Antonio Tursi
PhD – University of Macerata
antonio.tursi@gmail.com

Is Renzi cool?
A leader standing between audience democracy and participatory culture

The sheriff and the lawyer

Exploring Matteo Renzi means placing his leadership within the context of the changes in political regimes and those present in the mediascape. These are changes which do not run parallel to one another but are closely intertwined and reciprocally enhance each other. Renzi puts himself forward as a case which allows us to understand greater processes which in turn are inherent to western democracies and to the scapes of communication which are now global.

In order to understand this link between political processes and communicative processes it could be useful to take another look, with the help of Marshall McLuhan, at the run for the presidency between Nixon and Kennedy in the United States in 1960. A journalist gave the title of *The Sheriff and the Lawyer* to an article commenting on the televised debates between the two contestants. "[Kennedy] still presents an image closer to the TV hero, Professor McLuhan says – something like the shy young sheriff – while Mr. Nixon with his very dark eyes that tend to stare, with his slicker circumlocution, has resembled more the railway lawyer who signs leases that are not in the interests of the folks in the little town" (McLuhan, 1964: 364). The shy young sheriff presents a less clear image, less well-defined, less classifiable than the sly lawyer who is easily identifiable. In general, "anybody whose appearance strongly declares his role and status in life is wrong for TV" (McLuhan, 1964: 365). Kennedy had a relaxed air and seemed able to fit indifferently into any role: teacher, doctor, businessman, grocer, football trainer and so on. In other words, he seemed indifferent to that power which he was however trying to grasp. So, he seemed a rather vague figure with imprecise outlines to television viewers compared to the intense figure of Nixon, well-defined, tenaciously fixed on a precise goal.

McLuhan makes clear that "TV is a medium that rejects the sharp personality and favors the presentation of processes rather than of products" (McLuhan, 1964: 341) and furthermore that "the cool TV medium cannot abide the typical because it leaves the viewer deprived of his job of 'closure' or completion of image" (McLuhan, 1964: 365). This job of closure or completion is that which defines a cool medium like TV compared to a hot medium like the cinema. Closure – completion – is the activity which is expressly carried out by the spectator who, compared to the mosaic of light and dark spots which the TV offers, undertakes a participatory action in order to compose the image itself, and thus accepts only a limited quantity of spots at a time and with these builds up his own image. McLuhan describes this action as tactile, sub muscular. TV is a cool medium, it is participatory only because it makes us work, it absorbs us into its flow of image-mosaics which have to be continuously built up by the spectator. Therefore, the low definition of the medium – and of those leaders who use it and who can be seen, in their turn, as true media – means that an intense level of participation is necessary. TV requires from the spectator "a creatively participant response" (McLuhan, 1964: 372).

Through TV, Kennedy managed to involve the nation in his position as president, he was "the first TV President", even a "tribal emperor" in the television era (McLuhan, 1969: 34) and this was proved at the moment of his funeral: it was possible then to understand, as never before, "the power of TV to invest an occasion with the character of corporate participation… the power of TV to involve an entire population in the ritual process" (McLuhan, 1964: 372).

Political and communicative changes

In order to understand the role of a leader now, it is necessary to understand at one and the same time two processes that – at least initially – may seem to refer to different dimensions. On the one hand, the change of a political regime from "party democracy" to "audience democracy", by using the analytical categories suggested by Bernard Manin. On the other hand, the change of the medial ecosystem from mass culture to "participatory culture" which Henry Jenkins has written about at length.

The political parties have represented, above all in countries like Italy, fundamental points for mediation between the authorities (public power) and civil society. Upwards organizing requests and questions give by citizens and downwards promoting political choices made by the governing classes. The parties have been mass parties because they have known how to represent and integrate large areas of the population into democratic political life. With the passage to audience democracy, this fundamental mediating role has given way to a more immediate advantageous link between those who make the decisions (leader) and the citizens (the public). Also thanks to means of communication, leaders have begun to address the electors directly – that is to say without making use of mediation from the party. "Through radio and television, candidates can, once again, communicate directly with their constituents without mediation of a party network" (Manin, 1997: 220). And the electorate, in turn, has started to "feel" their leader nearer, a click of the remote control away and at present, and above all, with a click of the mouse or the smartphone. This change has supplied the environment which favors growth or at least a quickening of the personalization of politics.

As far as the communicative dimension is concerned, the "cool" television has already started to involve the spectator more directly in the show. With digital media and in particular with social media, a more direct and captivating involvement of the public in any media show is very evident and easily observed. Jenkins has noticed the paradigm of the new participatory culture which today we see *at large* on the applications of our *devices,* while observing the fan communities who follow various successful media products, their social interaction, their ability to produce meanings and imaginary (imagination) flowing from the (pre)texts which circulate everywhere. This movement has been hastened by *affordances* of digital media working "toward a more participatory model of culture, one which sees the public not as mere consumers of pre-constructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined" (Jenkins, Ford, Green, 2013: 2). Sharing has become the key gesture in this new culture. Allowing certain pre-existing products or modified texts or self-made products to circulate means letting people feel they are protagonists at the forefront of the mediascape. Our participatory digital culture "provides a range of new resources and facilitates new interventions for a variety of groups [and also for a single person, *editor's note*] who have long struggled to make their voices heard" (Jenkins, Ford, Green, 2013: xiv), opening up the possibility of reinventing political activism from the grassroots (see Antonelli, 2017).

Regarding disintermediation

At the point of contact between these political and communicative changes, where they are most evident, where they can be seen as a daily experience in Italian political life, we find Matteo Renzi who has grasped the inevitability of this "disintermediation of intermediate bodies". With these words, Renzi has not only accepted the change but he has also revealed a certain "contempt for those intermediate bodies which correspond to popular feeling, to the idea that normal people have about intermediate bodies (newspapers, magistrates, professional bodies, trades unions and in fact in a word those institutions that represent particular interests); those normal people who, while not belonging to the bodies themselves, limit themselves to observing them from afar" (Giunta, 2015:

49). Intermediate bodies which in fact represent an obstacle precisely to contacting these normal people, to any interaction on a personal level with each of them. Based on the rhetoric of local administration which is close to its citizens, Renzi has felt the need to found the State "not on the balance between intermediate bodies but on the trust between people, on people's inherent goodness" (Giunta, 2015: 50). The direct reference to people is a constant where Renzi is concerned: we go from "I rely on the people" to "I cannot and I do not want to go from using a bicycle to an official car. I am from Rignano! I have always been in the midst of people and will continue to be so". Naturally, as he is a leader among the people, his mandate comes directly from the people: "the other day, as I left the Quirinale, I heard this from people, please don't give up, don't let things get you down". Renzi searches for and underlines the importance of direct contact – without any mediation – between the leader and his people.

This is why the Democratic Party has never attracted Renzi, above all since he became its secretary. The reorganization of the denigrated party organization would not have helped to find a way of representing and integrating the electorate, the sympathizers, the registered members, the activists but would on the contrary have become a kind of impediment, a kind of diaphragm against any direct contact with people, with all the people (not those belonging just to a part, like a social class). In this way, rather than a "personal party" (Calise, 2002), we can talk of a "redundant" party (Raniolo, 2004) or of a "post party" (Mancini, 2015).

In a different way from the party, the new gadgets of communication are, on the other hand, essential for establishing a direct link with each follower, each friend, each cybernaut placed on a horizontal plain with the political leader, with "Matteo". Twitter is certainly Renzi's favourite platform and he uses it all the time. After all, on several occasions, while speaking to a live audience, he has used the expression "I will let you know with a tweet". And, vice versa, the people who use Twitter prefer Renzi: he is in fact the first Italian politician as far as followers go, he has over 2 million eight hundred thousand compared to the 2 million three hundred thousand of Beppe Grillo. So, in the era of disintermediation, it would not have been possible but to have "a young leader who governs through sms and tweets" (Prospero, 2015: 266), one who gives pride of place to the directness of a simple tweet in as much as it is " a comment on political facts, previews of decisions, polemical interventions, justification of approved laws" (Prospero, 2015: 216), a leader who through social media replies directly to citizens (with the hashtag #matteorisponde) and gives them an insight into what goes on behind the institutional scenes ("I'm coming! I'm coming!" tweeted from behind closed doors in the Quirinale or the photos of Renzi and Orfini busy with a playstation while the election of the President of the Republic is taking place) and what goes on in private. In this latter case, the tweets are planned to help to show up personal emotions and thus bring the ordinary people closer. Renzi feels like everyday Italians, he enthuses over sporting successes and suffers in national tragedies. He is one of us.

Regarding reintermediation

When analyzing the 382 tweets posted by Renzi from 19th February to 12th November 2012, we see that a good 124 (more than a third) are replies to citizens (mainly under the hashtag #matteorisponde, but not only), which leads us "to deduce that it is important for him to set up a dialogue and thus to use an interactive means which involves his followers" (Ventura, 2015: 125). But is this truly a dialogue or simply setting up a dialogue? If we look at the content of Renzi's replies, "the reciting component seems to take pride of place over the actual discussion or explaining things well" (Bentivegna, 2015: 54). Replying to a Twitter user: "What will the reform of public management entail?", Renzi replies "More merit, more mobility, more quality" (tweet of 23rd April 2014). Answering another who asks: "How do you intend to deal with illegal work?", the president of the council replies: "Strict as far as legal culture goes. But businesses need to be helped by reducing bureaucracy" (tweet of 23rd April 2014). The whole discourse with his followers

"seems above all a chance to bolster his performance rather than to offer any real answer" (Bentivegna, 2015: 54), to set up a dialogue instead of true concrete confrontation.

In a word, disintermediation seems to present itself more as a solidly thought out impression offered as a true process which increases the direct interaction between ordinary citizens and politicians. In fact, alongside this, processes which are totally contrary intervene and are essential to dealing with the complexity of present communicative flows, such as that which has been defined as a reintermediation from above. A reintermediation organized by politicians themselves who choose the inwards and outwards flows and, in fact, rebuild relations inside the group or at least between the members of the traditional elite group. With particular reference to Renzi, it is fundamental to mention another aspect of a moment of the reintermediation as found in the live tweeting #matteorisponde: the choice of questions which Renzi replies to is clearly an act of reintermediation carried out by the politician regarding the manifestation of immediacy. As far as the thousands of tweets with the relative hashtag produced by users such as questions, replies, objections during the live tweeting hour on 23rd April 2014 goes, Renzi has published only 40 tweet replies. When in April 2016, the format became a live video broadcast on Facebook too, the famous digital cultural magazine *Wired* didn't hesitate to advertise the event as a "monologue" by Renzi rather than a dialogue with the citizens (Cosimi, 2016).

Similar tendencies – to reintermediation – can be found regarding another moment of disintermediation, a symbolic moment of *renzism*: the Leopolda, the annual meeting in the ex-train station in Florence set up as a location for the new political movement begun in 2010. The Leopolda promotes the direct intervention on the part of citizens (again in this case all citizens, having banned previously all party emblems) in defining the *policies* regarding a large range of questions, and even in launching a new vision of Italy. Groups of citizens discuss certain designated themes and can then express their suggestions and debate them in the plenary sessions. So Renzi in a tweet on October 25th 2014 states "the extraordinary success of these groups shows that the Italians wish to take part in #Leopolda5". And Ms Boschi, launched by the Leopolda itself with her leopard patterened shoes look, commented on the success in this way in the 2014 edition: "in these three days full of ideas, proposals, things to be done, so much has been put forward by the nineteen thousand people who took part in the Leopolda". Besides, narrative frames, themes discussed in the groups, coordinators for these same discussions, programmed interventions, timing have all been decided by the organizers. These are decisions which serve, naturally, to give shape to the event but which inevitably orientate and select the proposals which the participants share. What is more, it would be interesting to see how much those proposals formed by the grassroots have actually affected Renzi's political actions, once he became secretary of the Pd and then head of the government and thus endowed with political power and capable of carrying out some of those ideas offered by the citizens present at Leopolda.

The temperature of Renzi

Renzi's leadership can be understood by observing the dynamics of disintermediation and of reintermediation. On a platform like Twitter, for example, very different often contrasting processes live side by side. The Net, in general, and Twitter, in particular, are often seen as horizontal platforms where each individual can communicate with other people without having to go through the normal restrictive channels of organizations (press agencies, newspapers or political parties). If in theory on the Net the situation is "one means one", in practice some are worth more than others (the pages of the most important daily newspapers are visited more often than the self-published newspapers). Even on the Net, some resources such as economic possibilities, communicative skills, popularity, are important and influence the flow of communication. Renzi has made use of both of these processes. On the one hand, he has shown that he can put himself on the same level with the average user, the everyday citizen, the follower and can set up a dialogue where he speaks

directly to the people. On the other hand, he has used the resources which he had to hand to keep a strong hold on the communication game. In fact, he has started up processes of reintermediation which indicate a sham dialogue rather than a real concrete dialogue. However, from his use of the media platforms we have the idea of the boy next door talking to his peers. The idea of a leader who is "one of us". This portrayal has gained him sympathy, support from the Italians (proved, for example, by the results of the European elections in 2014 with the Pd of 40.8%). Renzi has managed to adapt to the media. We could even say that Renzi is the child of the digitalized media environment. A *cool, prêt-à-porter* leader who has made it easy for cybernaut electors to have their say. After all, the boy next door can be anything, can become anything: boy scout, choir boy, a contestant in a TV quiz, mayor, secretary of the most important Italian political party, president of the Council. The cybernaut elector must complete his portrayal, give a chance to this young lad. Renzi, "one of us ", has created a narrative in step with our times, with our participatory culture, with the desire to be a protagonist which is typical of our times.

On the other hand, Renzi is in step with our times in another way too. To understand this, it would be a good idea to call to mind an element in the thinking of McLuhan which is often overlooked. As we stated at the beginning, McLuhan made a distinction between the cool media and the hot media but he also underlined that we are often confronted with processes (cooling off moments or warming up moments) rather than moments which cannot be modified (hot and cool). Processes which bring about changes of state, even concrete upheavals in temperature within a medium and, in our case, within a leader. The digital media have manifested a cooling off dynamic which is ever increasing, an ever more intense request to take part directed towards the users. The dynamics are perfectly in line with those described as the "timeless time" of the Net (Castells, 1996), once ultra-fast, instantaneous, capable of burning images, speeches and leaders in a flash. Renzi has declared that he is perfectly attuned to this speed, to this pressing rhythm ("I am condemned to run", "I have to keep accelerating. I reach a goal and then am off again, I reach yet another and yet again I head off after another"). And so, he uses a fast means of communication, very fast like Twitter which is directed to the present, useful for sharing statements or describing an event as it happens.

Renzi has been so cool as to enter into a state which we could describe literally as *oxymoron* like, he has transformed himself into something resembling boiling ice, so cold it burns. He has saturated the media attention of the Italians, bolstering up his image to such an extent that there is no space left for any involvement on the part of the citizen, cybernaut or spectator. Certainly, both the economic situation and the concrete actions of the government have become decisive factors in orienting Italians' judgment of Renzi. But perhaps it has not been the reality alone, the crude bare details of that reality, which have determined such a judgment. Perhaps another narrative has emerged and has been strengthened, an alternative to the fable put forward by Renzi, a narrative which is too defined, too full and which has alienated the sympathy of the public: that of "il bomba", the bully, the young braggart who talks too much and does little. So, notwithstanding or perhaps because of this important presence in the media, the electorate's judgment of those fundamental traits of a politician show a decided decrease in Renzi's popularity from the autumn of 2013 (the moment when he was mayor and became the secretary of the Pd) to the autumn of 2016 (a short time before the constitutional referendum which ended his government): for those who regarded him as strong his rating goes from 82% to 57%; his competence rating passed from 84% to 66%; his empathy rating and his skill in understanding people went from 77% to 48%; his honesty and integrity fell from 82% to 52% (Paparo, 2016). In general, trust in him fell from 56% when he formed his government (Istituto Piepoli, 26 February 2014) to 38% straight after the referendum defeat (Istituto Piepoli, 9 December 2016). The defeat in the referendum on constitutional reform confirmed this decline in trust. In a situation of media and political disintermediation and where, therefore, the tools of mediation cannot be counted on, will Renzi the leader be able to promote once more a narrative of himself in harmony with Italians' feelings? Will he ever again reach the necessary temperature at the right moment? Will he again be *cool*? Watch this space!

References

Antonelli, Francesco (2017) (ed.), *Net-Activism. How Digital Technologies have been changing individual and collective actions*, Roma Tre Press, Roma.

Bentivegna, Sara (2015), *A colpi di tweet: La politica in prima persona*, Il Mulino, Bologna.

Calise, Mauro (2000), *Il partito personale: I due corpi del leader*, Laterza, Roma – Bari, ed. 2010.

Castells, Manuel (1996), *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture. Vol. I: The Rise of the Network Society*, Blackwell Publishers, Cambridge – Oxford.

Cosimi, Simone (2016), "#matteorisponde, che cos'è stato e a chi è servito il monologo di Renzi sui social network?", *Wired*, <https://www.wired.it/attualita/politica/2016/04/06/matteorisponde-monologo-renzi/>, 6 aprile.

Giunta, Claudio (2015), *Essere #matteorenzi*, Il Mulino, Bologna.

Jenkins, Henry; Ford, Sam; Green, Joshua (2013), *Spreadable media: Creating value and meaning in a networked culture*, New York UP, New York – London.

Mancini, Paolo (2015), *Il post partito. La fine delle grandi narrazioni*, Il Mulino, Bologna.

Manin, Bernard (1997), *The Principles of Representative Government*, Cambridge UP, New York.

McLuhan, Marshall (1964), *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McGraw-Hill, New York.

McLuhan, Marshall (1969), "Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan: A candid conversation with the high priest of pop cult and metaphysician of media", *Playboy Magazine*, March.

Paparo, Aldo (2016), "Renzi e il suo governo: la popolarità persa e mai ritrovata", Centro Italiano Studi Elettorali, <http://cise.luiss.it/cise/2016/12/06/renzi-e-il-suo-governo-la-popolarita/>, 6 dicembre.

Prospero, Michele (2015), *Il nuovismo realizzato: L'antipolitica dalla Bolognina alla Leopolda*, Bordeaux, Roma.

Raniolo, Francesco (2004) (ed.), *Le trasformazioni dei partiti politici*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli.

Ventura, Sofia (2015), *Renzi & Co: Il racconto dell'era nuova*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli.