviano
Satirical media	Satirical media professional	@lucianinalitti
	Online-only satirical media	@lercio
	Satirical TV program	@welikechopin
	Satirical tweetstar	@iddio
Talk Show		@chetempocheffa
Political actor	Politician or political party	@bealorenzin
	Political institution	@ministerosalute
Activist actor	Activist blog	@narr_azioni
	Activist organisation	@fareprogressi
	Petition website	@firmiamo
Health-related actor		@mdssalute
Social media platform		@youtube
Social media expert		@franaltomare
Ordinary tweeter		@Individual_1 (pseudonym)
Other		@c0nvei

Table 2: Categories of Twitter users

		Communication function	Target of criticism
Stance	Critical	Phatic criticism	undefined
		Poetic criticism	campaign's design
		Cultural criticism	campaign's cultural assumptions
		Political criticism	political actors, institutions, policy issues
	Neutral	Promotion	none
		Fun	none

Table 3: Visual content analysis coding scheme

Phase	Via gatekeepers				@ gatekeepers				RT gatekeepers			
	Rank	Tweeter	N	Cum %	Rank	Tweeter	N	Cum %	Rank	Tweeter	N	Cum %
1	n.a.				1	MinisteroSalute	12	31.58	1	FertilityDay	70	38.25
					2	bealorenzin	8	52.63	2	Individual_1	18	48.09
									3	Individual_2	11	54.10
									4	ANCI_comunicare	6	57.38
										msdsalute	6	60.66
									5	Narr_Azioni	5	63.39
										Individual_3	5	66.12
									6	FikaSicula	4	68.31
										Individual_4	4	70.49
										Individual_5	4	72.68
									7	APEOnlus	3	74.32
									Individual_6	3	75.96	
									Individual_7	3	77.60	
									Individual_8	3	79.23	
									Individual_9	3	80.87	
									Individual_10	3	82.51	
									serenatudisco	3	84.15	
2	1	FikaSicula	68	17.39	1	bealorenzin	1742	29.31	1	robertosaviano	3309	5.61
	2	YouTube	35	26.34	2	matteoreenzi	306	34.45	2	Iddio	2346	9.58
	3	cOnvey	24	32.48	3	MinisteroSalute	163	37.20	3	FranAltomare	859	11.04
	4	fattoquotidiano	22	38.11	4	robertosaviano	126	39.32	4	ale_dibattista	663	12.16
	5	valigiablu	21	43.48	5	FertilityDay	101	41.02	5	TristeMietitore	661	13.28
	6	HuffPostItalia	19	48.34	6	Ceres	61	42.04	6	ch_distef	658	14.40
		repubblicait	19	53.20	7	UStampaLorenzin	45	42.80	7	matteograndi	638	15.48
	7	Linkiesta	13	56.52	8	durexitalia	39	43.46	8	lercionotizie	630	16.55
		wordpressdotcom	13	59.85		pdnetwork	39	44.11	9	foisluca84	619	17.59
	8	espressonline	10	62.40	9	meb	38	44.75	10	ArsenaleKappa	605	18.62
	wireditalia	10	64.96		Iddio	38	45.39					
9	socialmediacoso	8	67.01	10	indivanados	30	45.90					
10	Individual_13	6	68.54		repubblicait	30	46.40					
	RiccardoE	6	70.08									
3	1	fareprogressi	72	20.06	1	bealorenzin	766	21.83	1	robertosaviano	591	3.41
	2	repubblicait	34	29.53	2	matteoreenzi	128	25.48	2	Iddio	530	6.47
	3	Individual_16	32	38.44	3	robertosaviano	83	27.84	3	ArsenaleKappa	467	9.17
	4	YouTube	29	46.52	4	YouTube	73	29.92	4	Individual_14	451	11.77
	5	cOnvey	21	52.37	5	MinisteroSalute	44	31.18	5	repubblicait	448	14.36
	6	FikaSicula	15	56.55	6	repubblicait	38	32.26	6	opificioprugna	313	16.17
	7	fattoquotidiano	10	59.33	7	OmnibusLa7	22	32.89	7	lercionotizie	276	17.76
		Linkiesta	10	62.12	8	FertilityDay	17	33.37	8	VujaBoskov	190	18.86
	8	ninjamarketing	9	64.62	9	MGAavvocati	15	33.80	9	Individual_15	184	19.92
	9	propostalavoro	8	66.85	10	civati	14	34.20	10	FertilityMayDay	180	20.96
10	QSanit	6	68.52		UStampaLorenzin	14	34.60					

4	1	YouTube	26	13.40	1	BeaLorenzin	1144	28.85	1	ArsenaleKappa	679	3.27
	2	cOnvey	19	23.20	2	MinisteroSalute	176	33.29	2	TristeMietitore	445	5.41
	3	fareprogressi	15	30.93	3	welikechopin	116	36.22	3	welikechopin	360	7.15
		repubblicait	15	38.66	4	matteoreenzi	89	38.46	4	lefrasiidosho	338	8.77
	4	ilpost	8	42.78	5	FertilityDay	62	40.03	5	PamelaFerrara	316	10.29
	5	QSanit	7	46.39	6	robertosaviano	32	40.83	6	Iddio	294	11.71
		wordpressdotcom	7	50.00	7	makkox	29	41.56	7	EdoardoBuffoni	263	12.98
	6	fattoquotidiano	6	53.09	8	LaStampa	27	42.24	8	Civati	245	14.16
	7	fanpage	5	55.67	9	fattoquotidiano	26	42.90	9	foisluca84	222	15.22
		RiccardoE	5	58.25	10	repubblicait	25	43.53		Individual_17	222	16.29
	stati_generali	5	60.82					10	Adnkronos	219	17.34	
	8	FikaSicula	4	62.89								
		Linkiesta	4	64.95								
	9	Agenzia_Ansa	3	66.49								
		HuffPostItalia	3	68.04								
		wireditalia	3	69.59								
5	1	YouTube	8	11.43	1	BeaLorenzin	499	24.67	1	Iddio	282	3.15
	2	repubblicait	7	21.43	2	lucianinalitti	59	27.58	2	Individual_18	280	6.28
	3	espressonline	3	25.71	3	matteoreenzi	40	29.56	3	Individual_19	260	9.19
		fanpage	3	30.00	4	OttoemessoTW	33	31.19	4	ArsenaleKappa	244	11.92
		Firmiamo	3	34.29	5	welikechopin	28	32.58	5	Individual_20	174	13.87
		HuffPostItalia	3	38.57	6	chetempocheffa	21	33.61	6	foisluca84	157	15.62
		ilpost	3	42.86	7	LaStampa	20	34.60	7	ciropellegrino	137	17.15
					8	FertilityDay	16	35.39	8	lefrasiidosho	125	18.55
						UStampaLorenzin	16	36.18	9	Individual_21	124	19.94
					9	MinisteroSalute	15	36.93	10	Individual_17	112	21.19
				10	Corriere	13	37.57					

Table 4: Top gatekeepers

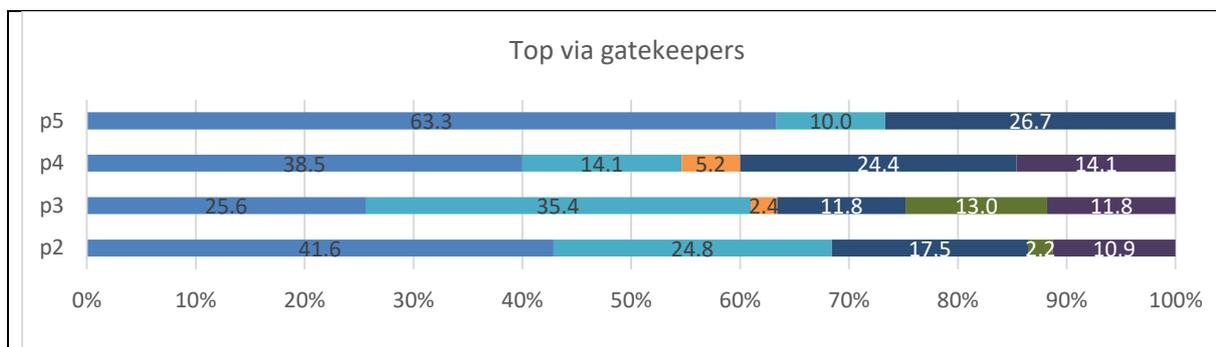
Ph.	Tweets	Via	@	RT	URLs to page	URLs to image
1	324	0; 0%	38; 8.64%	183; 56.48%	115; 35.49%	126; 38.89%
2	84384	392; 0.46%	4582; 5.43%	59014; 69.94%	9986; 11.83%	20833; 24.69%
3	25699	359; 1.40%	2402; 9.35%	17319; 67.39%	6526; 25.40%	8606; 33.49%
4	34605	194; 0.56%	3011; 8.70%	20769; 60.02%	7718; 22.30%	9078; 26.23%
5	13516	71; 0.53%	1402; 10.38%	8943; 66.17%	3265; 24.16%	3331; 24.64%
<b>Tot</b>	<b>158528</b>	<b>1016; 0.64%</b>	<b>11435; 7.21%</b>	<b>106228; 67.01%</b>	<b>27610; 17.42%</b>	<b>41974; 26.48%</b>

Table 5: #fertilityday communication patterns

		Communication function	Target of criticism	Percentage
Stance	Critical	Phatic criticism	undefined	7,0%
		Poetic criticism	aesthetic or artistic beauty of the campaign	6,1%
		Cultural criticism	women's representation, the idea of maternity as a duty, and/or state obligations in relation to reproductive choices	11,4%
			association between race and healthy lifestyle	4,4%
			the lifestyles promoted in the campaign	2,6%
			catholic influence on the representation of family/sex	0,9%
		Political criticism	neglected policy issues related with the choice to have children	13,2%
Health minister's personal character, integrity,	6,1%			

			capability, intelligence, effectiveness	
			the Premier, the Democratic Party, and the multi-party government	6,1%
			Health minister's public initiative organized for Sept 22nd	2,6%
	<b>Neutral</b>	Promotion	none	7,0%
		Fun	none	32,5%
		<i>Total</i>		<i>100%</i>

Table 6: User-manipulated images' communicative functions and targets



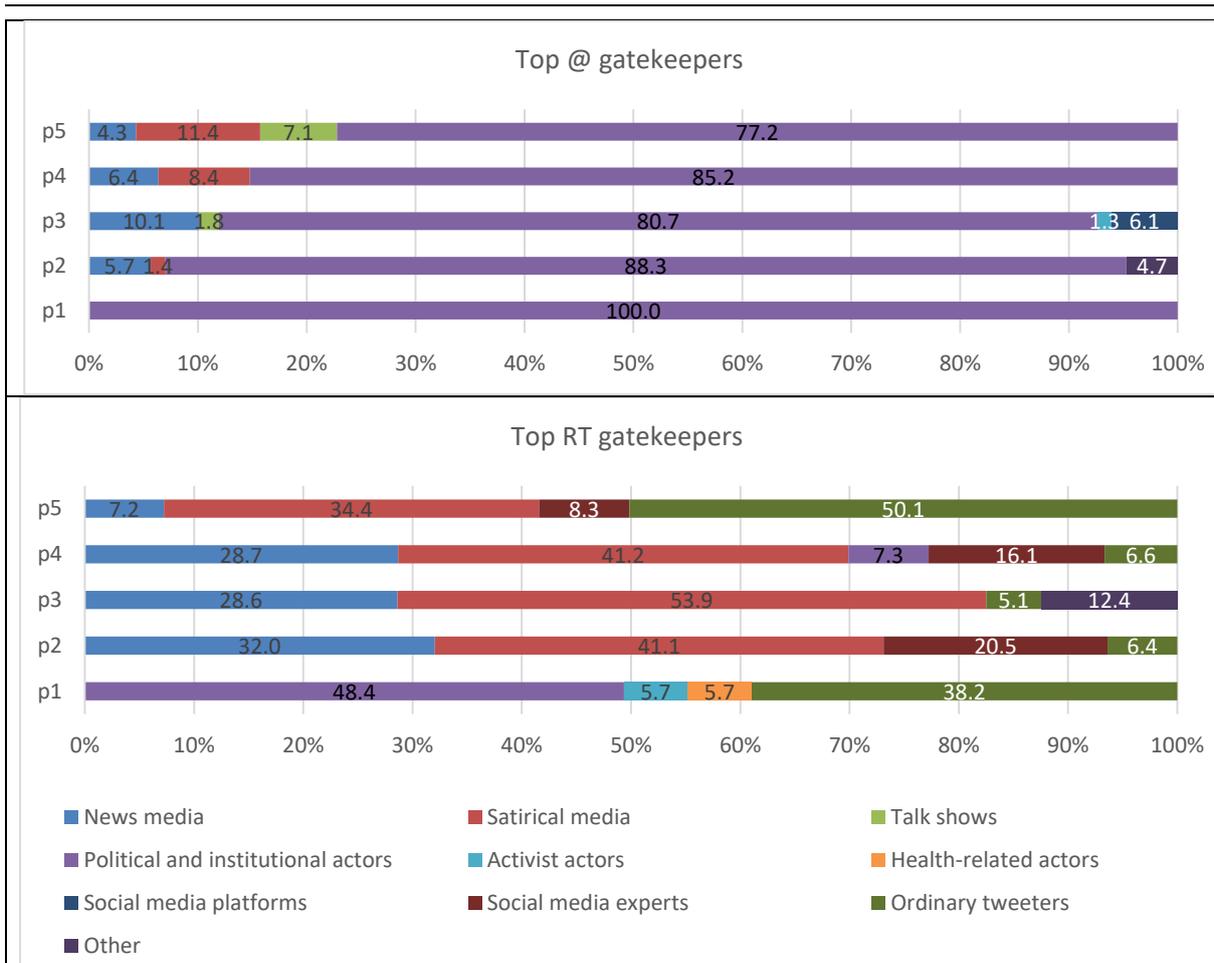


Figure 2: Top gatekeepers grouped by user category

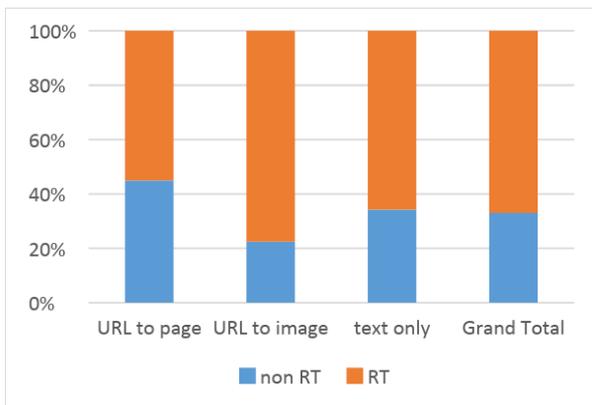


Figure 3: Retweeting practices in relation to tweet form

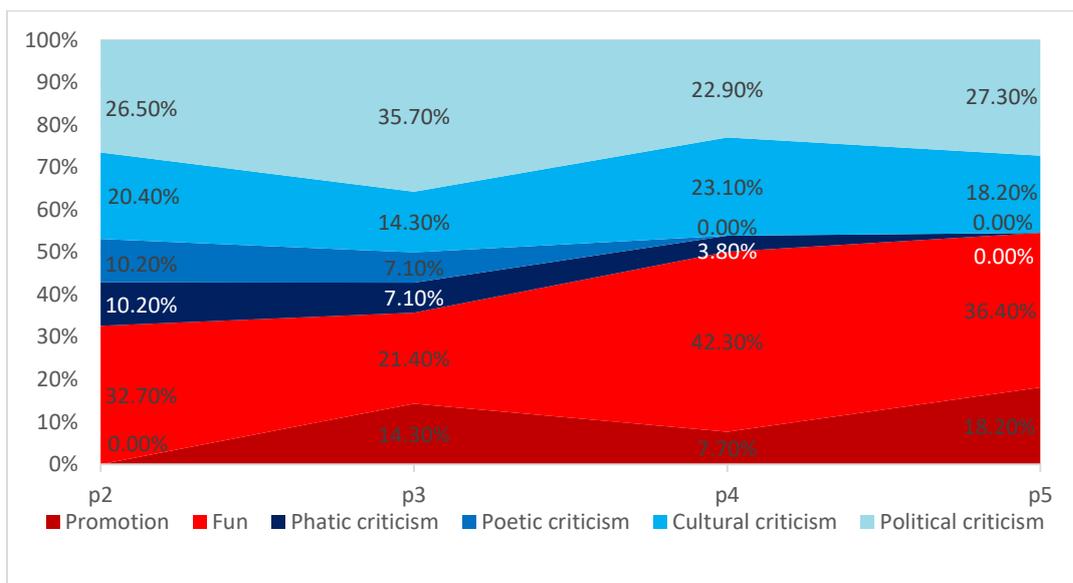


Figure 4: Use of neutral and critical user-manipulated images over time