The Wardrobe, the Politician, the Public and the Media: The Role of Image in the Construction of Political Identity (An Italian/British Comparison)

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WORK IN PROGRESS
comments welcome and appreciated

The study presented in this paper would not have been possible without the availability and generous time contributions made by all interviewees
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Abstract
The idea that image and presentation are important in contemporary politics is almost obvious. Yet, despite the extensive anecdotal evidence, little rigorous academic research exists about it. Sociology, Fashion Studies, and Material Culture Studies, in fact, examine in-depth the social significance of dressing codes, but rarely focus on their political function. Political Communication literature, instead, analyzes the impacts of political actors’ communication (mainly their rhetoric and attempt at controlling “the message”) on the media and the public. Most research is couched in terms of the “mediatization” of politics. The latter is mostly approached through the narrow lens of political marketing, its connections to popular culture, and only marginally addresses the issue of aesthetic presentation.
This paper develops a multidisciplinary and international comparative approach that aims at fitting the visual aspects of political communication within the construction of political identity in contemporary societies. The study, more specifically, examines the role of image in the political domains that are most neglected by current political communication literature: local and supranational politics, as well as the daily routines of politicians rather than electoral high-times. On the basis of over 50 interviews, it compares the role of image in the daily political practices of both British and Italian local politicians and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), respectively based in West Yorkshire and the Lombardy region of Italy. Ultimately the paper makes four contributions: it is a first step to mapping the mechanisms through which identity and political meaning are collectively constructed in contemporary politics; it both rejects the notion of “mediatization” and suggests a radically different alternative way of understanding the role of the media in politics; it demonstrates that current analyses really apply to the proverbial tip of the political iceberg, thereby showing the analytical benefits of bringing the “everyday” and the “individual” back into the study of Political Communication; it shows that the moralistic stand about the supposed deleterious effect of appearances (and image) on democratic politics—the dreaded “celebrity politics”—reflects more the narrowness of academic enquiry and the legacy of outdated models of politics-media relationships than the much vaster, variegated, and relational reality of contemporary politics.

Introduction
The notion that image and presentation are important in politics could appear almost obvious. Beyond the cult of the leaders’ image and the massive role of propaganda art, logos, and posters in the elaborate public choreographies of totalitarian regimes (Heller 2008), one could more simply think of Jacques Louis David’s flattering paintings of Napoleon displayed at the Louvre in Paris,¹ or the meticulous planning of official ceremonies, diplomatic meetings and dinners among heads of states (Stelzer 2011) to realize that the cultivation of appearances has always been essential to the exercise of political power.

¹ Napoleon was proclaimed Emperor in May 1804. He commissioned Jean Louis David to paint the coronation to glorify the event and conveying its political and symbolic meaning. As in the tradition of the Holy Roman Empire, Napoleon was consecrated emperor by a pope. Napoleon, however, crowned himself facing the congregation rather than the altar to mark his independence from the Church. As Malika Bouabdellah Dorbani (n.d.) observes, ‘Although David’s initial sketch represented the Emperor in the act of crowning himself, the final painting shows him crowning the Empress—a gesture that presents a nobler, less authoritarian image, described by Napoleon himself as that of a “French knight.”’
Yet, image seems to have acquired an even greater role in the last few decades as part of the alleged ‘mediatization’ of politics. It is a well-known fact that image consultancy agencies are recruited to provide advice in political campaigning—what on the East side of Atlantic is often referred to as an ‘Americanization’ of political campaigning (Negrine and Papathanassopoulos 1996; Baines, Scheucher and Plasser 2001; Yannas 2002). According to the Center for Responsive Politics (2012) so far $13,818,623 has been spent in the US presidential election campaigning on political consultants alone.²

The amount of anecdotal evidence about the importance of image and presentation in politics, however, is not matched by a comparable volume of rigorous academic research. Current literature is characterized by two main strands of research. The first, rooted in Sociology, Fashion Studies, and Material Culture studies is constituted by analyses of dressing codes, their social significance, and the way they have been constructed and modified over time (Barnard 2002; Barthes, 1990). These studies do include observations about the political and social significance of such dressing codes (Crane 2000; Keenan 2001)³ and, occasionally, dressing styles worn by individual politicians. Examples of the latter range from a communication analysis of the role of Gandhi’s dressing style in his ‘Swadeshi revolution’ (Gonsalves 2010) to the discussion of the symbolic role of former British PM Thatcher’s handbag on Radio 4’s programme “Woman’s Hour.”⁴ The focus on the political significance and effect of dressing codes, however, is occasional. The sources that specifically deal with women in politics (Betts 2011; Young 2011)⁵ contain informative and interesting details about the backstage crafting of first ladies’ and female politicians looks, particularly insights as to the communicative effects that the choice of specific clothing items, colours, accessories or hairdos were intended to achieve. For instance Young (2011) explains how former Prime Minister of Ukraine Yulia Tymoshenko’s famous braided ‘wheel’ and ‘demure yet commanding’ outfits served her political purposes. The author reports the words of the social psychologist believed to have served as Tymoshenko’s image consultant: ‘It was necessary to work out and implement an image that would block out the image formed by ...propagandists [for president Leonid Kuchma]: one of wealth, of envy, hatred [...] I created an image of a modest village teacher ...a Ukranian archetype’ (Oleh Pokalchuk in Young 2011: 112-113). These details would be essential to a throughout examination of the role of image in politics. Such accounts, however, tend to read more like high-brow versions of a fashion magazine than systematic analyses.

The second, more substantial, strand of research is the one this paper is going to concentrate most on. It is constituted by Political Communication literature. Most of analysis there addresses the way communication technologies are used by political actors to convey messages to the media and the public. They particularly focus on how politicians interact with journalists in the attempt to "manage" the media agenda and how authorities campaign about specific issues with what effects. The visual aspects of political communication are marginal and mostly approached through the lenses of political marketing (Butler and Collins 1994; O’Cass 1996; De Landtsheer, de Vries and Verfessen 2008; Smith 2009), popular culture (van Zoonen 2005; Mazzoleni and Sfardini 2009; Van Zoonen, Coleman and Kuik 2011) and the analysis of the effects of the increasing symbiosis between politics and media.

² This figure is about 6% of the overall $231,579,132 record expenditure (as of 1 March 2012) and is the 6th highest cost on the campaign budget following “Salaries and Benefits” ($30,953,311), “Broadcast Media Fundraising” ($25,843,804), “Travel” ($20,190,097), “Fundraising Direct Mail/Telemarketing” ($18,636,771), “Fundraising Internet” ($16,731,810).
⁵ As examples of literature about specific women politicians, Scammell (1996) and Conway (2012) write about former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher; Winfield (1997) about Hillary Clinton as first lady.
In relation to the latter point, most studies are couched within the terms of the ‘mediatization’ (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Strömbäck 2008) and ‘professionalization’ (Mancini 2010) of politics. These analyses are often associated to the idea the media are deeply involved—when they are not responsible (see, for instance, Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999: 247-249)—for a process of decay in which democratic politics becomes dominated by the profit logic of the market. These analyses often betray a moralistic standing that sees “image” as a synonym for “appearance” and, at the same time, as the antithesis of “substance.” Although there are different approaches, as it will be explained more in detail later, they appear to converge around the common assumption that image, together with spin and media management, is somehow a constructed veneer that hides the real substance of political issues and, with it, the true identity of a politician to the eyes of an increasingly disinterested and often gullible public—image manipulation is often credited for the electoral successes of the likes of Italian Silvio Berlusconi, British Tony Blair, and German Gerhard Schröder (Mancini 2010: 236-237).

Such negative assessments have often led to the public dismissive treatment of politicians’ “obsession” with presentation. British Labour candidate Barbara Follett,6 for instance, famously advised her party’s female colleagues on how to be more presentable as part of the New Labour re-styling in the 1990s. This practice has been widely mocked as ‘folletting’ (Turner 2001). We can think more recently about the ironic tones underlying the coverage of Gordon Brown’s make up routine (Summers 2009), David Cameron’s summer wardrobe (Letts 2011; Fox and Chilvers 2011), Silvio Berlusconi’s and (allegedly) Valdimir Putin’s plastic surgery (Elder 2011), or the attention drawn by Rick Santorum’s vest (which also has its own Facebook page) (Gross 2012).7

As an example of the outright contempt to which the management of presentation by party leading figures is sometimes subject to by both academics and journalists one can further look at the way the association between New Labour and the corporate image consultancy “Colour Me Beautiful” is treated in the following excerpt. Charlotte Adcock (2010: 145), for example, writes about the way in which the ‘Representations of New Labour [women] politicians [in newspaper coverage] [...] ranged from feminised images of an “on-message,” “colour-me-beautiful set” of clones with “manicured nails and lobotomised opinions” to their depiction as political innocents “doing battle for Tony Blair’s babes’ army.”’

Overall, despite visual aspects are understood to play a key role in the mediatization of politics, there is a lack of any systematic analysis of the role of image. This paper aims at filling such gap by presenting a multidisciplinary and international comparative investigation of the role of the personal image of politicians in the domains that are most neglected by current political communication literature: local and supranational politics, as well as the daily routines of politicians rather than the usual focus on national-level politics, party-leaders in particular, at high-times of electoral campaigning. On the basis of 51 interviews, it compares the role of image in the everyday political practices of both British and Italian local politicians and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), respectively based in West Yorkshire and the Lombardy region of Italy.

The data supports the development of a new theoretical framework that aims at fitting the visual aspects of political communication within the broader construction of political identity in contemporary societies. The framework brings together Relational Sociology, Actor Network Theory and Symbolic Interactionism (particularly Erving Goffman’s approach in The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life). Ultimately the paper makes four contributions: it is a first step to mapping the mechanisms through which identity and political meaning are

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6 http://www.barbara-follett.org.uk/biography/index.html
7 http://www.facebook.com/FearRicksVest
collectively constructed in contemporary politics; it both rejects the notion of mediatization and suggests a radically different alternative for understanding the role of the media in politics; thirdly, it demonstrates that current studies really apply to the proverbial tip of the political iceberg, thereby showing the analytical benefits of bringing the “everyday” and the “individual” back into the study of Political Communication; lastly it shows that the moralistic stand about the supposed deleterious effect of appearances on democratic politics (with relative dismissal of politicians as liars and the public as passive and ignorant consumer of glossy images) reflects more the narrowness of academic enquiry—a handful of party leaders with national and international media visibility—and the legacy of outdated models of politics-media relationships—linear politicians/media/public links—than the much vaster, variegated, and relational reality of contemporary politics.

The paper develops in six steps. It starts from placing into context the role of image in current Political Communication literature. The second section describes the methodology of the study. The third step consists in the illustration of a new explanatory framework to understand the role of image in contemporary politics. Fourthly, the paper presents the preliminary findings of the study, drawing on the many voices of the politicians who have been interviewed. The fifth part of the paper addresses the analytical benefits of the new framework. This section particularly explains why several aspects of the mediatization of politics are wrong and how they can be alternatively explained through the framework presented here. A sixth conclusive step brings the piece to a close.

1. Image in Political Communication: Obscure Areas and Troubling Assumptions

Most studies that engage with the visual aspects of politics, like image and presentation, are located in the field of Political Communication. Indeed, the idea of an increasing importance of image in contemporary society underlies the whole debate about the effects of the development of communication technologies on the practice of politics. Although the balance of causality (is media shaping society or the other way around?) might tilt in some approaches more towards the media technologies, in others in the direction of social factors that have developed in the post WWII context, there is a broad agreement that politics has radically changed. This transformation has been referred to with a variety of labels. Jos de Beaus (2011: 19) provides us with a fair number of them: ‘Mediocracy, government by spectacle, plebiscitary democracy, spectator democracy, telecracy, informational politics, public relations democracy, mobocracy, drama democracy, fan democracy, blockbuster democracy, media democracy, monitor democracy.’ I am going first to explain the reasons for the rise of image in the “new politics,” I will then offer a brief overview of the literature (or lack of it) about the visual dimension in political communication.

Mediatized Politics: A New Era for Political Communication?

One common feature of the alleged “new politics” is the ubiquitous media presence. Glnapietro Mazzoleni and Winfried Schulz (1999) call it the ‘mediatization’ of politics. They explain how this is ‘politics that has lost its autonomy, has become dependent in its central functions on mass media, and is continuously shaped by interactions with the media’ (ibid: 250). In this sense it is different from simply ‘mediated’ politics in which ‘mass media can be regarded as a mediating or intermediary agent whose function is to convey meaning from the communicator to the audience’ (ibid: 249). In other words, mediatized politics has yielded to the ‘media logic,’ particularly the ‘commercial logic of the media industry’ (ibid: 251). Such adaptation affects the ‘outlook’ of political actors, the communication techniques that are used, and the contents of the political discourse (ibid). These aspects appear to materialize, in practice, in the guise of politicians turning into performers who often recite carefully
rehearsed scripts on a skilfully arranged stage. As Mazzoleni and Schulz continue: 'the language of politics has been married with that of advertising, public relations, and show business. What is newsworthy, what hits the headlines, what counts in the public sphere or in the election campaign are communication skills, the style of addressing the public, the “look,” the image, even the special effects: All are typical features of the language of commercial media' (ibid: 251).

Jay Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh (2010: 210-211), in explaining the coming about of this transformation of political communication, emphasize the reciprocal nature of the relations between media innovation and social change. They identify seven factors that, in their analysis, have contributed to reshaping Western democracies in the second half of the 20th century: 'modernization,' particularly the proliferation of lifestyles and the rise of identity politics; ‘individualization’: the increased importance of personal aspirations against the conformity to tradition, which also involves orientation towards self-gratification and consumerism; ‘secularization,’ with its decreased reverence for official politics and, as immediate reflection of it, party identification; ‘economization,’ or the subordination of most aspects of life to economic criteria of performance; ‘aestheticization’—individuals’ increased concern with stylishness and image, especially in fashion and music; ‘rationalization’: the valuing of systematically gathered evidence, which supports politicians’ efforts to achieve persuasion through the techniques of market research and public relations; again ‘mediatization,’ this time as the ‘media moving toward the centre of the social process.’

To these factors we can add, according to Paolo Mancini (2010: 241), a further process of ‘professionalization’ of politics: traditional party bureaucrats committed both to a political ideology and the figure of the party leader are being increasingly replaced by professionals with technical skills, especially media and public relations experts, consultants, and pollsters. This is the outcome, in his analysis, of three interconnected trends. The first is related to social change, particularly the weakening of the classes that constituted the core electoral basis of traditional early 20th century parties (such as the Catholic and Social-Democrats in Western Europe). The second is the development of education and scientific enterprise, in turn fuelling the availability of a whole market of professionals and technicians. Connected to this, technological development especially in communications has led to a process of ‘homogenisation and globalization’ on a worldwide scale (ibid). Within such context, as Mancini explains, ‘television, which became the only possible way to reach an electorate spread over an enormous distance following the deurbanization process, and then the computer have offered parties and candidates a great opportunity for communication, finding potential voters, organizing campaigns, and solving policy problems’ (ibid). The third cause of the professionalization of politics, for him, is the (not better explained) ‘growing detachment of citizens from politics’ (ibid).

Within this perspective, which maybe painted with slightly different strokes but is largely shared by other authors in the field (see contributions in Kees Brants and Katrin Voltmer 2011, for instance), the weakening of the traditional party structure plays an important part in the transformation of political communication. The alleged disappearance of the hierarchical apparatus bridging the local to the national (see also Mancini 2011 about the Italian case), in fact, leads to a greater reliance by political actors on communication technologies for engaging with citizens at a distance:

‘The weakening of the party structures undermined the party’s access to the vital information and two-way contact with voters formerly provided by the party organization. Polls and, more recently, focus groups have presented an alternative to that dense network of interpersonal relationships and section meetings that once were the backbone of the mass parties and circulated information, opinions, emotions and perceptions’ (Mancini 2010: 239).
It is not difficult to see how image and presentation become crucial in a context in which direct contact with a politician is lost, voters are more volatile, and parties have to rely on mass media, mainly television, to convey their message to the electorate. In the words of Mazzoleni and Schultz (1999: 256): ‘The crisis of the parties has only expanded the political function of the mass media.’ In turn, this trend leads to a ‘personalization’ of politics, where campaigning is candidate-centred (Manin 1995: 219-221). Brought to the extreme, this could lead to what Mazzoleni (1995: 315) calls a ‘videocracy’ or ‘democracy by the [visual] media.’

Research Gaps
Although image and presentation constitute essential aspects of the “new politics” there is very little research about them. Some studies address the question of the impact of political candidates’ image on electorate’s preferences (Sigelman at al 1986; Falkowski and Cwalina 2002; Cwalina, Falkowski and Lee Kaid 2005; Hamermesh 2006; Banducci et al. 2008; Chiao, Bowman and Gill 2008; Cwalina and Falkowski 2008; Tresky 2009; Lawson et al. 2010). While they are able to establish which visual aspects of some candidates’ images are most appealing to the electorate (mainly in terms of facial characteristics), their narrow focus—including the fact that these studies are almost exclusively based on quantitative surveys and experiments—does not allow them to examine more deeply either the mechanisms through which images mediate a political message or the complex ways in which visual messages are interpreted by audiences beyond their immediate effect on electoral preference. Studies in political marketing, as it has also been observed within the field (Henneberg 2008; Harris and Lock 2010), tend to have a narrow focus on the political campaign application of marketing techniques (Butler and Collins 1994; O’Cass 1996; Landtsheer, de Vries and Vertessen 2008; Smith 2009; for the limitations of this approach see O’Shaughnessy 2001). They tend to approach the issue of image within the narrow parameters of commercial branding (White and Chernatony 2002; Schneider 2004; Smith 2009), often understood as the effective selling of a political “product” (O’Shaughnessy 1990; Lees-Marshment 2001; Smith 2008; for the limitation of the comparison between politics and a the selling of a product see Lock and Harris 1996). These studies also focus almost exclusively on political campaigning at election times.

Beyond electoral campaigning, it is possible to observe a widespread interest in political leaders and their media management efforts either in dealing with the media especially in getting their “message” across or controlling the “story”—what is normally called “spin” (Grattan 1998; Kurtz 1998; Gaber 2000; Bennett and Entman 2001; Jones 2002; Campbell 2003; Moloney 2006). This means that the attention is mainly directed at rhetoric. The focus on this kind of content is such that, even in studies about ‘image,’ the analysis is still about text (media coverage in the case of Kotzaivazoglu 2005 and Tresky 2009).

A further branch of research has examined the parallels between mediatized politics and popular culture (van Zoonen 2005; Mazzoleni and Sfardini 2009; Van Zoonen, Coleman and Kuik 2011), particularly between the engagement of the public with reality TV (example of studies of Big Brother are: Coleman 2003; Cardo 2011) and voting (especially by young people).

When the field attempts to address image within the broader conceptual framework of identity construction, it does so through the lens of cultural studies. Corner and Pels (2003b), in an edited book about “Media and the Restyling of Politics” aim to engage with the ‘aesthetics of the political self’—what they call ‘political style’ (Corner and Pels 2003a). The contributing chapters, however, not only are rather abstract (Ankersmit 2003; Pels 2003; Corner 2003), but also end conforming with the main existing avenues of research—again the analysis of political campaigning (Bennett 2003), the connections of political communication with popular culture (Simons 2003; Street 2003; Van Zoonen 2003) and political marketing (Scammell 2003). An exception in this respect is the excellent study by Richard Fenno (1978) Home Style: House Members in Their Districts. In it the author examines in depth through participant observation the activities of 18 congressmen in their
home districts between 1970 and 1977. Such activities, which he calls ‘home-style,’ involve ‘the congressman’s allocation of his personal resources and those of his office [...] the congressman’s presentation of self to others [...] the congressman’s explanation of his [they were all men] Washington activity to others’ (ibid: 33, his emphasis). The investigation presented in this paper has taken inspiration from Fenno’s. I will get back to this shortly in the methodology section.

Some examples of the few good, albeit isolated, exceptions to the general trends that have been described include the now ancient The Politician; His Habits, Outcries, and Protective Coloring (Wallis 1935) and the more recent The Art of Persuasion: Political Communication in Italy From 1945 to the 1900s (Cheles and Sponza 2001).

...and Extreme Claims
This gap in Political Communication research about image is both surprising and troubling considering the moralistic tones that underlie most assessments of the effects that the growing importance of visual aspects of political communication are having on politics. Strong, if not extreme, claims are made about their negative effects leading to a ‘crisis,’ ‘decay,’ or ‘degeneration’ of politics. As the previous literature review has shown, given that systematic analysis of the role of image is scarce, these claims are not based on solid evidence. The accounts of political communication in ‘post-modern Western societies,’ in fact, are described by de Beus (2011: 19) as ‘often moralizing and adversarial’; Mazzoleni and Schultz (1999: 248) define the stances of those who ‘see the media as one of the most crucial factors in the crisis of politics’ as ‘apocalyptic’; Blumler and Coleman (2009), who examine the political impact of the internet, talk about an ‘inexorable impoverishment of mainstream political communication’; Strömbäck (2008: 229) notices that:

The present situation when politics is mediated and mediatized [in the literature] is implicitly or explicitly compared to some kind of golden age—the exact timing of which is conspicuously absent in most accounts—when politics was more true to its ideals, when people were more civic minded, or when the media facilitated, rather than undermined, the way political communication and democracy work.

The characteristics of the transformed politics revolving around televised (or online) images—what is referred by Bernard Manin (1997) to as ‘audience democracy’—are on the one hand the public’s passivity, ignorance, and disinterest in politics; on the other hand, the artificial—not to say fake—nature of the politicians’ media personas. The former aspect is embodied by the belief that ‘the initiative of the terms of electoral choice belongs to the politician and not to the electorate’ (ibid: 223, his emphasis). In the words of Mancini (2011: 14), who applies Manin’s framework to explain the Berlusconi case in Italy, ‘voters are mere spectators of that which is put on the stage by those politicians who are the initiators and the central, dominant figures.’ The spectators of audience democracy are ‘consumers’ of politics rather than engaged participants. As Janelle Ward (Ward 2011: 167) points out: ‘Citizens are usually juxtaposed with consumers: the former are seen as being more conscious and active and the latter politically disinterested and passive.’ As a further proof of how widespread this interpretation is Stephen Coleman and Jay Blumler (2009: 46), on the same point, write that ‘in their approach to politics, citizens have become more like consumers (instrumental, oriented to immediate gratifications and potentially fickle) than believers.’ Mancini (2011: 30) adds to this the notion that the ‘big narratives,’ the ‘ideologies’ of the past have been replaced by ‘lifestyle politics’—‘the overlap between everyday life and politics’ in which politics is about personal trust in political candidates rather than the ‘obscure, difficult, ambiguous topics—the stuff of which real politics is made and which governments must resolve.’ One cannot escape the feeling that the public is not only portrayed in an unflattering manner, but assumed to be an outright mass of gullible individuals who are at the receiving end of Machiavellian political manipulations. In Murray Edelman’s (1988 in Mancini 2011)
words: ‘The public is mainly a black hole into which the political efforts of politicians, advocates of causes, the media, and the schools disappear without a trace. Its apathy, indifference, quiescence and resistance to the consciousness industry is especially impressive in an age of widespread literacy and virtually universal access to the media.’

Political actors, conversely, are seen as ‘pious, trained and organized liars’ (de Beus: 32). As Scammel (1996: 186) points out, political marketing has ‘a bad name’: “marketing” is perceived as a commercial intrusion, perhaps inevitable but scarcely uplifting. In the common currency of media, even academic debate, political marketing is the antithesis of ideological commitment and principle; at best a triumph of pragmatism over passion, at worst a danger to democracy’ (ibid.). The amount of resources and extent of effort in delivering messages to the public and keeping ratings up ‘seems only to fuel public mistrust in the authority and honesty of political leaders’ (Brants and Voltmer 2011a: 1). The assumption here is that the ‘mediated reality’ politicians conjure up is different from the ‘objective reality’ (Strömbäck 2008: 239). That is also why the “staged” self (or media persona) of the politician is believed to hide a “real” self. Worse, the idea is that the image of the politician is ‘pure esterioty’ (Ceccarelli in Belpoliti 2009: backcover).

In this context the study presented here aims to be a first step towards addressing such gap in political communication research by developing a systematic approach to the role of image in contemporary politics. In doing so, theoretically, it takes a broader approach than existing studies. Methodologically, it applies a deeper micro-level approach to the examination of the political process. More specifically it engages with the questions: What is the role of image and presentation not only in communicating a “message” to a “target audience,” but also in the construction of a politicians’ identity? What is the assessment of the role of image by the political actors themselves (rather than relying on extrapolations from structural factors and characteristics of a media environment)? How important is image to politicians, both the one they project in personal face-to-face interaction and the one they convey through the media? How much effort do they put in presenting themselves to others? And what is the role of image in everyday politics rather than during election times, for politicians who might be located at different levels of distance from their fellow citizens (i.e. politicians who are not necessarily high-visibility party leaders)? Finally, what shapes the relevance of image in different political cultures, media, and electoral systems?

2. Methodology
As already mentioned, this study drew inspiration from Fenno (1978). Although I did not have the resources to turn it into a participant observation project, I used the personal phone interview as a means to get as close as possible to the political actors’ perspectives within the environment in which they operate most of the time and feel most comfortable in: their offices and homes. While physically meeting and following the politicians in their activities would have been an extremely rich source of data, an advantage offered by telephone interviews was the possibility to include more participants—51 against Fenno’s 18, across different countries and political roles. While aware of what others researchers would have “looked for” in conducting the interviews, I purposely kept an open mind about the problem at hand, which was reflected in the semi-structured format of the questionnaire (see Appendix). Questions were slightly modified and new ones were added as the conversations went on, depending on the time availability of the interviewees, as well as their reactions to previous questions and prompts. Interviewees were also never restrained from developing their answers in any direction they wanted to take them to. The purpose was to get as close as possible to the worldview of the political actors themselves. As Fenno (1978: 250) describes the enterprise of this kind of qualitative research: ‘an open-minded exposure to events [ideas in the case of the phone interviews] in the milieu and to the perspectives of those with whom
they [researchers] interact will produce ideas that might never have occurred them otherwise. The interview data was complemented by the observation of politicians' online presence (websites, blogs, Facebook accounts), if available, particularly image galleries and pictures. The study involved 51 interviews with British and Italian politicians. They were conducted in February-March 2012 and lasted between 10 and 45 minutes, with an average of about 20 minutes. In order to examine a different dimension of politics than the one tackled by current research—party-leaders on the national political scene—the interviews included both local politicians and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs).

The British local politicians were councillors from Leeds (West Yorkshire), second largest district in the UK, with almost 800,000 inhabitants. The Italian politicians included the consiglieri comunali (town councillors) of the comune (town) of Brescia and Iseo within the region of Lombardy. Brescia is a town of about 1,250,000, while Iseo has a population of around 9,000. I choose both of them to examine the role and extent of face-to-face social relationships with political representatives against mediated relationships.

The comparative research design was adopted to examine the possible impact on the role of image of the following variables:

**Party system.** The “personalization” of politics has been normally associated with two-party systems rather than multiparty ones (van Biezen and Hopkin 2005, for instance). The typical case of two-party system that has strongly encouraged a polarization and personalization of politics is the US. The UK has only recently, with the rise of the Liberal Democrats (part of the government coalition since 2010), distanced itself from the traditional Labour/Conservative horserace. The fact that Britain has far less parties than Italy, however, would still lead to expect a greater role of a candidate's image in Britain rather than Italy (where one should be voting “for the party”). Having said that, I will also have to consider the role of political culture.

**Political culture.** As Richard Wilson (2000: 247) points out, there are different approaches to political culture:

Assumptions emphasize different factors, such as how individuals and/or groups are socialized, how different individuals organize their thinking about rules and norms, how discourse affects the legitimacy of political institutions, how and why individuals orient their thinking and communication in terms of salient myths, rituals, and symbols, and how moral criteria are apprehended and with what consequences for political behaviour.
William Reisinger (1995: 334), in this respect, talks about a ‘profusion of definitions’ concerning the concept. For Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1989: 12) ‘the term “political culture”… refers to the specifically political orientation—attitudes toward the political system and its various parts, and attitudes toward the role of the self in the system.’ Elsewhere Verba (1965: 513) defines political culture as the embedding of political systems in sets of meanings, specifically in symbols, beliefs, and values. Pye (1968 in Wilson 2000: 247) enlarges the definition to include ‘both the political ideals and the operating norms of a polity.’ Since I am looking at “norms of the system” through the lenses of electoral laws, as I will explain in a moment, in this study I will be concentrating on political culture mostly as individual beliefs, values, and meanings.

In this perspective the Italian political culture is believed to have been revolutionized by Berlusconi and his media-centred campaigning (Mancini 2011). The role of image, especially telesvisual voyeurism, has permeated society and degenerated to such extent that Marco Belpoliti (2009: 156) goes as far as talking about a ‘pornocracy [pornocrazia]’—this point especially underlined by Berlusconi’s appointment of some ministers almost exclusively on the basis of their looks rather than political experience (Moss 2009; Squires 2009). Belpoliti (2009) also discusses at length a peculiar Italian phenomenon—the cult of the “leader’s body [il corpo del capo].” Without slipping into stereotypes, Italian popular culture, if not general lifestyle, tends to be more oriented to the cultivation of appearances, as an entire tradition going back to Machiavelli can confirm. The study, in this respect, is explorative as to the overall effects of the combined influences of party system, political culture and the further variables I am going to illustrate.

**Electoral system.** The first-past-the-post electoral system (the candidate who gets the most votes wins) is expected to increase the role of image more than a proportional system (where even parties who do not get the most votes can still get elected representatives). Both local and national elections are conducted in Britain according to the first-past-the-post system. General elections are held every 5 years (last election in 2010). At the local level between one and three councillors represent each ward on the local council. In Leeds the three councillors who get the most votes in each of 33 wards are elected. One third of 99 councillors are elected every year, followed by a year without elections (each councillor normally serves for four years).

Italy has traditionally had a proportional system. This has been changed in 2005 with the Calderoli Law (Legge Calderoli). Now at least 340 seats (majority) within the Parliament (lower chamber) are allocated to the coalition that gains the relative majority of the votes at the national general elections. The remaining seats are allocated according to the proportional system. The electoral lists for each party are closed. This means that each party decides which candidates will sit in the Parliament. The voter does not therefore express any preference, which leads to expect less of a role for a candidates’ image. General elections are normally held every five years. The last elections were held in 2008. At the local level the system is different. For comuni with less than 15,000 inhabitants, as in the case of Iseo, each mayoral candidate has an associated list of consiglieri comunali (maximum 16). The mayoral candidate who gains the relative majority is elected and “carries” at least 12 of the people on his/her list as consiglieri comunali in the new administration. The remaining seats as consiglieri comunali are attributed according to the proportional system. In comuni with more than 15,000 inhabitants, as in the case of Brescia, if no mayoral candidate achieves an absolute majority (50%-1 vote), then the two

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14 ‘The political culture of a society consists of the system of empirical beliefs, expressive symbols, and values which defines the situation in which political action takes place. It provides the subjective orientation to politics’ (Verba 1965: 513).

15 This point was also made by several Italian interviewees.
candidates with the highest number of votes re-present themselves as candidates two weeks later (“double turn”). Once a candidate achieves the absolute majority, then the same procedure as for smaller comuni applies for the distribution of the consiglieri comunali seats (between 40 and 60). In this system the preference of the voters is important not only in choosing the mayor, but also in determining who, within the mayoral list, will actually sit on the Consiglio Comunale (town council). The last elezioni comunali (local elections) were held in Iseo in 2009, in Brescia in 2008.

Elections to the European Parliament are held every 5 years (last held in 2009) according to the proportional system. Party lists are open in Italy (voter preference is important), but closed in the UK (the party decides who to send to Strasbourg).

What I was particularly interested was the role of image in shaping voters’ preferences, especially in the case of open lists. In this respect interviews were designed to find out about the ways in which candidates achieved visibility at election times—how would voters recognize them? Why would they express a preference for them, especially when they might never meet them in person (or see them on TV or in the press)?—and how they establish relationships with the constituents while in office.

**Media system.** Would partisanship of the press make any difference in politicians’s visibility to the public? As Robin Brown (2011) points out, there is a tight relationship between political communication, particularly spin and media management—the attempt by political actors to control news coverage—on the one hand, and both political and media system on the other hand. In comparatively examining the political communication practices in the UK and the Netherlands he writes, for example, that ‘the emergence of spin is not simply a matter of mediatization but of the structure of the political and media markets’ (ibid: 64). In the case of the UK, the fact that two main parties are competing, essentially, for the same voters makes the ability of influencing people with low interest in politics decisive for electoral success. This also underscores the role of media management, the attempt at controlling the political message that reaches these voters. Media management, however, further makes sense because of the ‘objective’ nature of journalism in Anglo-Saxon countries (ibid: 62-63). This would not be the case if the media was partisan. In fact, as Brown writes, ‘a strongly partisan media would always provide favourable coverage to the party it supports and negative coverage to the party that it opposes, making news management unnecessary or pointless’ (ibid: 63). To demonstrate this point he further examines the case of the Netherlands. The country’s society has for large part of the 20th century been divided along four parallel segments (Catholic, Protestant, socialist, liberal), or ‘pillars,’ each of which has its own party, media, and social organizations. In this system members of the public tend to vote for the party and read the media of their respective pillar. Each pillar, in other words, has its own ‘culture.’ Electoral campaigning revolves around mobilizing core supporters through the pillar’s respective media and local organizations, rather than attempting to convince volatile centre voters (ibid: 65-67). As Brown concludes:

> the importance of news management in Britain arises from the coincidence of a competitive party system with a flexibly partisan media. The pillarized socio-political regime that existed in the Netherlands for a large part of the twentieth century provides an extreme counter-case of a political communications system that seems almost purposefully designed to limit the importance of news management (ibid: 65).

According to Brown’s analysis one would expect more attention towards media management (including concern about the way one’s image is projected) in the UK (close to bi-party system; journalism aspiring to objectivity) rather than in Italy (multi-party system’ commentary-oriented journalism).16 This, however, is a hypothesis that relies on the

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16 For the differences in media systems see Hallin and Mancini (2004).
assumption the politicians are a constant source of interest for the media (national and mainstream). This might well be true in the case of party leaders and key governmental actors, but what happens at the local level? How do national politicians in Strasbourg or Brussels achieve any visibility when European politics—a notoriously “boring” topic from the perspective of national media—might hardly get any coverage at all?

Size of constituency. The politicians included in the study had different degrees of physical distance from their constituents. Local councillors in Leeds normally represent between 10,000 and 15,000 constituents. The consiglieri comunali in Brescia serve a town of over a million people, while in Iseo they represent just over 9,000 citizens. In the case of the latter, beyond the Iseo centre, the population lives concentrated in 4 smaller villages or ‘frazioni’: Clusane, Covelo Cremignane and Pilzone. Each of them counts a few hundred people where almost literally everyone knows everyone else. Instead, the constituencies represented by the British and Italian MEPs are, respectively Yorkshire and the Humber (5.3 million people) (UK Treasury Department 2011), and “Italia Nord-Occidentale [North-West Italy]” (comprising the regions of Valle D’Aosta, Liguria, Lombardia, Piemonte for a total population of 15,000,000 inhabitants). What is the role of personal face-to-face interaction versus the “mediated” contact? When contact is mediated, how is it mediated exactly? Through media coverage (mainstream media? Local media? International media?) or through other communication technologies (such as blogs, websites, or social media)?

The interview questions, apart from briefly tackling the background of each interviewee—particularly one’s motivation for getting into politics—mainly focused on examining the politicians’ image—the way the interviewees dressed, but also the way they presented themselves through their approach to people, meeting fellow citizens at the local supermarket, public speaking, interaction with journalists...—and their engagement (either face to face or mediated) with the respective constituents.

3. A New Framework of Analysis
The study explains the role of image through a new framework that combines Relational Sociology, Actor Network Theory and Symbolic Interactionism (particular reference is made to Ervin Goffman’s The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life). Within this framework image is an aspect of a social actor’s identity and this, in turn, is the outcome of the constellation of relationships in which the actor is enmeshed. Communication is the enabler of the establishment of relationships. They do not exist, however, only with actors we directly interact with (people we have physically met, for instance). Communication can be mediated and relationships be established also at a distance. Calhoun (1991a), in this respect, argues that the proliferation of ‘indirect relationships’ and the production of ‘imagined communities’ are two features that fundamentally characterize modernity. He distinguishes four kinds of relationships: 1) direct interpersonal relations (face-to-face); 2) imagined personal connections that can exist, for instance, with political representatives, TV personalities, but also through tradition; 3) one-directional relationships that are only known to one of the parties: examples are surveillance, phone tapping, but also census data (which reveals information about individual spending patterns, for instance, without the population even knowing); 4) ‘the world of systemic integration or coordination by impersonal ...steering media...which gives the illusion of not involving human interaction’ exemplified by “capitalism” or “the market” (ibid: 96-105) The first two kinds of relationships are particularly relevant to the framework presented here.17

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17 Horton and Wohl (1956) would call Calhoun’s indirect relationships ‘parasocial relationships.’
Communication technologies, in this context, can extend our social reach and our ability to establish direct relationships (constituents, for example, can contact their local councillors by sending them emails), but they can also contribute to indirect relationships. For instance, a constituent can develop an indirect relationship with a political representative s/he has got to know through interviews s/he has been giving on local television, through posts on a personal blog, or speeches available on a website. I am now going to get more into the details of the components of this approach and their contributions to explaining the role of image in the construction of political identity. I will start from Relational Sociology, which provides the ontological scaffolding of this framework. I will then move on to Actor Network Theory, whose contribution particularly consists in enabling the understanding of the role of communication technologies in changing social actors’ (politicians in this case) identity by affecting the scope of the networks they are part of. Symbolic Interactionism, with its focus on the social construction of presentation, helps making sense of image as part of a social actor’s identity.

Relational Sociology
An immediate way in which Relational Sociology is useful for the purposes of the study is the fact that it allows grounding into a conceptual framework than seamlessly spans the micro and macro dimensions a key aspect of politics: identity. Relational Sociology conceives the social universe as entirely made up of relationships constantly being negotiated. In this process communication is ‘central’ (White 2008: 3). The extent to which relationships are subject to incessant re-working is captured by Harrison White’s comparison of social reality to a shapeless matter that never sets: ‘There is no tidy atom and no embracing world, only complex striations, long strings reitating as in a polymer goo’ (ibid: 18). Identity, in this perspective, is constituted in and through social ties. All identities, in fact, are ‘produced and sustained within interacting relational networks’ (Bearman and Stovel 2000: 74). The concept of identity is neither only related to human agents—people—nor restricted exclusively to the notions of the self and consciousness. Instead identity is ‘any entity to which observers can attribute meaning’ (ibid: 2). Identities arise out of communication situations (White 2008: 21). As White phrases it: they ‘trigger out of events,’ they are ‘switches in surroundings’ (ibid: 1): ‘A firm, a community, a crowd, oneself on the tennis court, encounters of strangers on a sidewalk—each may be identities’ (ibid: 2). As such there can’t be just one identity, but each one of us has multiple ones. An individual might be a husband, but also a politician, a governor in a local school, and a member of a birdwatching association. These are identities triggered by different sets of relationships organized in overlapping networks (which White calls ‘networks domains’ or ‘netdoms’). To illustrate the way individuals have multiple identities and just “switch” from an identity to another one when navigating across sets of relationships White uses the analogy of an Internet forum (ibid: 2-3). One can create an account on a discussion forum (about sociology, for instance) and his identity is not created by the mere act of subscribing, but by the participation, that is by the engagement in the discussion through postings that link him through stories to other users. The fictional user can log out from that account and participate to another discussion (on a football forum, for example). Although the user has logged out of the sociology forum the postings are not deleted: ‘the activity has left a social trace consisting of the ties to other identities in the forum. But the interaction has just switched from one netdom to another’ (ibid: 3).

A pattern of ties constitutes a network (White 2008: 20). Every social agent can be conceived of as a node that is ‘located at the intersection of several distinct, often heterogenous networks’ (Azarian 2005: 60). This defines the unique position of each social actor within the social universe. Such position is defined by the content of the ties—which might be goods, information, capital, rumours—but also by expectations that other identities are imposing on the actor. As Reza Azarian (2005: 61), a scholar of White’s sociology, describes this: ‘Since each relationship brings along a bundle of particular expectations and
obligations, this embeddedness means being simultaneously subjected to a number of specific constraining forces.' In terms of the focus of the investigation, these constraints relate to the expectations associated to presentation (such as dressing codes) in particular situations and attached to specific social roles. As I will show in illustrating the findings, it is true that politicians choose, for instance, the clothes they are going to wear and do so sometimes with the explicit intention of conveying specific messages. This choice, however, is the result of a balancing act that includes the consideration of the observers’ expected reaction, as well as and anticipation of their “reading” of a particular outfit.

**Actor Network Theory**

In Relational Sociology communication is acknowledged to be the essence of social interaction. Within this approach all that matters is the constitutions and constant re-workings of relationships and it makes no difference whether they are constituted face-to-face, over the phone, online, or even if they are imagined. The fact that communication is virtually—and indistinctly—everywhere, however, can turn into a hurdle on a researcher’s way to making sense of mediated communication, particularly of the role of communication technologies in political processes. The analysis turns therefore to Actor Network Theory (ANT), which more explicitly addresses the question of the nature of technology and its role in society. In this sense ANT is particularly useful in explaining how technology changes the identity of social actors. To understand this, I am going to explain first where technology fits in the social world.

**The social nature of technology**

ANT develops from the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS). It is particularly associated with the work of the anthropologist Bruno Latour. Together with Steve Woolgar, in *Laboratory Life* (1979: 236, emphasis in original), he examined the way in which scientific facts are not discovered, but *constructed* in a research setting. Through that investigation Latour started developing the radical notion—which he further expanded in later works—of a networked social reality in which there is no distinction between the “technical” and the “social.” This means, in practice, that society is made up of networks—a view entirely compatible with that of Relational Sociology. These networks, however, do not only include humans, but also non-humans: objects, technologies, ideas.

Latour developed this approach to overcome the ‘methodological individualism’ that, despite stretching its roots to Aristotle and medieval philosophy, is still at the core of contemporary sociological explanations of reality (Emirbayer 1997: 283-284). John Dewey and Arthur Bentley (1949 in Emirbayer 1997: 284), although writing over 60 years ago, still capture the present-day tendency to see individuals as the ultimate source of social action:

> All the spooks, fairies, essences, and entities that once [during the Middle ages] had inhabited portions of matter now [take] flight to new homes, mostly in or at the human body...The “mind” as “actor,” still in use in present day psychologies and sociologies, is the old self-acting “soul” with its immortality stripped off.

The puzzling result for Latour is that, albeit sociology has developed mostly after the Industrial Revolution, in an era of profound technical advances, the role of objects in our society is largely ignored. As he lyrically phrases it, they ‘remain asleep like servants of some enchanted castle’ (Latour 2005: 73). In reality, as another influential voice within the ANT camp—John Law—points out, objects like machines are an integral part of our very identity:

> we are all heterogeneous networks, the products of confused overlaps. Did you really find your way through last week without machines? Of course not!
You are part machine. And if you pretend otherwise, then this is presumably because you (like me) prefer to think otherwise. For in polite company [...] it is not generally considered to be a good thing to allow oneself to be "dehumanised" (Law 1991b: 17).

As Law (1991b: 16) continues: ‘Structures do not simply reside in the actions of people, or in memory traces. They exist in a network of heterogeneous material arrangements.’ In fact, as Latour (1991: 110) point out:

we are never faced with objects or social relations, we are faced with chains which are association of human (H) and non-humans (NH). No one has ever seen a social relation by itself [...] nor a technical relation [...]. Instead we are always faced by chains which look like this H-NH-H-NH-NH-NH-H-H-H-H-NH.

Objects—technologies and, among them, communication technologies—in this perspective, do not just enable establishing networks, but they change the actors themselves. Technologies are not just tools or intermediaries, but ‘mediators’ (Latour 2005: 128). In this respect ANT makes objects ‘participants’ in social action by overcoming the very definition of actors and agencies most adopted in sociology:

If action is limited a priori to what “intentional”, “meaningful” humans do, it is hard to see how a hammer, a basket, a door closer, a cat, a rug, a mug, a list, or a tag could act. They might exist in the domain of “material” “causal” relations, but not in the “reflexive” “symbolic” domain of social relations (ibid: 71).

To ‘break away from the influence of what could be called “figurative sociology” [the tendency to attribute “faces” to social action], ANT uses the technical word actant’ (ibid: 54).

Actants have agency, which means that they ‘make a difference’: ‘hitting a nail with and without hammer, boiling water with and without a kettle, fetching provisions with or without a basket’ (ibid: 71) do make a difference, which makes the hammer, kettle, and basket participants in the course of action. The same could be said for explosives, cars, computers in the action of a terrorist group.

This, however, does not mean that an object determines the action. The object participates in the action through what Latour (1999: 178-180) calls ‘interference’ and ‘composition’ (ibid: 180-183). In the case of interference, a technology can change an actor’s ‘programme of action,’ which can be thought of as the attempt to achieve a certain goal. A person holding a gun is not the same as a person not holding a gun. The man with a gun is a new ‘composite actor.’ This does not necessarily mean that the man with the gun will use it, but while an initial goal might have been just to cause injury, the fact that a gun is in the hand of the actor can lead to a different goal—killing. The transformation of the person once s/he holds a gun, is symmetrical with that of the object:

You are different with a gun in your hand; the gun is different with you holding it. You are another subject because you hold the gun; the gun is another object because it has entered into a relationship with you. The gun is no longer the gun-in-the-armory or the gun-in-the-drawer or the gun-in-the-pocket but the gun-in-your-hand, aimed at someone who is screaming. What is true of the subject, of the gunman, is true of the object, of the gun that is held. A good citizen becomes a criminal [or a terrorist], a bad guy becomes a worse guy; a silent gun becomes a fired gun; a new gun becomes a used gun, a sporting gun becomes a weapon (ibid: 179-180).
The second way in which objects participate to social action is ‘composition.’ This refers to the fact that, if in order to achieve a goal an actor uses an object, then the reaching of the goal is a ‘common achievement’ (ibid: 181) of both actants: ‘The chimp plus the sharp stick reach (not reaches) the banana’ (ibid: 182). To apply this to politics one could think that a local political representative plus a mobile telephone and a car conducts a very different kind of activity that the one run by a party leader with a mobile phone, a car, a blog, a Facebook page, a website, several offices (not to include countless support staff and relative resources). Action is therefore not the property of humans only but of ‘associations of actants’ (ibid). Given the extent to which human action is delegated to machines (ibid: 190) social action is the result of increasingly long associations of human and non-human actants.

The process through which the nature of all actants is transformed by the very fact of entering into a relationship (man + gun; chimp + stick; local political representative + mobile phone; party leader + mobile phone, + internet + blog + office + support staff) is called ‘translation’: ‘Translation does not mean a shift from one vocabulary to another, from one French word to an English word, for instance, as if the two languages existed independently. I use translation to mean displacement, drift, invention, mediation, the creation of a link that did not exist before and that to some degree modifies the original two’ (ibid: 179). In this sense, as for White, entities are ‘produced in relations’ (ibid: 4) and social actors are ‘network effects’ (ibid: 5).

The role of communication technologies
This understanding of the social and the role of technologies within it is valuable for conceptualizing the role of communication technologies in politics for three reasons. First, it underlines that communication technologies are not just a passive infrastructure whose role is enabling the establishment of relationships or, in other words, allowing the transmission of messages from a politician to a voter. Although those who talk about the ‘mediatization’ of politics (politics becoming dependent on a ‘media logic,’ that is in practice having to become “newsworthy”) claim that this is different from ‘mediated politics’ (media used to convey political messages), in reality they do not treat media technologies differently within the two conceptualizations. Media, whether news organizations or communication technologies, are always seen as the conveyors of messages. In ANT, instead, media technologies are actants in the social actions (here political processes) being performed. As such, in the process of translation, they transform both their own nature and the identity of those being connected. A politician who makes use of a technology with global reach, like the internet, or who routinely gains exposure to national TV is not the same as the politician who does not make use of that technology or without that exposure.

At the same time, as a second point, ANT allows the researcher to place technology into perspective. This particularly refers to avoiding the demonization of communication technologies (especially TV or the internet) and their effects on politics. Politicians behave the way they do, which might include careful orchestration of their image, not because of the mere presence of the media (as in some kind of Eisenberg principle) but because they are actor-networks—the outcome of constellations of relationships they are involved and whose scope is altered by the technologies.

Thirdly, ANT warns against the limitations of generalizing the effects of communication technologies on political processes beyond the single case study. In fact, in an ANT’s perspective, there is absolutely no point in establishing comparative research designs to further our understanding because the action of every actant is embedded within a specific constellation of relationships at a particular time and space. This makes every actor network unique. Latour (1999: 150) takes this point to the limit by arguing that even material substances, which our common sense would suggest cannot possibly change across time or space—arent chemical substances always made by the same configurations of atoms?—
are still the product of specific networks: ‘A lactic acid ferment grown in a culture in Pasteur’s laboratory in Lille in 1858 is not the same thing as the residue of an alcoholic fermentation in Liebig’s laboratory in 1852.’ The very way of categorizing what was an inert substance in 1852 as a yeast in 1858 reveals a shift in the two scientists’ views of the world: respectively ‘a world in which the relation between organic matter and ferments is one of contact and decay’ (‘yeast is [...] an unwelcome impurity that would hinder and spoil the fermentation’) and ‘a world in which a ferment is as active as any other already identified life form, so much that it now feeds on the organic material, which instead of being its cause, has become its food (‘the yeast has become a full-blown entity’) (ibid: 116-117).

By taking White’s and Latour’s social embeddedness to its logical end nothing could ever be learned outside the uniqueness of the network configuration at any given time and space. In this study I take a more moderate stance and support the role of comparison in sensitizing the researcher to difference and variation.

Symbolic Interactionism
To complete the explanatory framework we need to more closely incorporate the role of an important aspect within Symbolic Interactionism: presentation. The term “symbolic interactionism” was coined by sociologist Herbert Blumer (1969). Its approach essentially believes that the world is always experienced through the interpretations and ideas that people have about it. It is shaped by the meanings people construct and such meanings, in turn, are affected by the interactions that people have with each other. Blumer developed his thinking through philosopher George Herbert Mead’s understanding of the way the self experiences itself in society:

The individual experiences [himself or herself] as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group. [We become objects to ourselves] just as other individuals are objects to [us] ...it is impossible to conceive of a self arising outside of social experience (Mead 1934 in Charon 2010: 72).

The self is therefore socially constructed through a continuous process of interaction. Identity, in this view, is ‘part of what we mean by self’: ‘the name we call ourselves’ (Charon 2010: 84). The presentation of the self through appearance is part of that identity. As Charon (2010: 147) writes: ‘actors are often able to effectively present themselves to others. They announce their identity in obvious or subtle ways. They may dress to kill, put on a smile, decorate their office or house with the “in” colors, or present toghness or nonesty. Usually they are honest attempts to present identity; sometimes they are trying to fool us.’

Presentation provides a wealth of information to our social interlocutors even before we open our mouths: socio-economic status, attitudes towards them, trustworthiness, competence (Goffman 1959: 13). Social actors constantly seek this clues to ‘know in advance’ what is being expected of them and how best to act in each situation (ibid: 13).

Clothing, in this respect, plays an crucial part. As Alison Lurie (1981 in Charon 2010: 147-148) eloquently phrases it:

the idea that even when we say nothing our clothes are talking noisily to everyone who sees us, telling them who we are, where we come from, what we like to do in bed and a dozen other intimate things, may be unsettling. To wear what “everyone else “ is wearing is no solution to the problem, any more than it would be to say what everyone else is saying. We all know people who try to do this; but even if their imitation of “everyone” is successful, their clothes do not shut up; rather they broadcast without stopping the information that this is a timid
and conventional man or woman, and possibly an untrustworthy one. We can lie in the language of dress, or try to tell the truth, but unless we are naked and bald it is impossible to be silent.

In this sense image (presentation, clothing, appearance...) can be considered a reflection of the individual identity, not some kind of concealment or artificial veneer used to hide something different. For Goffman (1959) the whole of social life is performance: the very fact of being in contact with other people and communicating with them means that we are constantly on stage. In this respect, according to him, there are two kinds of communication: expressions ‘given’ and expressions ‘given off.’ The former refers to ‘communication in the traditional and narrow sense,’ it is mainly verbal and is about conveying information (ibid: 14). The latter is the ‘more theatrical and contextual kind, the non-verbal, presumably unintentional kind, whether this communication be purposely engineered or not’ (ibid: 16). Consistently with White’s relational understanding of the world, the ‘image’ or ‘performed self’ is a result of the whole network of interactions in which the actor is involved. Importantly, there is no “true” or “unchangeable” self (as if it was some kind of “pure essence”) behind the “performed self”. Identity is always staged and changeable depending on the constellation of relationships:

A correctly staged and performed scene [social situation] leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation—this self—is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited (Goffman 1959: 244-245, his emphasis).

Although the self, and the image it projects, are relational outcomes, it does not mean that the social actor does not act creatively. As Goffman (1961 in Charon 2010: 172) points out, often social actors purposely distance themselves from their formal (expected) roles in certain situations—for instance a teacher might mention a popular song to suggest that s/he is not different from the students in the class. The implication for this study is that the image of politicians can well be carefully staged, but this neither means it is fake—it is the outcome of the networks of relationships the politicians is located within—nor that it is the exclusive creation of the politician: instead it is the result of negotiation between the demands of the social interlocutors (the general public, journalists, other political actors, the voters...) and the politician’s identity.

Consistently with this framework, the study has examined the connections between the image of the politicians, their identities, their relationships with the relevant communities of fellow citizens and the way communciation technologies and media coverage have affected such relationships. We are now turning to the study’s findings.

4. Findings
What emerges from the empirical investigation is a completely different world than the one described by current studies in Political Communication. Indeed, it looks like current notions of a ‘professionalization,’ ‘mediatization’ of politics and the phenomenon of ‘celebrity politics’ almost literally apply to handful of politicians within each country. In the UK they apply to three people: David Cameron, Nick Clegg, and Ed Miliband. What is currently generalized to the whole of political communication is nothing more than the tip of the political iceberg. There is a whole political world that works according to different rules. I am going to illustrate
this hidden (at least from the point of view of academic research) domain, through the voices and experiences of the interviewees.

The Importance of Image: Being Professional

We all have an image, whether we are carefully managing it or not. Virtually all interviewees are not trying to convey an image in the sense that they plan it. On the contrary, they genuinely seem to be interested in presenting themselves for who they are. At the same time everybody realises that first impressions do count. In the words of Fabian Hamilton, Leeds Labour MP: ‘If you have no interest in the way you look and present yourself then people will get a bad impression and think you really don’t care about them either.’

This, however, is not a concern for politicians only, but relates to all professional environments. In fact, when I asked the interviewees whether their image had changed over the years most of them said it had not. Those who said it had, identified the threshold of change as them entering the job market rather than becoming a politician. I am now going to get more into the details of how image is an integral part of the interviewees’ professional role, which most of them see as ‘serving’ their respective communities, particularly helping fellow citizens in ‘solving problems.’

Gaining the interlocutors’ trust

A first way in which image helps politicians fulfilling their role is gaining the interlocutor’s trust. The ultimate purpose of the communication, for most interviewees, is not gaining votes, but addressing somebody’s concerns. This is particularly true at the local level, where issues are as concrete as it gets: housing, waste collection, anti-social behaviour, planning permissions, dog fouling... In this context the first priority of most councillors, as Josephine Jarosz, Labour councillor for the Pudsey ward in Leeds points out, is projecting a professional image, so that the constituents will trust them in solving their problems:

**Q: How do you present yourself, for example in what you wear, when you meet your constituents? Would you dress formally or casually?**

[...I think I’ve done both. I think even if it was casual it would be smart casual. I think people want to have confidence in you and therefore I think I would veer on the side of formal even for one to one meetings [...] because I worked in courts while I was working. You know I was used to wearing jackets and suits and things so I tend to carry on wearing those and I think people want to have confidence in you and I think if you dress too casually... smart casual is okay but if you dress too casually or look a little bit scruffy I don’t see how people are going to have confidence that you can help them and do what they need. So that’s just my opinion. You know it is that confidence that they need to know, that they have to feel that you’re a person that will take it forward and how you dress can convey that at least initially.**

As also Neil Walshaw, Leeds Labour councillor (Headingley ward) points out, dressing smartly is important to show that politics is a ‘serious business’:

I think candidates should always wear suits. You should always dress like it’s a professional job, though I think once you’re elected that’s less important than the fact you should dress comfortably and approachably, although for important matters I’m always "suited and booted" as the expression goes. But I think you should convey that you take it very seriously. You should always convey that. You should do. It’s a challenging role and you should be up to that challenge.
As part of projecting a professional image, some women councillors pay attention to removing accessories that might be ‘distracting’ from communicating with their constituents. The following exchange, again with Councillor Jarosz, besides this point, also underlines the many identities of political representatives, as all social actors. Here I had asked Councillor Jarosz whether she wears any accessories or make up:

I always wear a little bit of make-up – a little bit of eye shadow, mascara and a little bit of lipstick. That’s about as far as I go. Jewellery: I do like to wear earrings and a necklace, yes, and a watch probably. But not massive amounts. Not anything that’s distracting. I like to wear some but I like to keep it fairly discreet because if you’ve ever watched a newsreader on television if they’ve got something like large earrings or something on you get distracted from what they’re saying so I don’t want people to be distracted by what I’m wearing. I want them to concentrate on what I’m saying or... Yeah so I like my jewellery but not to... I mean I like big earrings when I’m going out socially but not when I’m representing, when I’m being a councillor, because of that. I just don’t want it to be distracting.

Q: So in that sense there is a slight difference from a moment when you meet your constituents and act as a councillor and when you go out socially?
Yes. I’m a bit more flamboyant when I go out.

While the statement in our conversation shows that the councillor is involved in some kind of “manipulation” of her image, this is not at all geared towards presenting herself in a better light. Instead, it serves the purpose of more effectively fulfilling the task of gathering information about the constituent’s problem. Image, in fact, needs to strike a crucial balance: on the one hand one wants to look professional enough to inspire trust in one’s ability to tackle a problem; on the other hand one wants to avoid looking intimidating. As Councillor Jarosz further explains, constituents are often distressed and it is important to put them at ease, so that they can ‘open up’ and, by explaining their situation in sufficient detail, enable the councillor to ‘make a difference.’ This applies to clothing, but also involves the way of talking to the constituent:

It’s a matter of putting people at their ease and trying to get as much information from them about what their problem is, what is the underlying cause of the problem but sometimes how they present it... Do you know, they’ve got a view about it but it might not be quite accurate; it’s what they feel. [...]
Over the years I’ve developed a much more friendly way, you know, try and get them to sit down, [and ask] “How are you?” You know, not just go “Right...” I used to go “Right, I’m Councillor Jarosz. What is your problem today?” and you know ... not sort of breaking the ice at all. It’s just a matter of learning that you need to give people time. You know they’ve built up the courage to come and see you and it can be often quite difficult problems, quite upsetting problems that they’ve got and they sometimes need time to get it out and often, as I say, we’re here to speak for vulnerable people who can’t speak for themselves so you need to give them time to say what they want to say so that you can make sense of it and help them. So, yeah, I think over the years I’ve learnt that, as I said to you earlier, I never promise that I’m going to make it alright. What I promise to do is I’ll do everything in my power.

Respect
Another reason why image is important for the professional role of the interviewees is that it conveys one’s respect for the constituents. This applies to all politicians across the board. This comment by Bernard Atha, Labour Leeds councillor for Kirkstall, shows not only the importance of looking “respectful,” but also how that look can manifest itself, in practice, in different outfits depending on the time of the year:

If it’s summer time and very hot then I think everyone will forgive you at a normal meeting to go in an open-neck shirt and flats but you’ve got to be smart. If you’re scruffy then I think they’ll say “he doesn’t respect us.” If it’s not that kind of day then if I was going anywhere I would certainly wear a suit and it isn’t that I concern myself very rigid in terms of social terms – I’m just the opposite – but my courtesy to people that, if I go there, I don’t go looking like scruffy, ‘devil lift them off the street’ after a night on the booze and lying in the gutter.

The effort at looking respectful does not apply only to meeting people in person, as Godfrey Bloom, Yorkshire and the Humber MEP for the UK Independence Party points out:

**Q:** I’ve seen several pictures on your website in which you are wearing a tie and a suit. Would that be the way you normally present yourself?

Yes. I believe quite strongly… in fact you’ve got me on a subject on which I believe quite strongly. It’s my belief that if you’re on television you’re going into people’s homes. You’re going into their living room and I think that’s what happens when you’re on television. If you’re going onto a platform and speaking to people – people have come in and sometimes maybe paid to hear you speak, maybe two or three hundred people – I think that it’s your responsibility to present yourself with respect to your audience. This is where I think a lot of politicians fall down, is that they’re scruffy and they’re badly dressed.

**Self-Confidence**

The way one dresses does not only convey a professional image to the onlookers. As a female councillor from Leeds explains, it contributes to building the self-confidence that constituents expect from a political representative:

I just tend to wear formal jackets to suits even if I’m wearing trousers with them because… the more nervous I am the more formal I will dress, you know, so if I’m making a speech in Council or something like that I will dress more formally to give me confidence. So it’s not only about exuding confidence, it’s about feeling confident yourself. So I haven’t one piece of clothing but I do tend to like suit jackets because I feel more confident in those.

**Social Expectation and Appropriateness**

On the point of social expectations, it generally appears that the MPs and MEPs are expected to dress more formally than local councillors. This is mainly due to their more frequent attendance of official meetings. The following excerpt of the conversation with Fabian Hamilton, Leeds Labour MP, shows the role of interlocutors’ expectations on a politician’s choice of “wardrobe.” More specifically, Hamilton provides concrete examples of the variation of the politicians’ outfits depending on what is socially ‘appropriate’ to the occasion:

When I go to the farmers’ market on a Saturday in Oakwood I will just wear a jumper and casual trousers and a jacket because I just don’t think it’s appropriate to wear a suit at a Saturday morning farmers’ market when you’re meeting the public there. You know, nobody else is wearing a suit. But today [24 February
I was at a school, I was at a formal presentation at the hospice, I'll be going to a presentation by Leeds City Council this afternoon and I'm going for a radio interview. People expect you to be fairly smartly dressed. I think it's what's appropriate for the occasion really. Weekends I will not wear a suit unless it's something like the Holocaust Memorial Day which is a really formal event then I will wear a suit and tie or Remembrance Day for example. But most Sundays and Saturdays when I do my advice surgeries I'll just dress like anybody else and I think people appreciate that. They don't want you to look like some posh person but they do expect you to be presentable when you're in a formal setting.

According to Godfrey Bloom, Yorkshire and Humber MEP for the UK Independence Party the pressure to be “well presented” is greater for MEPs than other politicians because not only they are in a public office, but they should represent their respective countries. Here is a lengthy but entertaining excerpt in which, with his characteristically flamboyant style, he delivers his assessment on the importance of presentation:

Well it's interesting that you should call me today on this subject [the role of image in politics] because if you listen to the news this morning Vivienne Westwood was speaking and saying that the British have never been scruffier and dirtier. You know, they're appalling. And I believe she's absolutely right and I believe it’s our responsibility, as society’s leaders if you will, to present ourselves looking clean and tidy and if you look at me and if you look at my boss, Nigel Farage [leader of UK Independence Party], you will find that we are both, if I dare say, immaculately turned out at all times and, you know, my suits come from German Street and Saville Row and my ties do. It's my job and also in the European Parliament to project myself as an Englishman representing my country as well as my party. It’s my job to look smart and my wife always says… You know, you get these politicians who dumb down don’t you? They take their tie off, you know, to be “one of the people.” That's very patronising. That's very patronising and my wife always says a businessman, a politician who takes his tie off to be one of the people when he’s wearing a collar and a jacket just looks like a drunken businessman. Show me a picture of a politician without a tie and he just looks like a drunken businessman so it’s demeaning, it's patronising. It is your responsibility if you are in public office representing your party, representing your country to dress accordingly.

Q: So even this idea that by removing the tie you are going to be closer to the people is not true? Are you suggesting that people are ready to accept you [formally dressed] anyway because you have a representative role?

Yes, I believe it's absolutely vital… And people don't like it [to dress down]. When I was at an investment bank in London… You’re probably too young to remember something called Dress Down Friday but you probably know about on Friday where everybody came in on Friday in casual clothes and that didn’t work. Nobody liked it. The women didn’t like it because it meant of course […] a whole new wardrobe for you […] because smart casual, you go “just a minute, I’ve got a wardrobe for business, I’ve got a wardrobe for the weekend, I've got ball gowns – what the hell does smart casual mean?” And then you have to go and spend a great deal of money on a whole new wardrobe for Fridays at work and so it was unpopular particularly with the ladies. Middle aged men look terrible in casual clothes. Middle aged men, and I am one, look like a sack of shit tied up in the middle in casual clothes. You have to be smart if you're going to look the part and if you’re coming in, if I was investing your pension fund, if I was investing millions of pounds for your pension or your company’s pension, you would expect to see me properly dressed, properly turned out. It gives you confidence in the same
way that if you go into hospital you want to see a nurse in uniform and a doctor in a white coat. It sends out the right correct message.

However, while politicians—as all social actors—tend to conform to rules of appropriateness, it does not mean that expectations of their “audiences” or interlocutors entirely shape the representatives’ choices about the way they present themselves. Leeds Labour Councillor Bernard Atha, 84, for instance, explains that wearing dinner jackets at ceremonies would be, in the past, considered some kind of political betrayal by his Labour colleagues, but he still did it because it was important to him:

some of my colleagues from early days thought I was a traitor by wearing dinner jackets [at official ceremonies]. Well I used to have to go to dinners and functions. I could have gone in ordinary clothes but I just think if you buy one best suit it’s your best suit and I got my second best dinner jacket when I became Lord Mayor because the first one had lasted me 20 years so when I had to wear a dinner jacket I had one there that had lasted me 20 years. That was a very good buy and the dinner jacket I’ve got now I hope will last me until I peg out. So as a sort of person who comes from a poor background, and who is not poor now, you think of those things and I just think it’s a good buy, a sensible buy. No I’m not afraid to appear in a dinner jacket amongst my Labour colleagues because they accept that there are certain things you do. In the services I wore a uniform. If I was going down the mine I wouldn’t wear my best suit; I’d wear old clogs. So I think we all accept that your appearance is an indication of the respect you show to them.

Another example is provided by Gabriele Albertini, former mayor of Milano, now MEP for North Western Italy (Popolo delle Libertà). He underlines the scope for politicians to interpret creatively what is “socially acceptable”:

Q: I see from your website that you tend to present yourself with suit and tie. Are there circumstances when you present yourself differently? Well, there are circumstances when I presented myself in my pants! [laughs] If you go to Youtube you will find about it. I had inaugurated a swimming pool by diving instead of cutting the ribbon, which no other mayor has done.

The Unimportance of Image Management
Image is important to politicians, as it is to all social actors. The interviews, however, suggest that the notion that politics nowadays revolves around appearances is a gross exaggeration. The unanimous feeling among interviewees that politics is about ‘doing things’ is well reflected by the words of Laura Castelletti, consigliere comunale for Brescia (civic list Brescia per Passione):

Politics today is not at all about image. I am talking about good politics. Bad politics revolves around image and many other negative aspects. I believe that good politics revolves around projects, visions for the future, and programmes.

In this context, as a consigliere comunale in Iseo put it: ‘You can project whichever image you like, but at the end of the day it comes down to: “Can you solve my problem? If you can’t, you have to explain me why.”

What a politician concretely achieves is ultimately what matters. This applies across the board of interviewees. The fact that “image is not all” is confirmed by the importance that all the participants in the study attributed to actual contact with the respective constituents. The conversations, in this respect, demonstrate that the literature on the mediatization of politics
tends to exaggerate the “distance” between the politicians and the voters in an era in which, so the argument goes, traditional party structures have collapsed and media coverage is the only connection left between citizen and political representative. The interviews, on the contrary, show that personal contact is still key to politics, no matter whether at the local, national, or even supranational level. In the following excerpts I am going to show the continuing relevance of the old fashioned meetings—even for the politicians who are furthest from their constituents: the MEPs—and the fact that personal contact and mediated communication are not mutually exclusive.

The Crucial Role of Personal Contact, Both Mediated and Unmediated

Local councillors tend to be most directly in contact with their constituents. This particularly applies to those representatives who have been living in their own ward for decades. Bernard Atha, for instance, Leeds Labour councillor for Kirkstall was born in Leeds 1928, became politicised at a very early age. He started as a small child by helping his father, who campaigned for the Labour party, to deliver leaflets, then became politically active in the 1945 elections when he was a teenager. He joined the party in 1946 and has been a continuous member without break, except for two years when he was called into the Royal Air Force (‘and as an officer [...] we were not allowed to have politics’), since then. He was first elected to the Council in 1957 and has now been councillor in the same area for 55 years.

Even if British MPs and MEPs do not live in their constituencies, however, they go out of their way to travel back and meet their fellow citizens as often as they can. Leeds MP Fabian Hamilton would be back from London on Thursday evenings and spend Fridays and the weekends meeting local people and campaigning. An almost identical schedule applies to British and Italian MEPs.

Countering the hypothesis that image becomes more important the farer a politician is from the citizen, this excerpt from my conversation with Godfrey Bloom, MEP for Yorkshire and the Humber for the UK Independence Party, underlines the role of personal contact with his constituents, especially when European issues appear far removed from the everyday life of local citizens. Here Bloom gives an account of his activities in Yorkshire during the week:

Q: Being an MEP, do you still have contact with local people? I would imagine that you are in Strasbourg or Brussels most of the time...

Yes I do [have contact with local people]. I make it my business. Some of our MEPs pretend they live in Leeds but they don’t, they live in Antwerp or Brussels. No I’m very much part of the community. Yesterday I was at a big church service for the (s.l. 0.3.49) Beverley Minster for the celebration of our judiciary for example. I shall this afternoon be out hunting in the north of the county with the Middleton Hunt. I make it my business to spend a lot of time speaking - tomorrow morning at a school in Harrogate; I’m speaking at another school the following week. So I do an awful lot of work in Yorkshire and North Lincolnshire, my constituency. I think the problem with the politicians is that they lose touch. You know I’m going to speak at Durham University the week after that and I stay. I don’t just speak and come away. I stay with undergraduates at universities. I stay over at a hotel and I stay with them in the evening and I stay with them in the pub so I can find out what they’re thinking as well. There’s no point in just one way. There’s no point in them just knowing what I think. I’ve got to know what they think otherwise how can I possibly reflect their views?

[...]
Q: So contact with your constituents and the way you present to them is important...

Oh certainly. I mean I think if you spend time with people who don’t in the main have a great interest in politics you see... You and I have an interest in politics because, you know, it’s what we do for a living in one way or another but your average butcher, baker or candlestick maker doesn’t have a great deal of interest in politics. He votes at election time but apart from that he doesn’t really make any assessment of politics impacting on his life. Of course it does. We know that it does. We know that every rule and regulation that he is trying to cope with in his little business comes from Brussels but he doesn’t know that. He thinks the regulation comes from Defra or the Food Standards Agency or the Financial Services Authority. He doesn’t realise that these are political rules and regulations he’s following. He thinks they’re made locally in the main by the local Council and people like that. He doesn’t understand that these political decisions are affecting him.

Personal contact is therefore a way to get constituents interested and make them realise that European-level issues are actually relevant to everyday local life. This point raises two observations. It shows first that the nature of the political issues affects the extent to which presentation plays a role in affecting a member’s of the public perception: presentation of a local councillor matters less because the political representative will be judged in the very short term by his/her ability to solve an immediate practical problem. Second, the MEP’s effectiveness is harder to assess because of the longer term issues they deal with (policies that might take long to be discussed and decided upon in Brussels) but also because of the lack of media coverage of European issues at national level.

Personal contact with the constituents has further effects on image. Hamilton (Leeds MP) underlines the fact that his “image” is balanced by the direct experience of him as representative that thousands of his constituents have made over the years. He also emphasizes the importance of a person’s behaviour beyond the “looks”:

Q: Would you say that as an MP sometimes image is “all you have”? I imagine that many of your voters don’t know you personally...

They don’t. Image is important but image isn’t everything and I do not agree with presenting an image over substance, over what you actually do and I do try not to be superficial. And of course you’re right, I can’t know 90,000 electors personally but I do know an awful lot of electors now. I’ve been an MP now for four terms. This is my fourth term so 15 years is a long time and you inevitably meet quite a few thousand people and of course you won’t know everybody but I’d like to think people judge me by what I’ve done, by what I’ve said, what I’ve achieved rather than simply the way I look. But you’re right, that looks are important but it’s not just the way you look or the way you dress; it’s the way you address people, it’s the way you talk to people. If you’re not patronising and you look people in the eye and you’re interested in them then they will respond appropriately and I think that’s really important to show the respect and courtesy to every individual and even people who don’t agree with you and argue with you to be polite at all times. I’ve only ever once lost my temper with a constituent who was particularly annoying I have to say and he wasn’t going to vote for me anyway but it’s not a dignified thing to do and even if they provoke you, you should never fall to that provocation. So I think being polite, being friendly, sincere and honest, genuine, that counts for more than simply the way you look.

*Political Communication Strategies as a Relational Outcome*
The strategies implemented by politicians to stay in touch with the constituents—one could say the very extent to which a representative feels the need to do so—are the result of a combination of variables. The following exchange with Antonio Panzeri, Italian MEP for Partito Democratico, is particularly significant in this respect. Not only does it highlight the way European representatives combine the use of new communication technologies and face-to-face meetings to communicate with several millions constituents. It also demonstrates that the concrete form taken by the political communication of a politician is shaped not only by the availability of technologies (as the literature seems to suggest), but is truly an outcome of the constellation of networks in which they are located. A first key shaper of such outcome is the fact that MEPs receive virtually no media coverage in the national media, which leads them to rely on alternative channels of outreach. The second is the electoral system, particularly the existence of the preference vote, which forces them to keep themselves visible to their constituents, so they can express a vote for them on the ballot at the next election:

Q: I have seen you have a website. Do you use it to communicate with your constituents?
Usually, yes, I have a website where I post what I do. I write editorials, especially about topics I am most closely dealing with. Being the president of the European Parliament Delegation that has relationships with the Arabic Maghreb, the topic of the Arab Spring and what is happening [in the Middle East] is strongly felt, and so I write about that. Also usually once a month I send my [electronic] newsletter in which I tell about my activity, the conclusions of the Strasbourg [discussion] round and also political news. I send it to a good number of people.

Q: Who do you send this newsletter to? Who are these people?
These are people who belong to my mailing list. People’s contacts I have been gathering across the years. Normally whenever I go to a meeting, I always go with a form. I tell those who take part in these meetings that, if they like, they can receive updates about what I do and think. They can just subscribe to the free newsletter. On this basis I have gathered the data [details] to send the newsletter.

Q: How many people are on the mailing list?
About 40,000.

Q: I am interested in the issue of visibility. I get the impression that MEPs do not enjoy great visibility from the point of view of national media. The European Parliament, usually, is not a source of great interest for the public. Would you confirm this?
Yes, yes, it is absolutely true. There are three obstacles against this possibility [of MEPS gaining visibility in national politics]. The first is obviously the treatment [of European issue] by national media: they are very far from the idea of Europe or cover it only and exclusively when, for instance, there is conflict of a national nature in Europe. And this is not good. It is not good. Because it is a way of bringing the European Parliament to the same level of national parliaments where there are often only rhetorical fights, when not worse. So it is a wrong way [of covering European issues]. And in addition to this, it does not contribute to building that political culture oriented towards Europe which we absolutely need. So this is the first obstacle. The second obstacle derives from perceptions, which are obviously an outcome of the first. The perception that public opinion has itself constructed about Europe. And here there is also a responsibility of national politics. If one looks at the Eurobarometer statistics can see that a few years ago there was a very positive attitude towards Europe. Now a bit less. This is because responsibilities have been dumped on Europe, which actually belong to national governments, that is those who had to show, and still do, that they are
up to the challenge [of governing]. And when they are not, it is easy to find an alibi [by saying] that “It’s Europe’s fault, it’s Europe which is demanding this, it’s Europe that does this.” Well... And the third obstacle is that, obviously—and I say this with great conviction and determination—that we need to work here [Strasbourg]. It is here that we carry out our work. But we are more than 1,000km far from home. [...] One has to wait until the end of the week when one returns [home] to travel the land and spread the message. And this makes the idea of Europe less felt. And in addition to this, we have one more problem. As all countries have their own electoral law, the Italian MEPs are elected on the basis of preferences. So we are constantly on the battlefield. Necessarily so. If we [MEPs] are too much here [in Strasbourg], as it is right to do, then one forgets about us in Italy. So at the next elections, if one runs again, many will wonder “Where has he been?” While he was just doing the work he was committed to.

Q: How do you make yourself known to the voters then? The constituency you represent is extremely vast [15,000,000]. Even if you have 40,000 people on your mailing list, we are talking about an overall population of several millions. If people never see your face on TV or do not know you personally, how can they express a preference for you on the ballot? How do you tackle this problem?

One uses the new informatic tools: for instance Facebook and Twitter are important in this respect. They will not establish a European political culture but at least give an idea that [one] exists to start with. Then the newsletter. Then also the TVs. Every now and then I am on them. I attend the political debates, especially on local TVs—even if nowadays there is nothing that is local anymore as everything is interconnected, so to speak. So these are the three main tools I use. Finally the normal activity one does: this evening [8 March 2012] I am returning to Italy but I have another meeting. Tomorrow I have two more. Saturday two more. And Sunday morning yet another. It is true that one does not reach millions of people, but I can assure you that if one keeps on organizing meeting every week, each of them attended by between 50 and 100 people, at the end of the year one will have achieved something. Finally, one also uses the tool of bringing several groups of people to the European Parliament in Bruxelles, to get them to know the Parliament, invited by the MEP. This is another tool to get yourself known.

The Rejection of Image Management

The most frequent reaction when I asked my interviewees whether they had ever received any recommendation on how to dress/present themselves from either consultancies or the respective parties was laughter. The great majority of interviewees never received any training whatsoever. Some Leeds local councillors attended courses organized by the Council about media interviews, chairing meetings, how to interact in the Leeds Council Chamber (related to etiquette and use of microphones), but they never received any training related to image management or public speaking. The conversations with MPs and MEPs suggest that also at higher-than-local level there is no real effort at image management.

Contrary to the expectation that politicians make use of consultants as a matter of routine, I could notice that, especially in Italy, some interviewees were irritated, almost offended, at the very suggestion that somebody could be telling them how to present themselves in public. Paolo Corsini, MP for Partito Democratico, when I asked him whether he had ever made use of image consultancy services said: ‘Nobody would ever dare to offer me this kind of services [image management] because they know that I would tell them to get lost [...] I hate this kind of companies [...] I dare to think [ho la presunzione] that I do not need them.’ Elena
Bonometti, consigliere comunale for Lega Nord in Brescia goes as far as imagining punching those who offer media and image management services in the face:

Look, once I received by post…—if I had had them there I would have killed them! [se ce li avevo li li uccidevo]—a company offering me this kind of services, such as somebody who could write my speeches. I am perfectly capable [bravissima] of speaking in public even without having prepared [“a braccio”] because, modestly, I have a certain culture and a certain brain [una certa testa]. And also one has to see the “climate” [the public mood] of the time [in every circumstance]. Perhaps I have planned to say something, but then, given the “climate” perhaps it is better that I steer towards something else. And they [the consultancy company] would have offered me …to take care of my image …I would have liked to punch them in the face [gli avrei spaccato il muso] if they had been there…but it was just via mail. And obviously I did not reply. They did not contact me anymore. They did not offer….No…it’s inconceivable [non esiste] I am myself. If other people want, they can come and take lessons from me [laughs loudly].

Godfrey Bloom, MEP for the UK Independence Party admitted to received media training before becoming a politician:

I was a spokesman for a big investment bank when I was a younger man and I did all that training when I was not involved in politics in the 1980’s because I was going to be radio and television and platform spokesman for a very big leading investment bank and so I got my training there which came in very useful of course after when I went into politics.

When I asked, however, whether he had ever received instructions on presentation from his party his reply was: ‘No [laughs]. Good Lord, no.’

Fabian Hamilton had attended the famous Barbara Follett sessions on colour. The attention to his presentation, however, as he suggests in this example, has not been shaped by the training, rather by his previous background in graphic design:

Did you ever receive any training about how to present yourself from your party or…?

Okay that's very interesting. You're the first to mention this.
Really? What was it called? Colour something anyway.
[...]
It’s this kind of formal course that she used to do about matching your skin tones to the kind of colours you were so that you’re either spring, summer, autumn or winter. I was winter actually. But you know if you're autumnal you can wear kind of dark greens and browns whereas if you’re winter you have to wear brighter colours. So I mean I think that was fairly superficial but I try to dress in a coordinated way but that’s about the only training I’ve ever had in how to present myself.

And do you think this has changed the way you present yourself in the sense that you have perhaps tried to put into practice any of these recommendations she was giving?
Not totally. I mean I think there were some sort of common sense things but I’ve always been fairly self-conscious about how I present myself because I was for many years a graphic designers and graphic design is about colour and form and proportion and things looking good so I always had a bit of a, I won't say artistic
eye, that's probably exaggerating a bit, but a sense of what looks right and what doesn't and how colours match with each other. I'm fairly good on colour toning. And then, you know, there's sensible things like my hair's thinning so just keep your hair short if you're a man and your hair's thinning and I've got a beard as you know from the website. It's fairly well trimmed so it looks neat in that I don't look like a drunk on the streets or something. People do like their representatives to look presentable and to look right and it's a case, as much for men as for women, though women are better at doing this, of presenting yourself appropriately not just for the way you look and your features and the clothes you wear but for your age as well. I'm now 57 this year and I look rather different to what I looked when I was 42 and I was selected and I had a very black beard and a fairly full head of hair. You know it's what's appropriate. If you're a man don't grow your hair long and comb it over the bald patch because that looks terrible and accepting that as you grow older you present yourself slightly differently to a young man or woman.

The experience of Gabriele Albertini, former mayor of Milano and currently MEP for Popolo delle Liberta' (PdL) is particularly interesting. The following excerpt shows his rejection of image management in favour of 'naturalness,' which he believes both better reflects his independent personality and is appreciated by his constituents:

Q: Is there a quality you are particularly keen to communicate to others? I do not follow a discipline for my communication. Simply I try in every circumstance to be myself. I behave with naturalness and simplicity, trying to express what I really think and what I feel...with naturalness and simplicity. I do not know whether this works, but so far it has worked since I have always been elected and re-elected with a wide consensus of votes. At least as far as the relationship with the electorate is concerned it has worked in my previous experiences. I do not know whether it will work in the future but so far that's how it has gone. As for the relationship with colleagues, there too. Perhaps they might not have particularly, let's say, great admiration for some qualities that I do not have: for instance I am not a professional politician, for instance the way they play the role...I am a free rider [battitore libero], I am not disciplined with the party [line], and so on. But they regard me as trustworthy and as a serious person. A person who, when he says something, than he does it, and somebody who says what he really thinks. So naturalness is the key to my communication.

Q: Have you ever received any recommendations about how to present yourself? During my electoral campaign I had been sided by consultants. I am talking about 1997, the first and true electoral campaign I ran, organized. I had a group of consultants who followed everything related to communication, including this aspect [of image]. And I remember that I also had a couple of consultants who had instructed me also about this behaviour. But after a short time...well...we broke up...I mean...with me it did not work. I could not get into a role that was not mine. I did not manage not to be myself. So at the end, even the final output, the result, was the exact opposite of what one was aiming for. It was much more agreeable and valid, even from the point of view of the quality of image and the [electoral] consensus to be achieved, and so on, sincerity and naturalness of behaviour rather than the script that was being forced on me to conform to some cliché of [political] candidate [...].

Q: Could you make an example of something you were asked to do, which you did not approve of?
Instruction about debates, for instance. The cliché was that to a question one has to answer aggressively if there is some polemical dimension [to the debate] and then one has to hide the boundaries of one’s own ignorance, or something like that. So one always has to give a better image of oneself than the real one. I contested this way of presenting oneself: if somebody asks me a question I am not able to answer, I answer that I cannot reply and explain the reasons why I am not informed about that particular issue, but [I can add] I think it is important to know about it and I commit myself to finding a proper answer or gathering more information about it. It is not that because there is a political adversary I need always to quarrel with him. If I agree with his thought, a part of his argument, or some objectively sensible observation, something in which I can recognize my own positions, then I can agree with him even if he belongs to another [political] team, of course. It was this. They wanted to impose on me some clichés, which perhaps are those of the “good presenter,” the “good candidate,” the “good politician” [il bravo presentatore, il bravo candidato, il bravo politico]. But in my case they did not work because I myself refused them, thinking that also voters would refuse them because they would have seen a piece of theatre [recita] rather than reality.

Especially television, in some respects, is ruthless. Because in some close shots, body language is subliminally understood by the interlocutor. So, for example, a Sgarbi character [Vittorio Sgarbi, Italian art critic, cultural commentator, politician, and TV personality], you look at him and admire him, you appreciate him [and you might think] “How well he speaks!” but he does not communicate trustworthiness. In fact one would think he is even too good in communicating. Then even this narcissism of his [carefully messy] hair. You admire him, but you do not establish a relationship with him, because one can see that it is a piece of theatre, in his case very well executed, of an exuberant and very egocentric personality.

Q: Are you suggesting it is perhaps better not to have such a perfect image, but a more natural one?

Yes, exactly. What I suggest is, do you know what was written on the Greek temple in Adelphos? “Know yourself.” In my case this is be myself. I am inspired by the ancient wisdom [laughs], the one that was taught to me by my Jesuit fathers when I attended the Liceo Classico [secondary school]

This experience is consistent across the political spectrum as confirmed by another Italian MEP, Antonio Panzeri representing the Partito Democratico.

Q: Do you pay particular attention to your image, especially since you have a Facebook page, a Twitter account and a website? Do you ever have the impression, for instance, that you are “being watched” all the time?

Since I started being involved in politics I paid attention only and exclusively to one kind of image: trying to be credible and consistent. Neither can I make any difference to my beauty or ugliness, nor am I interested in doing that. I do not think I need to dress in one way or another in order to appear like a person I am not. You have to be yourself. As far as I am concerned, doing this activity [politics] one has to show the way one feels. And I feel like the only thing that one has to “spend well” with public opinion, the citizens, whether those who have voted for you or not, is to be credible in the things you do. If you cannot achieve them, then explain why you were not able to. You need to be consistent. These are things that might not give you much notoriety in the short term but, in the long term, they will pay off.

[...]
Q: Did you ever receive any recommendations about how to present yourself, for instance from political consultants, not only about the way you dress, but about the way you speak in public, or talk to journalists...?

I can assure you that at the beginning of electoral campaigns there are usually many who explain how to restructure your image...but...No, no, I have never made use of them. The only thing you perhaps can make good use of is, in case you need to take some pictures, then in that case you really need a photographer. You can’t do it yourself with the self-timer [laughs]. If they [photographers] ask you to pose one way or another sometimes you follow their suggestions, but this is the only “retouch” that applies to me.

The very low level of orchestration in presentation also applies to “media management” and the alleged obsession with “being on message.” Politicians who are not party leaders, as it is suggested by the interviews, tend to talk more freely. Godfrey Bloom, MEP for the UK Independence Party explains his personal belief in saying what he thinks, which also fits with his party’s commitment to ‘tell the truth’ that other parties do not dare to tackle:

...it’s my responsibility to tell the truth. The problem is with modern politicians, most red [Labour] or blue [Conservatives], that they don’t tell the truth. How many times have you heard a television or radio interviewer with a politician being cross because he certainly didn’t answer the question? It must have happened to you a million times. You know the questioner asks a question and the politician simply doesn’t answer it. So I made it my business when I was first elected in 2004 to tell the truth at all times and therefore that I didn’t have to worry in the future, I didn’t have to wonder, “What did I say last time?” You know if I said it last time this is what I believe now. So if I said something in 2004 I’ll say it in 2012 and there aren’t many politicians that can say that and also, without sounding too arrogant, I’m usually right. If you look at my speeches or even if you wouldn’t have access to that if you look at the articles and lectures I was giving – I was a lecturer at Cambridge University for a while in the 90’s – if you look at what I was saying you’ll find that I’ve been right so my record is very good.

While there is general lack of effort in staging of one’s image, some interviewees admit the importance of moderately exploiting looks to be ‘recognizable.’ Neil Walshaw, Labour Leeds councillor for Headingley, for instance, explains how he played up his ‘big hair’ during his local campaign and how this benefited him in a situation of very little funding for alternative advertising:

I have large hair which, when all the photos for our campaign literature were taken, I had almost like... Are you familiar with The Simpsons? [...] Slightly Sideshow Bob hair, you know the way it was all sort of waxed and spiky and quite long? [...] Not looking like that but there was a hint of that. There’s my sadly now defunct campaign website but if you put into the internet Walshaw4Headingley [...], you’ll see what I mean and I’m kind of stuck with that hairstyle now which is always a joke but I confess to keeping that – shirt, tie and big hair. I’m not nondescript looking, shall we say, with big specs and big hair, yeah. It doesn’t hurt, you know. It really doesn’t hurt. But there was no conscious effort for that apart from the fact that halfway through the campaign I realised, because people were starting to recognise you when we came to the door because obviously we’d leafleted an area and then you follow up with canvassing and then people would recognise me and that was an interesting experience. That was the first time that’s ever really happened as you can appreciate so I’m kind of stuck with that. So that process kind of turned into a conscious effort I guess by polling day. Do you know what I mean? You really want to be visible.
Q: So you cultivated the image of the ‘big hair’ for that purpose, for being recognised?
A little bit yeah. I mean it’s how I normally have my hair anyway. It’s not quite so big at the moment I must admit but it’s how I am normally so... It sounds very trivial but we don’t have advertising budgets; you know we don’t get pots for political broadcasts. We don’t have money for adverts in papers so, you know, all these little factors that can help... we have willing teams of activists to leaflet and we have them to door knock so you have to maximise those two aspects and anything that breeds familiarity should be considered... I think ...as long as it’s sensible and serious, yeah.

Q: And was this also designed to appeal to the student population in Headingley [Headingley, Walshaw’s ward, is regarded as the “student area”]?
No not really. I just wanted to make myself recognisable to anybody really [...] it was just keeping on, keeping on really, you know. The fact that I think recognisability applies to all sectors of the population. I mean in Headingley the permanent residents are far more likely to vote than the student body in local elections.

Beyond all this, the idea that politicians need to manage their image because they are under the media spotlight at all times (we can add the fact that any member of the public can any time steals a picture and shoot a video through a mobile phone) does make sense in the context of local politics. Most interviewees have been living for many years in their constituency. They have an image that has been shaped by personal interactions over decades. As an Italian consigliere comunale from Iseo points out: ‘It does not make sense to change your image. You were voted for who you were, so it obviously works.’

What Shapes the Role of Image in Politics?
The expectation that image is becoming increasingly important in the age of celebrity politics, appears a rather shallow assumption based on the idea that a political representative would want to look good on television. Such notion is strongly challenged when one considers the broader relationship between dressing codes and class, a country’s culture, the way the standards of what is acceptable to wear in politics have changed across the years, as well as the fact that presentation reflects an individual’s personal history, professional background, and personal taste.

Class background
Bernard Atha, 84 and the oldest among the interviewees, who has been councillor for 55 years, recalls the changes in dressing codes at the Leeds City Council over the years. His experience underlines how the standards of what is “acceptable” to wear were shaped in the past more by class and the attempt to convey a political message than the desire to impress the voters:

Labour has controlled the Council in Leeds for a very long time and it was controlling it [...] [through] councillors who were basically working class. There were some middle class among them but they were basically working class. They all had the same ethos as I’ve been talking about where, if you went to a place like the Council you put on good clothes, you were smart. No one would have dreamt in those days of going in with an open-neck shirt; they’d always wear a tie. Now sometimes they don’t wear a jacket at all; they’ve got shirt sleeves. That would have been unacceptable 25 years ago and times have changed and I think
it began with the Lib Dems [Liberal Democrats] who wanted to show that they weren’t stuffy like everybody else and so they were a bit more adventurous in their dress. They might wear a fairly brightly coloured sports coat rather than a suit and there’s been a gradual change. So now if you came to our council, which at one time would have been full of suits and we have pictures of the Council chamber with all the councillors in, all wearing suits, and just right now you’ll find that quite a lot are in shirt sleeves and the earth hasn’t fallen on them. You know it hasn’t actually seemed to make any difference.

Q: So why are they more casual today? Is it to appeal more to the constituents, for instance, that they are “like them”? I think it could be that but most constituents don’t see them in Council so most constituents wouldn’t have any idea what they would look like in council. I think some of them adopted this rather casual form of wear because it’s comfortable and easy and cheap and so on and they see no reason why they should put on a different suit to come into council. So I think it’s just a general reflection of the fact that styles have changed and that many people now find it quite acceptable to look scruffy by comparison to what they would look like wearing a suit.

Q: Do you think this is also related to a generational change? For example, people from your generation, as you say, share the idea that you have to be presentable while maybe younger people are not as concerned? I think that’s absolutely true. I think young people nowadays are very adventurous in dress. Some of them look hideous by the things they’ve worn but that’s what goes on and if you look over the last 30 years styles have changed for young people.

Always according to Atha, presentation was far more important in the past when, if one had a working class background as he did, one needed to be well dressed in order to engage people from upper classes:

I came from a working class family. I'm now, I suppose, considered middle class because I've got this OBE [Order of the British Empire] and then a CBE [Commander of the British Empire] and a councillor for all these years but basically I still remain what I was, very working class, and when we were small and poor we always had to put on our best front, make our best appearance, so we always had a best suit. Sometimes it was the only suit. But I've always felt that I was obliged to appear reasonably smart and reasonably dressed, conventionally dressed in order to gain the confidence of not just the working class but the middle class and the upper class.

By contrast, as he continues:

'the children of those early [Labour movement] pioneers—people my age or older—don't have that same enormous pressure on them to look presentable because they came from a working class background and so I think we've become so much more egalitarian so that if you met the current Earl of Harwood then you would not know he was the Earl of Harwood. If you'd met his father, who's just died, you would know immediately he was the Queen's cousin and significant in the Royal family. One generation changed and it's completely different.

A country’s culture
Especially in Britain, several interviewees complained about the recent tendency for some young representatives to look 'scruffy.' It appears that there is a considerable gap between being 'presentable' and ‘being scruffy.’ In this respect, it appears that presentation is less of an issue in Italy, where the fact that one has to look ‘presentable’ in public is almost taken for granted. Especially Italian politicians who are in their 50s and 60s tend to wear jacket and tie at all times because, as Paolo Corsini (MP, 64) puts it, it is a matter of basic ‘good manners [buona educazione].’ Having said that, public dressing codes appear to have been stricter in the past than nowadays. In this example Enrico Pernigotto, 67, consigliere comunale representing the civic list Yseo nel Cuore [Iseo in our hearts], explains the origins of his formal way of presenting himself in public. In particular, he recalls having being told off at a university examination for not wearing a tie when he was young:

I am telling you an anecdote, so you know why I am always wearing a tie. I studied at the Catholic University outside Milano in the years 1964-1968. I did my first [oral] exam with Fanfani, Amintore Fanfani [1908-1999, former prime minister of Italy and historical figure of Democrazia Cristiana]. I turned up in May, he taught Political Economy, so it was May and I wore a white shirt, a jacket, without a tie. And he told me “Young lad [giovanotto], do you not have the money to buy yourself a tie?” And from that moment on I have always worn a tie [laughs loudly] […] I had to go and buy a tie and then I was examined. He would have not started assessing me without a tie. I had to rush down to Piazza Sant’ Ambrogio, I bought the tie, I wore it and I did my exam. It would not have been tolerated to sit an exam without a tie. There was an iron discipline. You had to have jacket and tie at the Catholic University. It was the year 1964-68. One could not sit exams with a shirt...It was a form of respect for the institutions and for the professor.

He further explains how he is now “disciplining” the younger (male) members of the Iseo Consiglio Comunale who had started attending the official meetings without the “proper” attire:

There were some young guys [ragazzi giovani]. I told them “Look guys, you have to wear a jacket and tie because it is a sign of...[decency] and they have sorted themselves out, ah? Do you know that now they all come along with jacket and tie? [laughs loudly] So I have obtained something... They are two university students [...] They used to come in jeans and jumper and now they present themselves properly [si presentano giusti].

Beyond the way one looks in terms of clothing, how one presents him/herself to the public and overall behaviour is also shaped by what might be called the local culture. Italian MEP Albertini underlines here how his already mentioned ‘naturalness’ fits with the appreciation by the Milanesi of hardworking genuine people. In this part of my conversation with him he had just finished explaining that the visibility of a mayor of a town like Milano (second largest in Italy after Rome with over 1,300,000 inhabitants)\(^{18}\) is far higher than that of national MPs:

Q: From what you say it sound like, if you are a mayor of a big town, image is incredibly important, but it is equally important that this image genuinely reflects your personality...

Yes, of course, otherwise it will not work. The mayors for whom it did work... myself included, it is not to show off, but even now, during the last elections in Milano, I got the same amount of preference votes than Berlusconi got, who was Prime Minister, eh! So I cannot say that my fellow citizens do not hold a good memory of what I have done, of how I was and how I am now. When I was mayor I got a record number of votes within the whole history of the Italian Republic. I

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\(^{18}\) The exact figure is 1,324, 110 (Comuni Italiani, 2010).
almost got half a million votes. In the shift between the first and the second mandate [I got] 120,000 [votes] more than those of my party. Which means that I got voted also by citizens who had a political allegiance to a different party than mine. So it means that this works. Especially in my town. The Milanese appreciates the effort, sincerity and honesty. Even if one does not manage to do what one was planning to achieve. But the good will is considered important. And perhaps it is this that has also constituted the creative and propulsive force of Milano. Because Milano has absorbed... with the Milanesita’ [Milano-ness], which is this, the work, the effort, the discipline, the commitment to something, has absorbed a lot of trends that came from the outside. Enough to say that the patron saint of Milano was born in Germany, no? And the greatest people from Milano were not born in Milano. There is a great quote of Indro Montanelli [iconic figure in Italian journalism], my great friend and almost stepfather, who he said on the day of his 90th birthday, he said “What I am, I owe it to Fucecchio [comune in the province of Firenze, his birthplace]; what I have become, I owe it to Milano,” because Milano welcomed him. The Milanese saw in him somebody who wanted to be like him, committed, hardworking, and so on, qualities that bring him [the foreigner] close to his humus [roots]. And this applies to the mayor, too. One might not be able to achieve everything [he wanted to achieve] but should do his best. And he needs, above all, to be himself.

Generational change & personal (professional) history
Younger people, particularly in the UK, are less concerned about appearance. The conversation with Joseph Marjoram, a Conservative local councillor for the Calverley and Farsley ward in Leeds, is an excellent example of how dressing codes reflect an individual’s personality. The following excerpt shows not only how generational differences have changed taste in clothing, but also the specific personal circumstances that have led to the councillor’s strong belief that appearance does not affect an individual’s ability to ‘do the job.’ Additionally, being a stay-at-home dad, Marjoram’s full-time family job has a practical impact on to the extent to which he can “dress up” to attend official meetings:

Q: What would you wear when you meet your constituents?
Oh gosh [...] I’m rarely out of jeans and a hoodie so much to the amusement of my colleagues here. They happen to be almost... one of them is almost twice my age and he’s rarely out of a suit and tie and I’m rarely out of jeans and a jumper so I am conscious that, you know, particularly because I’m around during the week I find it more difficult actually to dress for a Council meeting and put a suit on. I have to make sure I’m up ten minutes early so I’m got time to have a shave and tie a tie and all these kind of basic things which I don’t do looking after the children obviously. So for me I don’t think how I dress or how I present myself is a barrier to people coming to see me. In fact I always get jokes when I’m on the school run wearing a suit, you know, if I’m going directly from one place to a Council meeting or whatever it is, a site meeting with a planning officer, these sorts of things, where I would put on a shirt and tie, people always know almost not to talk to me because I must be dashing off. So I feel like I dress like most of the people that I see and that’s fine with me.

Q: And do you think this perhaps helps making them closer to you, making sure that you look more approachable?
Yeah I think so and I mean my background in the military was in the sub-marine service and down a sub-marine it’s pretty grotty and very uncomfortable. You don’t judge people by how they dress because everyone looks a bit dishevelled. It was the most professional working environment I’ve ever been in and it was a real lesson to me that actually what people wear has no bearing on how they do
their job and absolutely everyone, to a man, down that sub-marine did an excellent job otherwise it would be dangerous if they didn’t. It was a very pressured, intensive environment and what people wore just didn’t matter, you know, and I’ve seen people put out a fire wearing their boxer shorts and a pair of socks because they respond to the situation regardless of how they’re dressed and that’s how it should be.

So I do get picked up occasionally for going to meetings. I have one meeting which comes round every couple of months on a Friday afternoon and on a Friday morning I’m looking after the children and I’m on quite a tight schedule to get to the meeting. I don’t normally bother putting on a shirt and tie and none of my colleagues thinks that I should but really I know it doesn’t make any difference to my contribution. You know I’m not bothered. I’ll wear jeans and a jumper there just like I do on the school run in the morning.

Q: Because, as you say, it doesn’t make any difference to your function, to what you do at the end of the day...?
Yeah, absolutely and in fact one of the things I think is quite amusing about that is that I increasingly see national politicians dressing down as if this makes them more like the people. I don’t think anyone is so daft as to think that taking off your tie or rolling up your sleeves or removing your jacket... You know if you have some of the gilded backgrounds that all the political leaders have in Westminster really in terms of their upbringing and their family wealth and all the rest of it, you know, taking off your jacket people don’t [think] “oh he’s taking off his jacket, he’s just like me.” There’s still a barrier to those politicians connecting with people and it’s not what they wear.

The impact of personal experience, particularly the experience of a specific professional environment, on a politician’s assessment of what is acceptable to wear is further emphasized by another example. In this case, Neil Walshaw’s (Leeds Labour councillor for Headingley) background as transport and urban regeneration consultant at least a decade ago still affects his relaxed approach to presentation:

Q: What would you wear when you meet your constituents, in practice?
Ties, hmmm? I’m not sure a Yorkshireman should knowingly put a noose around his neck...[ironic tone] No I do. For meetings, scrutiny boards, important meetings, development plan panel meetings, full Council I always wear a shirt, suit and tie. For community meetings I always wear a shirt. I’m wearing a shirt now.

Q: But no tie?
Not often a tie, no; I’m not a big fan of ties. I tend to spill things on them for a start, which is... I don’t know when I wear a tie, it appears. No, seriously I tend not to wear... Working in business in the private sector for 10 years’ previous to being elected I didn’t often wear a tie then either and most people didn’t. One thing was particularly noticeable actually was that if you were dealing with clients from London and the South East or fellow consultants of whatever, you know, transport, regeneration, consultant planning, often they wouldn’t wear ties, particularly from London. People coming up from London hardly ever wear shirt and ties. Suits, yes and shirts but not really ties.

Q: And why do you think is that?
Change in culture. Business fashions change. When I was sort of 15, 16 in the turn of the 90’s, you know, it was all double-breasted suits and silk ties. Well soon that became to represent... I don’t know, that was eventually seen as vapid and untrustworthy yeah, by the middle of the 90’s; so you know it was all single
breasts and suits and ties. But ties seem to be much more optional now. It's just a change in business culture. Maybe it'll slide back the other way; I don't know.

Q: Do you think it's the business culture of your particular area of activity?
I don't know. I think obviously a lot of people working in property development and that don't wear... Yeah, smart casual would be the phrase. I went to a meeting of developers the other day, in the evening, and they were all smart casual. It's seen as more approachable when you're dealing with I guess elected Members and members of the community, yeah.'

Q: Could it be that you and your colleagues in this field of business deal with so many people from different communities that perhaps it [the no-tie style] is a way to look more approachable, as you say?
It's kind of a default middleism. Yeah, it's the most universally acceptable form of dress - shirt and jacket but not a tie - as opposed to going too much either way in the opposite direction, you know. You know a three piece suit and a tie done up would look odd in a community meeting. At the same time if you were meeting councillors and Council officers, you know, turning up in a tee-shirt and jeans would be the other way.

Social networks
On the point of the way previous experience affects the image of a political representative, I am presenting the example of MEP Albertini (PdL). He explains how, having been mayor of Milano, he can count on the fact that already many people know him. He also explains how there are different networks a politician deals with. As an MEP he identifies two domains: the public back home (mainly indirect relationships) and the colleagues within the European Parliament (direct relationships):

I am, yes, MEP and elected in a constituency of 14,000,000 voters, with a preference vote beside everything, so if I do not know them, they have to know me because they have got to write my name on the ballot [...] My personal experience is very much shaped by what I have done during the 9 years I was mayor [of Milano]. Yes, I am MEP, but my image, more than for what I do here [Strasbourg] is known and, for who voted for me, appreciated because it left a mark through my experience as mayor. So [...] I do not know them personally, also because they are so many those who have written my name [on the ballot] but my relationship with them is very tight. At least [this tight relationship exists] at the level of opinion, of exchange, of dialogue [with the public] rather than [with the party] apparatus, organization and consensus. This is something I have never followed, perhaps inappropriately but this is my personal history and my attitude.

Q: I would expect you take care of your image for the sake of your relationship with the 14,000,000 voters, but I am sure you also have to deal with other politicians at the European Parliament. Who do you communicate with?
I would distinguish the two domains. The one with the citizen, the voter, in my case, being my vote an "opinion vote," rather than a "[political] apparatus vote" for the party, I communicate through the personal contacts I happen to have by attending public meetings or even simply in the street, but above all through the media and the local TVs, less national TV since I am not often invited. Then there is the whole network of the internet, I have Facebook, this kind of [electronic] world, and then the newspapers and the press. This is as for my relationship with the voters. In relation to my relationship with institutions, first of all with the European Parliament, well there it is all based on personal relations: on dialogue,
meetings, collaboration exchanged and returned, basically on the application of good manners and good intentions.

*Nature of the political issues*

Image cannot be more important than “substance” because most the interviewees are judged on the basis of what they actually do. The following examples, show that it would be absolutely unthinkable that local councillors and mayors—the latter, effectively, comparable to managers of huge companies—were able to survive just through their looks.

Leeds MP Fabian Hamilton explains that the combination of the local election system—the fact that there is going to be an election every year and that, even if a candidate is not due for re-election, somebody else from the same party will be; the fact that local councillors serve mostly part-time; and the nature of the issues, about which local fellow citizens feel passionate about, makes them more ‘accountable’ than in Westminster:

I think local councils are much more accountable in many ways because they’re based in a smaller constituency, in other words they’re usually a quarter or a sixth of a parliamentary constituency, they’re there all the time as opposed to being in London most of the week and usually most local authorities have three councillors in each ward. It’s not a full time job so you would carry on working and doing whatever you normally do for a living and that keeps councillors much, much more in touch with the people they represent and it means that in cities like Leeds, Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool you have an election every year and a third of the Council retires and has to be re-elected and that makes you much more accountable to the people because you’re facing an election even if you are not up that year; your colleague is and you have to work to get your colleague elected if you’ve got a colleague who’s also in your party. So I think the connection with the people is much stronger and the issues are much closer to people’s hearts. So yes they may be boring to some of us – I mean dealing with pot holes in the roads or sewers or windows in council properties, council housing, crime and things like that that actually affect lives in localities. They’re the issues that people really are passionate about and you can actually do something about it a lot of the time.

A similar point is made by Neil Walshaw, local Labour Leeds councillor for Headingley:

I think what people are looking for in Headingley, especially local elections, is ability and integrity and I think if anyone can convey that and convince people of that and then demonstrate that if they’re successful then I think that’s a far better advantage than anything; any particular telegenic aspects. You know all politics is local, so if you can convey your integrity, your abilities in residents’ meetings, in public meetings, in area committee meetings, that kind of thing, then that matters more than, you know, a full hairline.

Further to this Joseph Marjoram, Conservative local councillor in Leeds for Calverley and Farsley suggests that attention to image by governmental figures is a way to deal with the fact that they cannot be judged on their effective dealing with issues in the short term:

it’s much harder for national politicians where the things they’re working on are maybe more complex, more difficult, take longer to get a result from. Perhaps they feel more pressured to present a good image day to day if they don’t have something that really they can say, you know, I’ve done this today. In my case [instead] [...] I’m not judged on how I look. I’m judged on the job I do.
The need to be competent is made extreme in a town like Milano. Here again MEP Albertini point out how the extent to which the idea of 'inventing' one's image is, effectively, inconceivable:

Being mayor of a big town is a unique role than cannot be compared to other institutional roles. I will explain, also because I have myself interviewed those who, in turn, had been first ministers and then mayors of a big town. The mayor is the direct point of reference for thousands, tens of thousands, in some cases hundreds of thousands of citizens, so his exposure is extraordinarily intense. Examining people who have been previously ministers, perhaps rather well, who have later become mayors, have not found themselves at ease because you cannot invent an image of yourself as a mayor. Because the relationship between what you have to do, the actions and the concrete contents of your decisions is too tight, it is what is being perceived. So for a while you might invent some alternative reality. Do you remember what Lincoln said: “One can fool a small section of the public some of the times, the great majority for a while, but never the entire populace all the time”? This particularly applies when you are a mayor. Reality prevails over fiction. [Dealing with] Potholes and services are concrete actions. You can make a good appearance at a conference, make a good speech, go on a talk show and make a bella figura, but if you cannot organize the huge enterprise of services within a comune... Think that the comune of Milano overall has a team, between direct and indirect, that is people who are employed by companies directly controlled by the comune which process waste, who deal with the production of energy, airports, public transports, they are 40,000, eh! It is a huge service company. A true holding. So the job of the mayor is this. It cannot be compared [to other political roles]. The job of the MP resembles that of the minister, although the latter is farther away from “his people,” it is less of a direct point of reference. The job of the MP is much more indirect, especially the MEP.

It's more than the “media” and the “(national) media system”
Two widespread assumptions within the literature on the mediatization of politics are that the simple availability or existence of a communication technology will make a difference in the way political actors communicate with the public, and that journalists from national media outlets are more or less interested in what politicians have to say. The experiences of the interviewees challenge both such notions in at least three respects.

First of all, politicians who are not party leaders hardly get any exposure in the national media limelight at all. Paolo Corsini, MP, who is also a Modern History Lecturer at the University of Parma and who has been mayor of Brescia 1992 and 1994, explains that he received far more media exposure as a mayor than as a parliamentarian:

Q: Do you now, as a MP, receive less attention than when you were a mayor?
Much less attention, much less attention. Also because the number of Italian MPs who receive great attention is that small elite which belongs to the “star system” of politics. Because I do not belong to the star system of politics, I get attention only when I raise my voice [prendo la parola] or I act within the boundaries of well-defined domains, which are the domains of my own town [Brescia] or those, let’s say, of cultural activities, the world of scholars and so on.

Q: What do you mean by “star system”? It is that world to which 30 or 40 political figures belong, who show off [primeggiano] in talk shows or camp [campeggiano]on newspapers’ pages, who speak at conferences often without even knowing what the topic is.
Second, there is a whole media landscape that is ignored by political communication literature: local media. This does not only affect local councillors but, in a deeply interconnected world, also MEPs. Here Linda McAvan, Labour MEP for Yorkshire and the Humber explains that she does not normally get national media coverage, but issues she tackles that are relevant to local areas are picked up by local media:

Q: Do you get a lot of media attention?
No, oh no, not really, no.

Q: The EU seems to be a very unpopular topic in the national media. Would you confirm that?
Well the EU gets lots of negative press in the tabloids, in the national tabloid media. In local media you get some negativity. There are some people who campaign. But you’re competing for local stories with local politicians and Members of Parliament and the truth is there are fewer local newspapers, and fewer people who are buying newspapers. So yes I get some press coverage but I don’t know whether it’s more or less than a Member of Parliament. It’s hard to judge because we cover huge regions whereas Members of Parliament only cover parts of Leeds or, you know, whereas we are covering the whole of Yorkshire and the Humber; there’s lots and lots of newspapers. And those newspapers will pick up on a story depending if it’s a local issue for their area. For example I noticed this morning [6 March 2012] I’m in the Whitby Gazette [Whitby is a small coast town in North Yorkshire] which is about fishing. Obviously fishing is not such a big interest in South Yorkshire ... it’s not a local interest.

Thirdly, the newsworthiness of a political representative is a relational outcome, it is not purely dictated by the rhetorical features of what one says. In this example Godfrey Bloom, of the UK Independence Party, explains that he tends to get more national coverage than other MEPs because of his party’s position within the UK political spectrum. Although Bloom points out that traditional parties, especially Conservative and Labour, tend to get most media attention, being a minority party is, in this respect, an advantage because it provides alternative, controversial—and therefore newsworthy—stances:

I certainly do more radio and public speaking than most other MEPs, you know, by quite a long way but that’s because largely of the party. We are the Independence Party and we’re the only party advocating self-rule; you know home rule for England. So we tend to get disproportionate amount of time when it comes to European politics. So I do a lot of television and radio and public speaking that my fellow MEPs probably don’t do.

Q: Could this be related to the fact that traditional parties get perhaps more access to mainstream media because they belong to the “red or blues,” a you say?
That’s quite right, yes. So for example their Ministers and Shadow Ministers get prime time television all the time and so the media don’t seek out a red or blue MEP because it would be of no journalistic interest to them. Whereas we, because we’re taking a completely separate view from the establishment, you know we do get proportionally more on these issues.

On the other hand, a further example from Italy shows that even the fact of being located at the margin of the political spectrum and providing unusual policy suggestions does not necessarily guarantee coverage. This even applies to party leaders. Elena Bonometti, consigliere comunale in Brescia for Lega Nord—which has even advocated independence
for the North of Italy—points out that the members of her party constantly have to put up with either a ‘smear campaign’ or a coverage-blackout by both the national and local media. In the following excerpt she presents her view of the widespread prejudices against her party and the consequences such stereotypes produce on the media access of the *leghisti*:

... Bossi [Umberto Bossi, party leader of *Lega Nord*] has been demonized, he has been presented as a person with no manners [*maleducati*], ignorant. Well, I know him personally. He is absolutely a decent well-mannered person. I ate next to him several times and he uses cutlery correctly [ironic tone]. Just to tell you...there is a programme on a TV channels here in Brescia [local TV] where politicians are interviewed at the dinner table while they are eating. And by the way, in my view, either I eat or I give the interview. I am going to spoil my meal if I am speaking...[...] [Anyway] They never invite *leghisti* [representatives from *Lega Nord*]. It’s because there is the stereotype, the prejudice that the *leghista* perhaps eats with his hands and chews with his mouth open. For me that’s what it is ...the demonization of Bossi and of all his [political] children. Absolutely I have been discriminated, penalized, mob-attacked [*mobbizzata*] in some quarters, absolutely ...and in the face of others’ rage I just keep going on calmly and serenely.... I can’t let them affect me [*perché figuriamoci*]!

Here she elaborates on the ‘journalists’ dirty games’:

If you look at the *Giornale di Brescia* [local daily newspaper], at the reports which come out the following day about what gets discussed in the *Consiglio Comunale* [Council meetings]. I was there 24 hours [the whole time], I read it [the report] and I have no idea what they are talking about. And then they [journalists] write that that woman [a female *consigliere* who spoke at the meeting] “put up a storm” [*ha fatto il matto a quattro*]. No, the woman, because maybe she is a relative of the owner of *Giornale di Brescia*, said “bif” [nearly nothing] for two seconds. How many times I have made some good contributions [to the discussion] and I have not been mentioned at all in the newspaper. Once I made an ironic comment meant as a joke and I got a headline, as if that was what I had really thought [about the topic]. Eh...the journalists are playing dirty games. Because they are pushing forward some people while they are obscuring others. Obviously I have no godfathers, no people who protect me, I have no friends, no relatives [in the media], and on top of this I am “the one from the *Lega* [Nord],” so let’s stigmatize her, let’s put her into the “things to forget about box” [*dimenticatario*]. I must say that I am at the receiving end of this dirty game. But all the Santanché-style people [Daniela Santanché, minister for the Implementation of the Government’s Programme 2010-2011 during the Berlusconi government] at the national level, and other people at the local level—I am not telling you who because I do not want to be sued. If they were forced to demonstrate what they have done in the last few years in a tough question time [*interrogatorio fitto*], if they had to show their real essence, I would make the *bella figura*, not them, who are some journalists’ *coupmonte*’ [put up job].

This, in turn, affects the way the *leghisti* present themselves to the public, particularly the importance they attribute to wearing their party colour—a bright green. This tendency sharply contrasts with the experience of virtually all other interviewees. Most of them never do that. Some would wear rosettes at election times only, but even those are regarded as ‘daft’ and ‘banal.’ The main reason against wearing party colours (note that literature on political marketing and branding attaches great importance to the consistency of delivering the message, including sticking to the party colours) is that councillors, *consiglieri comunali*, or even MEPs, are there to serve *all* the members of their communities, not only those who voted for them. Another reason the interviewees raised, which might sound trivial, but it
matters when it could affect the way one present him/herself every day, is the fact that one’s party colour might look ‘terrible’ on one’s complexion. An example that kept on emerging was, in the UK, the bright yellow of the UK Liberal Democrats.

Going back to the Lega Nord and its special connection with the colour green, Raoul Francesconi, consigliere comunale in Brescia, emphasizes how the green colour is used to enhance the visibility of the party, as a sign of distinction in a media environment in which, as pointed out earlier, it does not appear to gain recognition and coverage:

We [local representatives of Lega Nord] usually wear the green tie or the green pocket handkerchief, which is our colour, we have a white flag, you know it, don’t you? With the [green] Lega symbol.\(^\text{19}\) We have this habit [to wear green]. When there is a particular occasion, like the Council meetings, but also on ordinary days. It’s not compulsory, let’s be clear. It is something one should feel, and normally we do. It is, in fact, a form of distinction. We are......well... keen on that.

As Francesconi further points out, wearing green has also deeper meanings. In the following excerpt he shows that there is a certain level of pride in wearing the party colour as reflection of the commitment of local representatives to their community, almost as an act of defiance against the national and local smear campaign:

We have always had the TVs [national and local], which have always attacked us and they still do it, and they portray us like a group...I do not want to get into that [lasciamo perdere] ... the critiques we receive are monstrous. They make it sound like in our group there are only, I don’t know, boors [zoticoni], but it is not like that at all. Now people have come to know us, especially in the last five years of government, they know who we are or who they are. I am talking about my colleagues [...] [but] It [Lega Nord] is a sample of society as all other parties. This feeling of belonging to our land of the North is related to the fact that we have felt exploited for 60 years [by the centralized government in Rome], to put it in short [......] The problem is that we are tired of supporting [economically] the mafiosi, the thieves ["magnamagna"] so to speak, those who are pillaging these lands of people who are hardworking, who have always given everything, even at a social level, and now when we need something perhaps we have to face difficulties due to this waste of resources. This is why we feel strong in our movement, why we are keen to be seen, to be noticed, to let people know that we are not afraid to show that we are from Lega Nord. That’s it: because we feel we are right [ci sentiamo nel giusto].

Finally, beyond the position of a party on the political spectrum, it matters whether a candidate belongs to a political group that is in government or opposition. As Angelo Piovanelli (Popolo delle Liberta’) consigliere comunale in Brescia explains, opposition politicians gets easier access. In his case, being a member of the majority coalition, once you have been elected, it becomes difficult to get coverage unless you are one of the key figures within the comune administration:

There is a difference [...] between being a majority and opposition consigliere. Because, clearly, an opposition consigliere, due to his role, a contestation role...[...] a role easier to fulfil because on every stance of the majority the opposition is free to take the initiative and say what it wants. It’s easier. As for the majority consigliere, actually...he is almost forced to stay within the boundaries of the party, if he does not want to create problems to the majority.

\(^\text{19}\) The flag can be seen here: [http://efd-eu.blogspot.co.uk/2010/01/lega-nord-italy-northern-league.html](http://efd-eu.blogspot.co.uk/2010/01/lega-nord-italy-northern-league.html)
[He has] to stick to the agreed line. So it becomes difficult to gain visibility. In the sense that there is a council leader [capogruppo] of the party, then you have the assessori [the equivalent of ministers at the comune level] and the mayor. They are the most representative and visible figures. Once they have spoken, it is clear that the opinion of the majority consigliere is rather redundant [ininfluente]. It is of scarce value [not newsworthy].

5. Analytical Benefits of the New Framework
The new analytical framework, as illustrated by the findings, allows developing a radically different interpretation of the 'mediatization' of politics. More specifically, it is possible to raise the following points:

There is no “new politics.” Michael Delli Carpini and Bruce Williams (2001: 161) argue that, in the new media environment, 'Individuals are simultaneously citizens, consumers, audiences, family members, workers and so forth. Politics is built on deep-seated cultural values and beliefs that are imbedded in the seemingly non-political aspects of public and private life' (their emphasis). From a relational perspective, not only this is absolutely true, but it always has been: all social actors have multiple identities all the time. In this sense what we are witnessing today is not a different politics, rather a transformation of society—something that relational sociologist acknowledge as an incessant process—in which the scope of social networks is simply enhanced by communication technologies.

Unmediated politics has never existed. Communication, however, is the very enabler of relationships. According to Niklas Luhmann (2007: 302) 'it is not action but rather communication that is an unavoidably social operation and at the same time an operation that necessarily comes into play whenever social situations arise.' As such, communication has always been central to politics. Politics is communication.

All politics is relational. The study points out that the various ways in which the politicians/media/public relationships are conceptualized at the moment are rather simplistic. They can involve various ‘axes.’ Brants and Volkmer (2011), for instance explain how the development of communication technologies affects the horizontal dimension of mediatization (politicians-journalists relation) and the vertical dimension (political actors-public relation). This framework, which the authors develop through an international comparative perspective, is more sophisticated and holistic than previous explanations of either the politicians-media, public-media, or politicians-public relationships. It also involves the possibility of two-way exchanges among the actors. Crucially, however, it is still based on linear relations within the traditional 'triangle' whose vertices are constituted by politicians, the media, and the public. This paper, instead, suggests that around every single individual there are whole overlapping clouds or constellations of relationships, which exist at different levels and which constantly change over time. It is these relationships (their scope, the identity of the actors involved, their changing action) that shapes the impact that communication technologies on political processes at every given time and space. This, in turn, introduces my next point.

No generalizations can (nor should) be made. The way communication technologies are appropriated by each single social actor, including politicians, depends on the set of relationships they are enmeshed in. Such relationships will shape not only the way the technology is utilized, but also the extent to which image is important to the politicians’ communication activities and what form they will take in practice. In this respect the position of each actor—and the relative outcome in terms of the role of image—is unique. This paper has pointed out some similarities among the interviewees, but has also underlined how the
There is no “real self” as separate from the “staged self.” Identity is shaped by an individual’s constellation of relationships. In this paper I have shown that the scope of these relationships is affected by communication technologies, including outreach through websites and TV appearances for instance, as well as personal contacts. The experiences of the interviewees show a range of constellations of relationships leading to different outcomes in terms of attention towards presentation as well as planning and orchestration (or lack of it). Party leaders’ image might be staged, but this is not some kind of “lying” to the public. It is the outcome of where they stand in the party network, particularly the fact that they fulfill the role of the “face” of the party.

Image (or self-representation) is essential to social life, not just to politicians. Politicians are, in this respect, really no different than ordinary people. We all care about first impressions. What applies to highly visible political actors, in principle, is not different to what celebrities or VIPs experience, from Richard Branson to the Pope. What changes is the audience each actor plays to. The public could be constituted by the fellow citizens in Clusane (fraction of Iseo, about 1,700 inhabitants)\(^{20}\) in the case of one of the consiglieri comunali in Iseo or the 15,000,000 citizens living in the Italy North Western constituency (in the case of Italian MEPs).

It is not the impact of the media per se. Media have a role in affecting the scope of the network of relationships. As such they do not produce any change in political processes through their mere existence and availability—which would be rather technologically deterministic—but their effects change across context depending on how they are appropriated by social actors—not only politicians but also journalists and members of the public. As shown, the extent to which political representatives located at different levels of “distance” from their constituents use them (in the form of websites or Facebook pages, for instance) is shaped by broader aspects like electoral laws, visibility in the national and local media. In turn, the interest by national or local media is affected by position of a party within a country’s political spectrum, specific events, whether a party is in government or in opposition....

The “personalization” of politics is a network outcome. The extent to which aspects of personal life become political, in this perspective, is simply the result of the expansion of the scope of the network the political actors is enmeshed in. Party leaders are located within the widest constellation of relationships. This dramatically increases their visibility—amount of media attention and extent to which, in practice, one is under the camera lens. In turn, this affects the degree to which private life becomes part of the image of the politician.

The public is not passive. As political identity is shaped by social relationships, the public is constantly involved in the construction of the image of politicians. In fact, political actors are incessantly negotiating the way they present themselves, balancing the influences of their personal and professional backgrounds, of their personal taste, and individual character with the expected “reading” of their outfits by the onlookers in each of the social situations they come across. Beyond this, as several interviewees have pointed out, the public can tell who is really passionate about serving a community. As Laura Castelletti, consigliere comunale in Brescia (civic list Brescia per Passione) phrases it:

\[
\text{Image has a role, an important one. But I believe that citizens, the electors, have matured and grown up in this respect. They do not let themselves be fooled. In the sense that a good image sold at the last minute does not fool anybody any}
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\(^{20}\) Istat (2001).
more. In my view image today is something a person builds up over time. It is not immediacy [estemporaneità]. It is not enough to have a good picture on a poster.’

6. Conclusions
The preliminary results of the study presented in the paper have supported the development of a new framework to explain the role of image in contemporary politics. The framework conceives the political universe as a social terrain characterized by overlapping constellations of relationships among members of the public, journalists, political actors in their many identities. These relations exist at different levels and span the local, national and supranational levels of analysis in a seamless domain.

The framework allows rejecting the notion of a ‘mediatization’ of politics, particularly the idea that politics is becoming increasingly focused on image at the expense of substance. While it is true that presentation is incredibly important for party leaders—the almost exclusive object of analysis of current studies—this is not some kind of aberration or degeneration of politics. It is simply the relational outcome of the increasing scope of the networks of relationships those political actors are part of—a development brought about by the ubiquity of communication in contemporary societies.

The findings demonstrate that current studies really apply to the proverbial tip of the political iceberg. If we look at the submerged dimension of politics, in its local and supranational dimensions, instead, it is possible to realize not only that what most existing research argues is wrong, but that the concepts it relies on (mediatization of politics, celebrity politics...), as it has been explained, are inadequate to make sense of the political reality beyond the most visible political figures at election times. In this respect the study shows the analytical benefits of bringing the “everyday” and the “individual” back into the study of Political Communication.

The paper ultimately shows that the moralistic stand about the supposed deleterious effect of appearances on democratic politics—with relative dismissal of politicians as liars and the public as passive and ignorant consumer of glossy images—are the outcome of a very selective and, ultimately, shortsighted view of politics. They reflect the narrowness of academic enquiry and the legacy of outdated models of politics-media relationships—linear politicians/media/public links. The reality of contemporary politics, instead, as the myriad different experiences presented in the paper confirm, is much vaster, nuanced and variegated.
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Appendix

This is an example of the kind of questions asked during the semi-structured interviews. They refer, in this case, to the role of local councillor.

Interview Questions

Background
How/why did you get into politics?
Why did you join the party/political group you represent?
How do you see your role as a councillor? What do you do?
How long have you been a councillor for?
How old are you?

Presentation
I am sure all councillors want their constituents to know that they are “there to help” and “there to look after the local residents’ interests,” but is there something that you especially want to communicate to your constituents? (for example, you want your constituents to understand that you are particularly either trustworthy, rather than organized and professional, or approachable rather than committed to ideas...)

Do you have any contacts with your constituents (through surgeries, for example)?
How do you present yourself when you meet them? (formally/informally)
What does the way you present yourself tell about you as a person?
What does the way you present yourself tell about you as a politician?
Would you say that the way you present yourself reflects the values of your party/political group? If so, why/how? If not, why/how not?

Did you ever receive any training or consultancy support on how to present yourself? (not only about the way you look but also in terms of presentation skills, public speaking, voice coaching...)

Did you ever receive any recommendations from your party/political group in relation to presentation?

Your presentation
Are there different “looks” or “styles” in your presentation that you use in different circumstances? (for instance attending a meeting at the Civic Hall rather than meeting your constituents at a local supermarket?) Could you make some examples of these looks and the kind of events to which they would apply?
What affects your choice of one style rather than another one? (for example, formal attire rather than casual) (for instance, would you think about comfort, kind of activities you are going to engage with...)

Is there some piece of clothing that you tend to wear more often? Why?

Is there an accessory you tend to wear more often? Why?

Is there a colour you tend to wear more often? Why?

Does your way of presenting yourself change depending on whether cameras/journalists are at the event you are attending? If so, how/why?

Do you often have contacts with journalists/media?

Your constituents
Who are they mainly? What is their typical profile, if any?

What would they talk to you about? What are the issues that are most often are raised during your surgeries?

Changes over time
Do you find the way you present yourself over time has changed? If so, why/how? If not, why/how not?

Do you think presentation has become more important? If so, why/how? If not, why/how not?

Are national-level politicians more dependent on their image than local councillors?